The Apple Tree

by Philo

Summary

Harry returns for his seventh year determined to change the status quo. A tale of romance, betrayal, initiative and derring-do!

Notes

Previously posted on HPFandom, this story was started in 2003, finished mid-canon, and is inevitably AU.

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Harry slipped into the Leaky Cauldron and leant casually against the wall, as the door shut with a muffled thump beside him. The flavours of the wizarding world wrapped him in their familiarity as he waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim light. He savoured the rich, warm smell of wizard tobacco, the sharp, sour tang of old spilt ale, the odour of wizard bodies, their natural scents not disguised with chemicals, but enhanced with herbs and spices. He propped a leg nonchalantly against the wall, adjusting the sports bag on his shoulder as he ran a magical scan over the heaving mass of people. It was a reasonably new skill, and he made sure to use it at every opportunity – partly, because he liked that he could, and partly because he had become more cautious, and liked to know if there were any dangers present.

He felt the magical power levels of the wizards and witches present, his senses sliding quickly over the throng. Most were of low level power, a few middle level – his eyes now adjusted, he noted that Blaise Zabini had a good middle power level - and scanned along the booths lining the back walls, working methodically left to right.

Hold it.

He slid his eyes and senses back again. Interesting. A notice-me-not spell across the third booth in. Which had a good view of the door. He pushed away carefully, making his way calmly to the bar. He waited patiently to be served, the staff dealing as fast and as cheerfully as they could with the enthusiastic demands of the multitude. He leant a hip against the wood, turning as he waited to glance casually over at the booth. He delved through the spell. One person only in there. With an obscurcation charm on! And incredibly strong magic. Tinged, as well. He felt his stomach tightening, adrenalin beginning to pump into his veins.

“Mr Johnson!” Tom, the barman, stood grinning at him as he quickly polished a glass ready to fill. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“Not at all, Tom,” Harry smiled. “Rushed off your feet, I see.”

“Well, the kids go back to Hogwarts tomorrow. Lots of families leave it till the last minute to come and get their supplies. Make an outing of it, really.”

Harry nodded.

Tom grimaced. “Actually, I’ve a favour to ask.”

Harry raised an eyebrow, his face open.

Tom gestured towards an elderly couple sitting at a small table not far from the bar, just finishing their dinner. “Old Bernard and Mathilda Franks. So many decades since they had anything to do with Hogwarts that it never entered their heads to think we might be a trifle busy this week,” he snorted.

“No room at the inn?” Harry murmured.

“Well, there is, but the thing is, Mrs Franks can’t manage more than one flight of stairs – “

“You want me to do a levitation charm?” Harry guessed.

“No, no. I offered that; don’t have any problem with that myself. But she insists they make her sick
and her tummy is too delicate at her age –“

“You want my room.”

“I’ve got one on the third floor you can use,” Tom said hurriedly, “seeing as how you’re young and fit. It’s cheaper –“

“Sounds good to me,” smiled Harry.

“But only a single, though, and you have to share the bathroom,” Tom got out guiltily.

“Tom, it’s fine,” Harry soothed. “Want me to go and talk to them?”

“Would you? I told them I’d have to ask you, that there was no guarantee -“

“No problem. Tell me though, who’s hogging the third booth to themselves at the back there?”

“What?” Tom looked round at the back wall. “Oh, Severus Snape! I’d forgotten he was there! Put up a notice-me-not, has he? Damn cheek! In my pub! Taking that whole booth to himself when I’m so busy! And he’s barely ordered a thing all evening –“

Harry grinned. As soon as he knew the name, he could see the man. He was sitting there with his head in a book and an empty pint glass in front of him.

“I’ll go share his table in a minute. What’s he drinking?"

“Best ale.”

“Two of those then, Tom. Has he eaten yet?”

“You’re not going to buy him dinner?” Tom said, scandalised.

“Hate eating on my own in front of someone. Mrs Tom got any of that steak and Stilton pie on today?” Harry said hopefully.

“She always makes sure it’s on when you’re booked in,” Tom said with a smile. “Two, then?”

“Please.”

Harry strolled over to the elderly couple. Mathilda Franks was the tiniest, most wrinkled person he had ever seen. She had neat white hair scraped into a tight bun at the back of her head, piercing dark eyes and a prim mouth that she was just dabbing with her napkin. Harry hunkered down beside her and found himself at eye level.

“Mrs Franks? I’m Alex Johnson.” He gave her a friendly smile, and held out his hand.

She observed him with a beady eye.

“Mr Johnson?”

That was Bernard. A wheezy voice. Probably have more trouble with the stairs than his wife. Maybe that’s why she was fussing, thought Harry.

“It’s your room?”

“No, it’s yours,” Harry assured him, standing up and swivelling round to the rather chubby little
wizard with watery eyes and a rather fetching striped cap on his head. Dumbledore would like that cap, Harry decided with an inward chuckle.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” Bernard Franks said anxiously.

“Truly, I don’t. You’re doing me a favour. Tom’s put me in a cheaper room. I didn’t know he had cheaper rooms! I’ll be sure to ask for one next time! Didn’t know he was ripping me off all this time!” Harry glanced over at the bar with a smile to see if Tom was listening, which he was.

“I only open the third floor when we’re really busy, Mr Johnson!” he denied the accusation.

Harry grinned at him. Tom slammed two pints down on the bar. “Dinner’ll take a little while. There’s a backlog,” he grunted.

Harry laughed.

Tom gave in and grinned back sheepishly. “It’s true.”

Harry nodded. He turned again to Mrs Franks, who had not yet said a word. “If there’s anything else I can do for you –” he began politely, to be cut off by the old witch.

“It’ll work out for the best,” she said, in a clipped voice, as if coming to a decision.

“I’m sorry? “ Harry asked, brows raised in enquiry.

Mrs Franks just looked sharply at Harry and said crisply, “Thank you for the room, young man.”

Harry regarded her for a moment: “You’re very welcome,” he replied, and got up. He knew when he was being dismissed.

Adjusting the sports bag over his shoulder, Harry picked up the pint glasses from the bar and carried them carefully over to Snape’s table.

“I hope you don’t mind me joining you,” he said cheerfully, “but there’s no other seats to be had. The place is heaving, isn’t it?” and he bent his knees to slide the ale onto the table so that his bag didn’t jostle it as he did so.

Snape looked up from his book and glared his trademark glare, but Harry could sense his curiosity that Harry had seen through his notice-me-not spell and invaded his privacy regardless. His eyes swept the room, confirming that all the other tables were in fact occupied.

“It’s a public house,” he answered shortly; “You may sit where you wish.” And he returned his head to his book.

Harry pushed his bag along the bench seat and sat down beside it. He took out his wand and gave his glass a quick tap, cooling the beer, then took a welcome swig of his drink before sighing in pleasure. Really, butterbeer might warm you down to your toes, but on a hot night a chilled ale was delicious. Very unBritish, of course – but he had it at a perfect temperature where the ripe bitter flavours still came through, accentuating the cool wash across his tongue. He was aware that Snape had been watching him from the minute he had withdrawn his wand – indeed, Snape’s own was in his hand under the book, but Harry had made a point of using large slow movements that were clearly unthreatening.

He looked across at the man, meeting his eyes. “Want me to chill yours too?” he asked, pushing the second glass across the table towards Snape.
The black eyes narrowed in the sallow face. “I do not accept drinks from strangers,” he said quietly, his crisp diction slicing into Harry.

“It’s best ale - I asked Tom what you were drinking,” Harry explained.

“And why would you do that?” Snape answered in his silkiest voice.

Harry felt it tingle down his spine and resisted the impulse to shiver.

“’Cos I’m disturbing you?”

Snape looked at him as if he were a specimen in one of the glass jars lining his workroom. Harry felt the coldness of that gaze stroke over his skin, and he could no longer hold back the shudder that twitched through his muscles. He leant his head back and took another long quaff of the beer, letting himself give a further shudder as the cold liquid slid down the back of his throat, and hoping Snape thought that the first one was for the same reason. He pulled the glass from his lips just in time to realize that Snape was watching his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. He shivered again.

“It’s good cold, on a night like this,” he offered. “Sure you won’t try it?”

Snape returned his gaze to his book. “At the speed you are drinking I’m sure you’ll be able to manage the second one in no time at all,” he said, a hint of censure in his voice.

Harry had to bite back his instinctive desire to respond. Actually, though he didn’t know it, Snape had a point. Harry had already had a couple of pints with his workmates before leaving Brighton and apparating in to Diagon Alley, and he needed to slow down. The ale was much stronger than Muggle beer. He wiped his finger up the side of the glass, catching the chill condensation, and sucked his finger into his mouth. He loved the way it cleared a clean path on the glass. He looked across at Snape to realise that the man was watching him again, and thought maybe it wasn’t the best mannered thing to do. Snape bent his head again.

Harry wondered why he hadn’t accepted the drink. He didn’t know it was Harry offering it and his own glass was empty. Most people would jump at a free pint.

Suddenly, he had an epiphany.

He looked hard at Snape and then glanced away, his eyes scanning unseeing over the smoky bar. Of course Snape hadn’t accepted the drink! He was a Potions Master: he must know of every drug or potion that could be masked by alcohol – beer especially probably – its bitter taste would disguise a number of herbs or poisons. And people hated him; people on both sides of the political divide, even old pupils might enjoy the opportunity to slip him something embarrassing, even if not lethal. Snape would never accept a drink from a stranger – would probably never be able to, whatever the outcome of the war: there would always be people posing a threat to him, seeking vengeance. The thought absolutely shook Harry; he had enjoyed clubbing and drinking in the pub with his friends and workmates over the last couple of years, and the sudden realisations of the restrictions and indeed, the loneliness of Snape’s life, hit him like a bludger.

He turned and looked at Snape again, seeing him as a man for the first time in his life. His eyes roamed over him, taking in the familiar sallow skin, the thin cheeks, the dark shadow along his chin. His hair was lank rather than greasy, and really, he wore it in such an unflattering way! He could tie it back or cut it short, either would look a helluva lot better.

“I don’t pick up stray men, either,” Snape said from his book, not bothering to look up.

Harry had just taken a mouthful of ale and consequently sprayed it over the table.
“You did that on purpose!” he gasped, getting his breath back.

“Told you I was not available?” Snape sneered.

“Chose your moment for maximum affect!” Harry choked, just getting his head round that Snape thought he was trying to pick him up.

“It is an art,” the older wizard said smugly.

Harry stared at him. A hint of humour? From Snape? Who thought that he was interested in him? Did Snape attract that sort of attention? His eyes started looking again, noting the long, rather delicate hands as the man flipped a page over. He looked at his body, searched his memory of the shape of Snape. All he could think of was the commanding swoop of Snape in his robes, swirling down the corridors or coming into class. The man had Presence with a capital P. But his body? Well, he was tall and slim, and really, Harry had never thought anything more of it. He eyed Snape’s shoulders and chest.

“Still not available,” the man murmured, eyes never leaving the page.

Harry flushed. He’d been so overwhelmed at the thought of anyone considering Snape as a potential sexual partner that he had been staring. And was Snape gay?

“Sorry,” he offered fairly, then added, “if it eases your anxieties, I don’t pick up stray men either. I prefer to know where they’ve been, myself.”

Snape’s eyes shot up at that. So, he’d just been trying to be obnoxious – he hadn’t realised that Harry was gay.

Then, to Harry’s discomfiture, Snape checked him out. Openly.

Harry felt his cheeks redden and tried to stop his hand shaking as he raised his glass and took another small sip. Anything not to look back at the man. Snape! Giving him the once over! Holy shit!

“Getting shy now?” Snape said. Oh my god, Snape was teasing him.

Harry put his drink down and stared straight back at the other man. The black eyes looked assessingly into his. Harry’s heart was thumping and he felt heat surge through his body, bursting out of his pores. Snape looked away, burying himself in his book again dismissively. Shakily, Harry pulled a couple of magazines out of the side pocket of his bag and then decided, with sweat trickling down his spine, that now was the time to take off his hoodie. He tried to stand, but the bench seat did not allow him to get his legs straight, so he manoeuvred his back to the wall and with one knee on the bench reached down to the hem and began to peel it up his body.

Unfortunately the fabric clung like tacky weed to his tee shirt underneath, and he could feel both peeling up. His head was buried, his stomach exposed, and he felt ridiculous. He sucked in his breath to expand his chest to pull the damn thing over his head, and felt his loose jeans slip down his hips. Cursing to himself, he yanked both garments off, peeled the tee shirt from the top and whipped it back on quickly. Snape stared openly throughout, and Harry felt colour washing up his stomach. He pulled his jeans back up and wished he’d invested in a belt. Or underwear.

“And you’ve seen many?” Harry snarled back, red as a beetroot.

“None of that level of amateurishness, that’s for sure.”

“I’m not buying any more hoodies,” Harry grumbled, embarrassed. He must have looked bloody ridiculous. And it was dangerous, that moment of having one’s head covered.

Snape actually laughed. Harry blinked, then gave a small smile in return.

“Nice tattoo though,” Snape said, bending to his book once more.

His trousers had dropped that low? Bloody hell!

“Thanks,” Harry managed to get out with an attempt at nonchalance. He picked up the Quidditch magazine which he had just collected from the seller outside the pub and started to read one of the articles. He hadn’t meant to pull the other journal out of his bag and slipped it back in the pocket. It was a potions periodical which he’d bought because Hermione had finally got her research published. She had used a ‘nom de plume’ as she didn’t expect that the thoughts of a Muggle schoolgirl would get much respect; they had had many a laugh over choosing her name in the Gryffindor Common Room late at night, and Harry felt immensely proud of ‘Herbert Greystoke’ which after many more hilarious options were discarded was chosen because it used Hermione’s initials and had a hint of elderly boring respectability about it. Harry was delighted to find that he actually understood the article, but that was mostly because Hermione had read them excerpts from her research books and discussed the matter with them endlessly over months and months. He had been interested to find that there was also a paper by Snape in ‘Practical Potions Monthly’, but it seemed to be a highly complex refinement of some previous work with a whole string of preceding papers referred to within it. Most of the other articles seemed overly wordy or incredibly boring, and he wondered whether Hermione’s clearly written piece would be hailed as a welcome relief by the readership or rejected as not dull enough.

“Mr Johnson!” said the landlady cheerfully, sliding the steaming plates in front of Harry and Snape. “How are you then, ducks?”

“Fine, thank you, Mrs Tom, and yourself?” Harry responded, shifting half to his feet in greeting. When Harry had first called her Mrs Tom, never having heard the landlord's surname or her first name, and hoping that he’d be enlightened, both halves of the married couple had been tickled by it, and ‘Mrs Tom’ she had remained.

“Ah, sweetheart, sit you down now and get tucked into that! I didn’t know you knew Professor Snape,” she added, glancing from one to another.

“Hogwarts’ return, isn’t it?” she agreed. “That why you’re here, Professor?” she continued.

“I had some business in town,” Snape said noncommittally. “There appears to have been a mistake, Madam, I did not order any dinner.”

“No dear, I know, Tom says, that nice Mr Johnson has ordered dinner for Professor Snape, just like that, would you believe it! It’s my special, he knows it’s good,” she said bending in conspiratorially towards Snape, giving a nod towards Harry. “Were you a student of his, dear?” she asked Harry.

“Wanted to repay one of your teachers, eh? Very nice manners too,” she smiled, and bustled off, without waiting for an answer.

Harry looked at Snape. “Don’t eat it if you’d rather not,” he said quietly, “though it’s the steak and
Stilton and it’s delicious. And I haven’t left this table so I can’t have poisoned it.”

“Why should you imagine anyone might want to poison me?” Snape said limpidly.

Oh! Dangerous ground!

“Well, you’re a Potions Master, I expect you’re always on the alert. I expected so after the beer, anyway,” Harry added.

“How do you know I am a Potions Master?” Snape asked, not picking up his knife and fork as Harry had done. “I’m quite certain you are not one of my ex-students – I have a very good memory for faces.”

Well, he certainly wasn’t an ex-student! “Your picture is in Practical Potions,” Harry said, indicating the magazine in his bag.

Snape glanced at it with surprise. “You’re interested in potions?” he asked, a mix of curiosity and wariness in his voice.

“I’m afraid I didn’t understand most of the articles,” Harry admitted. “Yours seemed predicated on so many earlier papers that I got rather lost.”

Snape snorted, looked hard at Harry again, slipped a bookmark into his book before laying it on the table, and took up his knife and fork.

Harry felt ridiculously pleased.

“God, this is delicious,” Harry moaned a few mouthfuls later. Mrs Tom’s pie was just out of this world. Rich gravy, the tang of melted Stilton, the flaky slip of the pastry on his tongue.

Snape looked up at him and smiled. “I have to concur. I have not had this before here and wonder how I could have missed it.”

Harry felt like he’d stepped onto another planet. Snape! Smiled! Again! In six years he had never seen the man smile! Which was an appalling thought, when he came to think about it. Dumbledore smiled. Professor Flitwick was always chuckling at the high table over something, though it was never possible to hear what. Madam Hooch often grinned in excitement on the quidditch pitch, and even laughed at some of the rude locker room jokes. Even Madam Pomfrey liked a bit of a laugh when she had stopped worrying over her patients. But Snape. Snape always looked sour. Well, he didn’t appear to have a lot to laugh about in his life, did he? Harry wondered how he coped with the constant fear that spying must bring: he couldn’t imagine doing it himself. Living every day in fear of discovery; never knowing when he was summoned if he would come back alive or unharmed. Having to do whatever disgusting things he did have to do for Voldemort.

No, it was good to see Snape smile. Harry wondered where his loathing of the man had gone. In truth, it had dissipated over the last year. Here, meeting him as a man and not the cruel tormentor of his past, he was ready to start with a clean slate; here he was not the hated Harry Potter, and it was interesting to see how the other man reacted to a stranger. So far, it was very interesting indeed.

Snape finished everything on his plate, and sat back, elegant and replete. Harry wiped up the last traces of gravy with his bread, not willing to waste a delicious morsel.

“Thank you,” Snape murmured.
Harry grinned.

“Glad you liked it. I hate eating in front of someone who isn’t. Makes you too conscious of yourself.”

Snape looked him over, but didn’t comment. Pushing his plate to the side, he returned to his book. A young girl appeared and picked up the plates, saying conspiratorially, “Mrs Tom said to tell you that she’s made sticky toffee pudding.”

“Oh god! Yes please! With ice cream.” He looked across at Snape, who was watching him indulgently. “You’ve got to have it. It’s orgasmic.”

The girl giggled, and Snape raised a haughty eyebrow. “I beg your pardon?”

“Sorry, been living around Muggles too much. Muggle expression,” he apologised. “Apt though,” he added.

“Indeed.” Snape intoned. “Nevertheless, I will forgo the pleasure.”

“Not into public orgasms?” Harry said, the words slipping out seemingly of their own volition. Had he really just said that to Snape?!

The girl choked back another giggle; Harry apologised to her again, and she swept away.

“Sorry,” Harry said to Snape. “You’re really missing a heavenly experience though.”

“Perhaps I prefer to keep my body in shape for more earthly pleasures,” Snape said so mildly before burying his head in his book that Harry almost didn’t catch the full meaning, and when he did he was horrified to find that his prick jerked interestedly. Well, Snape did have a sinful voice. Impossible not to have noticed that over the years. Even more sinful saying things like that!

“I can’t believe you have to watch what you eat: you’re incredibly thin as it is,” Harry responded, thinking the response very tactful until he realised that it made pretty clear that he had given Snape a good looking over. Which he hadn’t, had he? Snape always looked like a thin column. Though looking at him now, with just his upper body exposed across the table top, Harry was surprised to realise that the man was much wider in the shoulder than he would have thought.

Snape stood up, and Harry wondered if he had taken offence and was leaving.

“I’m getting another drink. I’d offer you one as you’ve bought me dinner but you still have one in hand,” Snape said, motioning towards the still untouched pint on the table. “A firewhiskey, perhaps?”

“No, I’m fine,” Harry murmured, picking up the pint. “Cheers.” He watched Snape move to the bar, and then turned quickly back to the table as he realised he was trying to decipher the man’s body shape through his robes. He glanced at the book Snape had left on the table, and almost choked with laughter as he realised that it was one of the more obscure texts that Hermione had cited as a reference in her article. He couldn’t wait to tell her!

Next moment, his pudding arrived, steaming, the toffee sauce glistening richly on the top. Several scoops of ice-cream were beginning to melt into the sauce at the side of it. Harry leant forward and breathed deeply. The scent was out of this world, and made his mouth salivate just to smell it.

At the bar, Snape had turned to watch his table companion whilst his pint was being pulled. He observed the sniff, watching the man’s appreciation, then saw him select a careful spoonful which
he lifted to his mouth and almost sucked off the spoon, not taking the whole into his mouth but sliding his lips over it and then tilting his head back, eyes almost shut as he savoured it. The man was in a world of his own with the dessert, shut in pleasure, and Snape, to his surprise, felt himself begin to harden at the sight. The man seemed an utter sensualist, smelling, tasting, looking. As a man for whom the senses were an incredibly important part of his work, for whom the exact shade of a potion meant the difference between success or agony, who checked ingredients by sight and scent and touch, he knew how rare such a trait was. So many seemed to see the world in half-colours as it were, pastel shades rather than the full gamut of rich magentas and crimsons and smalt and verdigris. He strolled back to the table, and slid into his seat.

“I’m not giving up this experience for anyone,” Harry groaned. “Read your book and don’t look at me. This is too pleasurable for words,” and sucked another spoonful slowly into his mouth, shutting his eyes to concentrate on the pleasure of the taste.

Snape watched him. The actions were definitely sexy, if not sexual, yet it wasn’t a come-on: “It’s like watching someone masturbating,” Snape said, his voice gravelly. He was fascinated.

“Oh god. Don’t add your voice to it too or I’ll go over the top.” Harry was on sensual overload, the taste of the pudding with its crumbly moist texture, the contrast of the heat of the pudding and the cold ice-cream, the smooth slide of the sauce, the rich sweet smell. And Snape, purring.

“Are you hard?” Snape asked, absolutely curious. Could someone get hard over a pudding?

“Am now,” Harry gulped, Snape’s question shooting right to his groin. He opened his eyes, spoon just coming out of his mouth, could almost feel his pupils dilating.

“Sure you don’t want a taste?”

Snape looked at the young man, mouth slightly open, eyes dark, cheeks flushed, and forced himself not to shift and reveal his discomfort.

“I’ve already said no,” he murmured, but his eyes were drawn to that mouth.

Harry blinked, and suddenly realised that his subconscious was slipping in more than he’d intended. Wasn’t it? “I meant the pudding,” he blushed.

Snape looked down at the half-eaten bowl-full, the brown and white swirling together as the ice cream melted. “I don’t have a sweet tooth,” he commented, “I prefer tangy, salty flavours.”

He was winding him up! Harry felt his erection get impossibly hard. Thoughts of Snape tasting him shot into his head and were so shocking, shocking because they were Snape and him and bare flesh and salty skin and come and shocking because he was aroused and not horrified by the thoughts.

He suddenly couldn’t eat another mouthful, and put the spoon down with a clatter, then straightened it in the bowl, not looking at Snape. The heady tension was enticing and odd and delicious and wrong.

He shifted on the seat and put his back to the wall at the back of the booth, pulling his magazine out again and shifting one leg onto the bench, murmuring a quick cleaning spell on his boots. He didn’t know what to make of the situation. He had no intention of picking Snape up, and the other man had said he wasn’t interested. But that last comment, and the tone of the conversation….

“I apologise,” Snape said quietly, and Harry’s head jerked up.

“That last remark was uncalled for,” Snape continued. “I’m sorry for making you uncomfortable.
I’ve never seen anyone enjoy food so much, and let my tongue run away with me.”

Harry gulped again. *Do not think about Snape’s tongue*… “Sorry too. I shouldn’t have started it by saying it was orgasmic. Let’s forget about it. I don’t think Noble is the best reference, if you’re thinking about Herbert Greystoke’s article. I thought Hudson had more relevance.”

Snape’s eyes lit up, and to Harry’s surprise the next half hour passed in peace with an in depth discussion of the article and the ramifications. Harry felt on firm ground and actually enjoyed the discussion. In Potions class they never questioned or discussed anything in this manner, and it was intriguing to follow Snape’s arguments and thought patterns. Eventually Snape asked about another article, that Harry had found immensely boring. He said so. Snape laughed, and agreed. They had coffee, and it was with a sense of reluctance that they realised that the hour was getting late, the pub had cleared considerably, and that it was time to call a halt.

Snape stood up. “I’ve enjoyed this evening, Mr Johnson. Thank you for my dinner,” Snape said, surprise with a hint of warmth to soften it in his voice.

“Alex,” Harry said. “It’s Alex. And I’ve enjoyed it too. Surprise to me as well,” he commented, “never knew potions could be interesting until recently.”

Snape laughed again. “Perhaps you should have paid more attention in school, Alex.”

Harry smiled. “Perhaps.”

He stood as well, and began to head towards the bar. “I need to pick up my key from Tom. I’ve swapped with an elderly couple and Tom’s put me on the third floor. Didn’t know there was one till tonight.”

“I’ll go up and use the bathroom then,” Snape said.

Harry raised an inquiring eyebrow.

“Tom put me there too, as I asked not to be on the same floor as any of schoolchildren. There’s only one bathroom.”

“Righto, thanks,” Harry said, trying hard not to think of Snape in the bathroom. In the same bathroom that he was going to use. Snape naked in the shower. He turned away quickly, and startled, Snape headed off.

Harry’s alternative accommodation was basic but comfortable, a narrow single bed in a small room in the eaves. He lay on the bed waiting for Snape to come out of the bathroom. Not having heard anything for a while, he picked up his towel and headed along the corridor just as Snape opened the bathroom door and came out of it.

Harry couldn’t help it. A billow of steam flurried in the air, Snape’s hair was clean and washed, and he could smell the most delicious fragrance – lemon balm, and something else. Snape was wearing black silk pyjama bottoms under a towelling robe. Both men stopped in front of each other. Tension, hot and sexual, sprang to life faster than a curse at a Death Eater meeting. The moment seemed forever and as brief as a blink, before Snape stepped around Harry, murmuring, ”Sorry if I kept you,” then strode off to his bedroom without waiting for a response.

Harry shut himself in the bathroom, leant against the sink and took great gulps of air.
Harry leapt out of the bed, wand instantly into his hand, his body in defensive pose, his heart hammering in his chest, before he even realised what had awoken him. His senses quickly judging that the danger was not in the room, he realised that a loud – very loud - noise in another part of the inn was responsible. He checked his muggle wristwatch. 2am. Pulling on his jeans, he padded barefoot to the door and opened it quietly. Peering outside, and finding the corridor empty, he slipped out, re-warding the room with a brief wave of his hand. He stole quietly towards the stairs, then jerked round quickly as Snape’s door opened just as he’d passed it. His eyes quickly took in the older man – wand at the ready, pyjama top open all the way down the front, barefoot like himself. The dark hair pulled back in a neat plait. There was a mutual acknowledgement, then Harry crept forward, Snape right behind him. It felt good to have the man at his back. Quietly, they tiptoed down the edge of the staircase, round the dogleg.

Raised voices could be heard, muffled by the thick pine door at the bottom of the staircase. Harry crept quietly towards it, and carefully turned the knob. Snape’s hand grasped his shoulder, holding it back. Harry had to resist a shiver at the touch of the warm hand on his naked flesh. He could feel the bony fingers forcing their control on him. He stood quietly, waiting, listening through the sliver of gap, conscious of the heat of Snape on the step behind him.

Soon, his shoulders began to shake with suppressed laughter. He turned his head, to look at Snape over his shoulder, to see a similar wry amusement on his face.

Blaise Zabini had apparently sneaked into a girl’s room; their exertions had led to the sudden collapse of the bed, the noise of which having then alerted the girl’s parents...there was a right hullabaloo going on, with the parents shouting, the girl squawking, Blaise’s voice almost absent, and Tom casting spells to repair the bed in a very disgruntled voice.

Carefully pulling the door to, a big grin across his face, Harry turned, and found his nose almost buried in the hair on Severus Snape’s chest.

He inhaled sharply.

Snape smelt fantastic.

He felt the older man take a deep breath –the movement pushed his chest closer to Harry: the tension of desire rose between them instantly. Harry wanted to rub his face over that hair, feel it against his lips, touch his tongue...

He moved his head swiftly to the side. His nose inadvertently brushed a tight nipple, and he felt Snape recoil, as if reality had suddenly hit him, and Snape stepped back onto the higher step behind him. Harry, with the door right behind him, couldn’t move. He looked up at Snape, but in the shadows of the stairwell it was hard to make out his expression.

The older man turned and walked up the stairs. Harry couldn’t help but look, but the loose, unfastened pyjama jacket gave nothing away. Snape turned at the top and stared down at him. Harry wasn’t quite sure what to make of that look.

And then Snape was gone.

Breathing deeply, Harry’s hand slipped automatically into his jeans to adjust himself. Letting out the breath slowly, he had to admit that Snape was hot. He couldn’t remember ever having such a visceral reaction to anyone before.

He walked slowly up the stairs, and rounded the corner at the top. The corridor stretched in front of him.
Snape’s door was ajar.

Author’s note: My thanks to Samayel for the excellent "notice-me-not" spell.
A Good Night

Harry’s footsteps faltered. He stared at the door from the end of the corridor. It had been closed when he had come past earlier. Snape had to have left it open deliberately.

It was an invitation.

Easy for him to ignore, if he so wished.

But did he wish?

His cock was giving him a clear answer on that one.

All his blood was heading south and his mouth felt dry.

His brain was trying to fathom all the reasons he shouldn’t, but he found himself outside the door.

Another deep breath, and he stepped inside.

He found his back against the wall, the door slammed, and Severus Snape kissing the fucking life out of him.

Harry was aware of nothing but hard planes, skin, the scent of Snape’s shampoo, the muscular feel of Snape’s tongue, the wall behind him and Snape enclosing him, and heat, heat, heat.

Eventually, Snape’s mouth pulled away from his, though Snape’s body stayed exactly where it was.

A single candle burned by the bed.

Snape’s face was a landscape of shadows and sharp lines. A mirror on the wall managed to reflect the light sufficiently to give glossy life to the black depths of the man’s eyes.

Harry’s heart was pounding.

It didn’t mean anything that this was Snape, his teacher, a man with whom his relationship before this day could best be described as antagonistic.

It was the most shattering, hottest kiss he had ever had.

Harry’s eyes dropped to Snape’s mouth, and unconsciously his own tongue came out to wet his lips, and his lower body pressed forward.

“I don’t fuck strangers,” Snape repeated his sentiments of earlier.

“No,” Harry agreed dazedly. His eyes flashed up to Snape’s, then down again to his mouth. His brain felt as woolly as a mountain sheep.

Snape barked a laugh, then slid a hand slowly down Harry’s chest. His fingers fanned out, and Harry gasped as he managed to snag both of Harry’s nipples in one pass, before continuing on, down over Harry’s clenching stomach muscles to hook into the top of Harry’s low slung jeans.

“I’m presuming you’re amenable to the other options?” he murmured.
The low, seductive voice stoked over Harry’s nerve endings. He had never felt so at the mercy of another person, so willing to be amenable to their every suggestion. The realisation made him uncomfortable, and he knew that he needed to make this mutual, to make Snape feel as out of control as he did.

“Mmmm,” he agreed, bending forward. His shorter height made it easy for him to reach, and his teeth closed around Snape’s nipple, giving it a firm tug. He felt Snape stiffen, but held on, his other hand sliding up Snape’s side under his shirt, thumb moving to brush Snape’s other nipple before his hand slid round to Snape’s back, stalling momentarily as his fingers noted the ridges, before sliding down into the curve of his back and holding the man firmly against him whilst his mouth and tongue gentled the pain of the tug.

Snape’s guttural grunt was incredibly erotic. Snape’s hands slid down his sides, making him shiver, pulling him away from the wall and sliding over the swell of his arse, pulling him snug against Snape’s solid erection.

The feel of it made Harry moan, his lips leaving the nipple and moving up to Snape’s neck, burying his face in the curve of his throat.

Snape’s hands slid around his sides, trailing over the waistband of his jeans. He pulled back, snapping the stud as he looked at Harry. Harry’s stomach pulled in, an invitation, and his lips sought the older man’s as he felt Snape’s fingers slide the zipper down, his arms moving up over Snape’s shoulders. Snape’s hand slipped into the gap, and Harry gasped into his mouth as he felt cool fingers curl around his length. He couldn’t prevent the thrust of his hips, and Snape laughed, letting go, his fingers pushing lower to explore Harry’s balls.

The pressure of his hand caused the last bit of grip of the denim to give way, and Harry’s jeans slithered down his legs. He tried to pull a foot out of them, stumbled, and with an embarrassed grin he pushed at Snape, giving himself space to get them off.

Snape settled back, hands crossed over his chest, watching him. Harry stepped out of the jeans, kicking them to the side, then stood back up straight, naked and needy and caught between self-consciousness and a desire to say ‘take it or leave it: this is me.’

“Beautiful,” Snape said, shocking Harry.

“What...?”

“Come now,” Snape stepped forward. “I’m sure I’m not the first lover to admire your assets?”

Harry blushed, shockingly pleased to be complimented by this usually dour man. But then, this Snape was not a Snape he had ever met before, ever had any intimation existed.

A sexual, sensual, predator Snape.

Harry’s hands moved to Snape’s pyjama jacket, to slide it off his shoulders.

“Leave it,” Snape moved out of reach, taking Harry by surprise again, then distracting him by dropping his own pyjama pants and stepping out of them.

Harry couldn’t help it. His mouth watered. He swallowed convulsively. His lips opened slightly. And he dropped to his knees.

He might not be good with words, but he’d try to show Snape how impressed he was otherwise. Looking to Snape for permission, one hand moved to grasp the base, whilst his mouth moved
forward to taste.

“Alright?” he asked, when Snape didn’t speak. Snape’s eyes were dark, but Harry could sense something, though he wasn’t sure what. “Surely I’m not the first lover to admire your assets?” he repeated Snape’s words back.

Snape laughed, the movement pushing his hips forward. Harry didn’t waste the opportunity, his tongue reaching out to savour the flesh in front of him....

For the next few minutes Harry was so absorbed in his divine task that his thoughts were nothing but a mush of sensation. His jaw ached from stretching around Snape’s girth, but the pleasure, the taste, the small movements that Severus was making that showed his enjoyment...

“The bed, I think,” Snape said huskily after another moment or two.

Harry slowly withdrew, his lips gliding taut, his tongue chasing a last drop of flavour as it swirled around the spongy head in passing. Bliss.

“Your jaw must be aching. And your knees,” Snape said in explanation.

Harry grinned up at him, surprised at the consideration. “Worth it,” he smiled, but his knees cracked as he stood up, and Snape laughed again and held out a hand to him.

Lying on the bed, spread out like a feast with Snape lying alongside him, just looking at him, Harry felt every bit as beautiful as Snape said he was, though he knew he wasn’t really. But Snape – he made him feel like every nerve in his skin was alert and alive, vibrating with tension and sensitive to every stir of air.

Snape spent the next hour making Harry’s body feel, as it had never done before. Snape teased his senses, light delicate touches, ghosting breaths, then the scrape of nails, firm pressure, moist tip of tongue, till Harry was so wound up, so overloaded with sensation, so thoroughly aroused that he knew he’d not only always see Snape as a different person for ever afterwards, but knew himself to be more than he had thought too. Snape had given him license to revel in his sensuality, had encouraged him, allowed him to touch as well as be touched, understanding innately that Harry, like himself, gained pleasure too from that.

In the aftermath of shattering orgasms they both fell asleep, no awkward questions of going or staying to throw cold water on the pleasure.

They woke and moved again into exploration and passion, languid with sleep and the warmth of the bed and the scents of each other, before sleeping again.

The light was breaking through the weave of the drab curtains when Harry next awoke. Snape’s chest was against his back, the flutter of Snape’s silk top moving over his hip as Snape’s arm shifted against him. Snape’s breathing was regular, ghosting warm over his neck: he was still asleep. Harry lay there, cosy and feeling oddly protected, taking stock with a happy smile curling his lips. He edged back tighter into the man’s hold, dozing, until his bladder forced him to ease himself out of Snape’s arms and along to the bathroom.

Returning along the corridor, he reached his own door. Would Snape expect him to leave? Just like that?

He couldn’t.

He carried on and slipped back into the room. Snape was lying back against the pillows, one hand
behind his head, the other under the sheet slung low across his hips. The black shirt framed his chest and the taut muscles of his stomach, and Harry felt desire rise in him so fast he felt dizzy.

Only Snape’s right hand moved, an unmistakeable stroke, as he lay there, watching Harry.

Decisively, Harry shucked his jeans and was back on the bed in seconds, stretching out beside Snape.

“We haven’t long,” was all Snape said.

“No,” Harry agreed, but his hand reached out slowly, exploring Snape’s stomach, feeling the tiny contractions of the muscles under his fingers. “You look so fucking hot like that,” he whispered, voice gravelly. His head came down, his lips gliding over that stomach, imprinting the feel of it onto the sensitive skin.

“I’m going to have stubble burn all over me,” Snape snorted.

“You complaining?” Harry asked, deliberately rubbing his jaw harder over Snape’s belly. He always used a muggle razor when he was staying in the flat, rather than the longer lasting wizarding methods.

He could tell from the jerk of Snape’s cock and the sudden tightening of his arm as he squeezed himself involuntarily, that the man liked it, and rubbed again as he pulled the sheet up and away. It was stunningly erotic to see Snape’s long fingers curled around his own erection.

With a final pull, Snape let his hand drop away.

Harry would have liked to spend a long time worshipping that solid flesh again, but the hour was against them, the light brightening through the curtains even as they lay there, and in truth, his jaw ached from the night before. Not that that was going to stop him. There just wasn’t time to tease and play. He swallowed the man down whole, then pulled back, sucking hard as Snape groaned and bucked at the unexpected forthrightness of his approach.

Harry’s hands roamed over the surprisingly strong thighs as he worked. Snape’s legs were pleasantly hairy. His own erection jumped when Snape spread his legs. The movement, the invitation, the request, was incredibly erotic, and Harry’s hand slipped into his own mouth alongside Snape’s cock, coating his fingers with saliva, before he withdrew them and then teased a wet trail over the rippled skin of Snape’s scrotum.

He felt Snape’s pleasure in the thrust of his hips, the tightening, and applied himself to making sure Snape remembered him, remembered this.

Minutes later, Snape was kissing him, tasting his own come in his mouth whilst his hand brought Harry to completion with firm even strokes. Harry’s own hands were gripping Snape’s back, the silk pyjama jacket ghosting over his skin, and he had to pull away from the kiss, panting into Snape’s neck as he rode the wave of pleasure.

They lay there like that as Harry got his breath back.

Snape’s wizarding alarm suddenly started announcing that it was time to get up. Snape reached over him, pointing his wand at it to silence it, before pulling back and waving the wand over them both. Harry could feel the tingle of the cleaning spell. He knew it saved time, but he quite liked the feel of come on his chest, until it got itchy.

He sighed, rolling onto his back.
“You have to go,” he said. A statement.

“I do,” Snape looked at him, then moved away, sliding off the bed to stand. “Do you have any objections to me using the bathroom first?” he asked.

“You’re catching the Hogwarts’ Express?”

“How do you know that?” Snape said, his casual tone belying the sudden suppressed tension Harry could feel emanating from him.

“The place is full of kids to get it!” Harry grinned. “Drew a short straw and got escort duty, did you?” he chuckled.

“Something of the sort,” Snape inclined his head. He slipped his pyjama trousers on, and looked at Harry.

“Oh, sorry,” Harry slid off the bed and pulled on his jeans, taking care as he zipped them. He was thinking fast.

He stood upright. “I’d like to see you again,” he said firmly.

Snape looked at him, his face expressionless. “I don’t think that would be a good idea,” he said, after too long a pause.

Harry looked at him, head cocked. It could, of course, be that Snape didn’t rate the sex. Frankly, he didn’t believe it. They had both enjoyed it – more than enjoyed it. It had been explosive, outstanding. Harry had had more that one one-night-stand, and indeed, a longer relationship. None of it had compared to what had happened last night.

And he loved Derek. Not in love, but still...

He wasn’t going to give up easily on whatever this was.

He had felt utterly in tune with Snape. The man was incredibly sensual. And generous and uninhibited. It was too good to be a one night event.

He flipped his thoughts to think of it from Snape’s point of view.

Stupid! He was so stupid! He looked at Snape, still wearing the silk pyjama top. He looked brilliant, mouth-watering. Harry knew he was hiding the scars he had felt on his back. But that wasn’t it, was it? Snape had worse than that to hide.

The Dark Mark on his arm.

“I don’t have much time for relationships,” Snape continued smoothly. “You already know I’m committed to teaching and research....”

Harry strode over to him.

“I appreciate that school life must keep you busy,” he said quietly. “I bought a house in Hogsmeade a year ago,” he went on, and noted Severus’ eyes widening. “It’s not much but it’s quiet and discreet. We could relax there, without interruption. I’m away a lot myself. But I think what went on here last night is too good to turn our backs on. It was fucking hot, Severus! Admit that, at least!”

Snape looked down at him, eyes dark and unfathomable. His lips quirked. “It was enjoyable,” he
conceded.

“Bastard!” Harry grinned. “Well, maybe I got more out of it than you, then. Fair enough. But I’d like the chance to explore further. I’ll be at the Tufted Duck in Hogsmeade for the next three weekends, Friday nights, between 7 and 9.30. Join me if you’d like to see me again.”

Snape said nothing.

Harry tried not to let his shoulders slump, and walked to the door. He turned.

“Thanks. You’re quite incredible, you know?” And he left.
Harry made his way after dinner to the Headmaster’s office for the expected confrontation.

He had been waiting for this, always slightly on edge after every holiday, for so long now, had rehearsed what he wanted to say so many times, that he needed to get himself under tight control now that the time had actually come. He slowed his pace a little, moving his feet in time with his heartbeat, using the awareness of the steady thump! through his body as a form of meditation, as Andy had taught him. He breathed slowly and regularly. He became aware of the silence of the hallways as he walked, the echo of his footsteps reverberating the only sound, calm and soothing and under his control. He smelled the unique castle scent, of old stone and polish and oil paintings, and felt comforted and at home.

Once calm, he focused on the points he wanted to make, the things that needed to be said. And I must keep an open mind as well, he instructed himself. Judge and decide after any ameliorating facts come to light. Ask the right questions.

He came to the entrance and gave the password McGonagall had given him after the feast, and calmly rode the stair into the Headmaster’s office. He was not surprised to see Professor McGonagall sitting in an armchair in front of the fire sipping tea, with Dumbledore just passing a cup to Snape, who was reclining against the wall.

“Harry! Tea? Milk and sugar?” Dumbledore smiled, waving the pot.

“Milk no sugar, thank you, Sir,” Harry agreed, taking the chair and cup that the headmaster waved him towards.

Harry pushed himself back into the seat and crossed one ankle over the opposite knee, knowing that a relaxed and confident posture would reflect itself in his attitude and in others’ attitudes to him. He was aware of the others noticing it, and felt more in control. He sipped his tea, and waited.

“I’m sure you are not surprised that we have a few questions for you, Harry,” Dumbledore began cheerily.

“That’s fine, Sir, I’ve a few that I’d like to ask you as well,” Harry responded, his voice a polite inquiry.

Dumbledore’s eyes narrowed with surprise. “I’ll answer anything I can, of course,” he smiled. “Did you want to go first, then, Harry?”

“No, after you, Sir,” Harry deferred.

“Very well, perhaps you’d like to tell us where you have been this last week?” Dumbledore got straight to the point.

Harry sipped his tea and looked at the professor. “May I ask why the last week is of such interest to you, Headmaster?” he inquired calmly.

“You were not at your relatives’ house,” Snape snapped. “Where we have wasted a great deal of time and effort creating wards for your protection.”

Harry looked at him. Amazing to think…Not now!
Harry took another sip of tea. The silence stretched out. At last, Professor McGonagall turned to Harry.

“Potter, we realise that life may get a little boring for you in Privet Drive, but –“

“Really, Professor?” Harry asked gently, leaning forward towards his transfiguration teacher. “That’s – interesting. What do you know about my life in Privet Drive?”

Minerva McGonagall gave him a confused look. “I’m sorry, Potter, I don’t understand.”

“I’m just asking, what do you know about my life in Privet Drive?”

Minerva flashed a puzzled glance at her two colleagues, and saw equal incomprehension.

“My memory and understanding is that no adult wizard or witch visited Privet Drive from the night I was left at my aunt’s after my parents died until Mr Weasley collected me the summer before my fourth year? Am I mistaken?” Harry asked.

“Your relatives aren’t very keen on witches and wizards – “ McGonagall began, but Harry interrupted.

“No, they’re not, are they?” he said, softly, dangerously.

There was a moment of still silence.

Harry reined in his anger and continued quietly, “You see, I find that hard to understand. Taking me there the night my parents died – yes, that was understandable. Not checking – ever – that all was well – even though you knew the Dursley’s didn’t like magic – that, I find more than incomprehensible.”

“Mrs Figg – “ Dumbledore began.

“Never once entered the house,” Harry finished.

“Really, Potter, is this all some sob story about being mistreated? Please!” sneered Snape.

Harry looked at the man whose prick had been in his mouth that morning. The strangeness of life made him want to laugh.

“Actually, I’m perfectly happy with my private life at the moment, give or take Voldemort,” Harry responded, “but I am concerned about the mistreatment of others.”

“How very Gryffindor of you,” Snape murmured, which earned him a glare from Professor McGonagall.

“Headmaster, do you know how many orphans there are in the school at the moment?” Harry changed tack slightly.

“Why on earth is that any business of yours?” Snape snarled.

Harry held his temper. “I’m not asking for names, just an idea of numbers. There must be quite a few students who have been orphaned by the Voldemort business.”

“Worried about all the little martyrs’ children, Potter?”

“I expect there are some orphaned children of Death Eaters who displeased Voldemort in your
“Professor, most witch and wizard orphans are taken in by their families. There is no need or time to go chasing round after them –” Professor McGonagall began condescendingly.

“Professor, I am expected to go and risk death for this wizarding world. Even if I win, there’s undoubtedly going to be a helluva lot of pain on the way, seeing as how fond Voldemort is of Crucius. I need to have a world that’s worth fighting for.”

“Really, Potter, your desire to be the petted hero is outrageous! You complain that the wizarding world failed to coddle you, then ignore its efforts for your safety.” Snape leant on the back of the winged chair, his fingers looped together along the back, his dark eyes full of contempt.

“The ‘efforts for my safety’ were pitiable,” snapped Harry, “and only sufficient to ensure that the man who is supposed to save the wizarding world didn’t pop his clogs before you were ready for it. Tell me, did your wards assure you that I was at Privet Drive when Remus Lupin called?”

Snape and McGonagall looked at Professor Dumbledore. “They did, Harry,” he answered, wondering where this was leading.

“So why did Lupin not demand to see me?”

“We assumed that perhaps your relatives had sent you to your room for misbehaviour and weren’t allowing you to see visitors.”

“Ah. Of course, you would be expecting misbehaviour from me. So you only began to worry when it appeared my life force was spluttering out.” He looked at the three faces, each trying to blank their expressions. ‘Had I been dying for the two days before that happened it would not have been your responsibility at all?’

“Potter, you are being utterly ridiculous!” Snape jeered. “Of all the melodramatic! Why on earth should we imagine you might be injured within your own home?”

“Why on earth indeed!” Harry snapped back.

Silence.

“Mr Potter?” Minerva McGonagall asked quietly, and he could hear the shake in her voice, “Are you telling us that your relatives abused you?”

He felt the fierce intensity of three pairs of eyes on him.

“What I’m saying is that you have no way of knowing, and you frankly didn’t care to find out.”

Silence.

Harry took a calming breath. “My concern here is that other children are not put into the same position. I know it is not your responsibility to care for children before they come to Hogwarts, but the wizarding world needs to make sure someone does. And once students are here, there should be some way of monitoring that all is well.”
“So you are saying you were abused.” Snape’s voice was no longer jeering, but Harry was cross because he was missing the point.

“No, Professor Snape, I am not saying that. What happened to me is irrelevant —“

A snort. Harry glared.

“Okay, you want to know. I was not abused. I was probably knocked around more than most kids, and I was starved. Most people would probably feel my living conditions were unacceptable, but I’m not bothered —“

“The house looked fine, Harry, and your relatives are not poor —“ Dumbledore began, puzzled.

Harry sighed. They were not going to let this go. “Have you ever been inside a muggle house, Sir?” he asked the Headmaster.

Dumbledore looked diverted. “No, I don’t think I have,” he answered slowly.

Harry nodded. “Muggle houses are not like wizarding houses. Rooms do not expand to fit the wishes of the occupants. Did you not feel it the slightest bit odd, Sir, that my Hogwarts letter was addressed to The Cupboard Under The Stairs?”

The three sets of eyes glanced at each other and then looked at him.

Harry took a quick look around the room and waved his wand at a blank bit of wall near the fireplace. A small door, about four foot high by two feet wide, appeared. There was a latch on the outside.


They all moved towards the little door.

“You’ll have to go one at a time,” Harry said, with a smile in his voice. He stood up and held the door open for Professor McGonagall, who ducked her head and went in. Harry closed the door behind her.

“It’s dark!” her muffled voice sounded.

“Yes.”

“Ow! I just hit my head!”

“Sorry Professor, that’s the stairs. You can only stand up straight just by the door.”

“But I can’t see the door!”

“Yes you can. Look for the line of light underneath it.”

“But Potter, where’s the light switch? Muggles have electricity!”

“I usually wasn’t allowed a light bulb,” Harry said quietly. “Electricity costs money.”

Snape and Dumbledore looked at Harry. He found himself avoiding the eye contact, and stepped forward to open the door. McGonagall stayed inside, looking, before coming out. She moved to sit in her chair, just brushing her hand on Harry’s arm as she went by, not looking at him. Harry felt oddly touched.
Dumbledore merely bent down by the doorway and looked in. He twiddled the latch in his hand. “On the outside only, Harry?” he asked gently.

Harry nodded.

Snape practically had to crawl in. Harry tried not to look at his behind as he bent over. He shut the door. Harry heard the makeshift bed creak as Snape sat on it, and thought it was strangely intimate that Snape should be on his childhood bed. He knew his nose would be picking up the scents of the enclosed space – the unwashed sheets, the odours of sweat and socks and urine, the pleasant smell of shoe polish that was kept on a rack on the back of the door.

Snape rapped the door once and Harry opened it. With a quick decision he waved his wand and a bigger door stood in its place.

“This is where I slept after my Hogwarts letter. It frightened them into giving me Dudley’s second bedroom.”

Again he held the door open, and ushered them all in this time, following behind them. Snape looked at all the padlocks on the door as he passed. They crammed into the small space. Harry felt them noting the sparse furnishings, the bars at the window. He bent down and lifted the floorboard. “I hid my wand and anything precious here. Everything else was locked in my trunk and I wasn’t allowed access.”

“At least you had a cat for company,” Professor McGonagall said, trying for a cheerful note as she spotted the cat flap.

“No, that was to deliver bread and water through. I would be locked in here for weeks at a time, though they let me out to do jobs.”

The silence was so thick that it seemed to muffle the ears. Harry led the way out and sat down again.

In silence, Dumbledore conjured more tea and poured it.

“You must hate them. And us,” whispered Professor McGonagall.

“I did hate them,” Harry agreed, “until I had a heart-to-heart with my aunt at the beginning of the summer holidays last year, just after Sirius died. Then I realised how very unfair it had all been on them.” He could not keep the condemning tone out of his voice.

“You feel sorry for them?” Professor Snape sounded incredulous.

“Yes,” Harry nodded. He turned to Professor Dumbledore: “Sir, I need to ask for an assurance.”


“That regardless of whatever I tell you now, you will keep to your commitment to pay Dudley’s school fees. It’s his last year.”

Dumbledore looked seriously at the young man in front of him. He was feeling like his grasp on reality was seriously skewed, and he was having trouble pulling it back into place. However, he kept his voice to its normal tones, and answered, “Very well, Harry.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Harry breathed a sigh of relief. He had achieved one of his objectives.
“You must be very fond of your cousin, Mr Potter,” Professor McGonagall commented in a warm voice.

Harry laughed. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Professor, but I’m afraid I can’t stand Dudley. I did, however, come to an agreement with my aunt.”

“Would you care to explain that?” Snape slid in.

Harry looked at the dark haired man, now sitting in one of the chairs, his back straight, a cup cradled with apparent nonchalance in his fingers. He really looked amazingly sexy, Harry thought, feeling an inappropriate stirring in his groin. Control! He turned his head away, and looked at Dumbledore: “I need to ask you a question or two first, Sir.”

Fire away!” smiled the older wizard, having fortified himself with a good mouthful of very strong sweet tea.

“The first one is personal,” Harry paused apologetically.

“I’ll answer if I can,” the old man nodded.

“Thank you, Sir. Have you ever had any children?”

Surprise lit the faces of all three.

“No, I haven’t, but as you know I have been involved with children for a very large part of my life.”

“Yes Sir. It’s not exactly the same, is it?”

Dumbledore looked at him enquiringly.

Harry sighed. “I feel relieved – just a little – that your actions were through a complete lack of knowledge rather than malice.”

Harry could feel the shock at this statement, but it had been very important to him.


“I’ve no idea, Sir. I’ve tried to consider as many reasons for your actions as possible.”

“It just seemed the best thing to put you with your relatives. Away from the adulation of the wizarding world…”

“It didn’t occur to you that putting me with a Muggle family that absolutely detests magic and regards wizards as freaks, who believed they had a duty to beat the magic out of me, might actually make me think Voldemort had a point?”

You could slice the air with a knife. What did they expect? thought Harry.

“And what conclusion did you come to, Mr Potter?” Snape asked silkily.

“I had no good experiences of the Muggle world whatsoever before I came to Hogwarts,” Harry stated. “On the other hand, some of my meetings with wizards haven’t exactly been warm fuzzy occasions either,” he added, a slight smile in his voice. “It’s very fortunate that I met Hagrid and then the Weasleys, because frankly, I wouldn’t otherwise know the kindness of good people, or what family life could really mean. And luckily, in the last year or so, I’ve met some wonderful
Muggles, so perhaps I have a more balanced perception of the world now.”

“So it’s all for the best, then, Harry!” Dumbledore took a slice of cake from the plate in the middle of the low coffee table.

“Perhaps you’d like to go and tell that to my Aunt, then, Sir,” Harry said dangerously.

“Pardon?” Dumbledore mouthed round a piece of icing.

“Perhaps you’d like to go and tell my Aunt that, Sir?”

“I’m not with you, Harry.”

“No. As I said earlier, I understand the initial decision, taken in the rush and shock of my parents’ death, to take me to my Aunt’s. But you must have known they wouldn’t want me, mustn’t you? Otherwise you would have knocked, and told her her sister was dead. What sort of person leaves a baby on the doorstep? With a cowardly letter?”

Snape hissed. Potter had called Dumbledore a coward! But Professor McGonagall sat there, numb; she had been there too, and was deep in the depths of her own culpability.

“I find it hard to believe that you made no effort to find out anything about them – or me – afterwards. Did you know the Dursley’s never wanted children?”

Eyes just stared at him, speechless.

“That after Dudley’s rather unexpected arrival, my Aunt suffered from severe post-natal depression? That she was only just getting over that and was overcompensating by spoiling Dudley rotten? Have you any idea how difficult two toddler boys can be? I’ve got friends with little kids and it’s exhausting after just a couple of hours! Did you not think to even ask Mrs Weasley? Think Fred and George before there was even a chance of remonstrating with them verbally!”

Harry could see from the looks of horror all round that that had struck home.

“Petunia couldn’t cope. She didn’t want to cope -and why should she have to? Did you offer any help? Any respite? They had a child they didn’t want, always there, always in the way, always a threat to their world because I started sprouting magical ability in bits and pieces and it terrified them! Did they have anyone to talk to about it? Tell them how to get it under control? They lived in fear that I might do something terrible. And I could have. It was utterly wrong of you to have put them through that. They never ever had the opportunity to be just their own family; even if it was necessary for me to be there, you could have offered them some respite. I’m sure someone could have been found to take me in for the odd weekend, or week away. No wonder they hate wizards.”

Harry put his cup down on the table, and pushed his hands through his messy hair. They had to know what they had done.

After a few moments, Professor McGonagall looked at him. “You said you came to an agreement with your Aunt, Mr Potter?”

Harry smiled briefly at her. “Yes.”

“To help around the house?”

Harry laughed an ugly laugh. “That was probably the bit that was hard for my Aunt to give up! The only way they coped with me was by finding me useful, or ignoring me. I learnt to do the
housework at a very young age, and I’m not complaining either, because when I went to live on my
own, looking after myself was a doddle. If I wasn’t doing housework, I had to keep out of the way –
either staying out of the house, or locked in my cupboard or room, depending on how they felt.
I’m not saying everything they did was bad. Just that I wouldn’t wish it on any one else. Not if I
can do something about it.”

“And are you asking us to do something about you? You only have two holidays left, and you
could stay at Hogwarts…” Dumbledore began.

“No thanks!” Harry laughed. “I used to be very glad to stay here at Christmas and Easter, thank
you Professor, but I don’t need it now!”

“You are happy to stay with the Dursleys, then? You went back there last Christmas and Easter,
did you not?” Dumbledore asked, slightly puzzled.

“Oh, I didn’t stay at the Dursleys.”

“Excuse me?”

“I haven’t lived with the Dursleys since I had the discussion with Aunt Petunia.”

“What are you gibbering on about, Potter?” Snape sneered.

That’s what I was saying about the protections being rubbish – sorry for the language, but they
are!”

“Really, Potter -!” Snape began.

“Professor Dumbledore, what is your ward telling you now? The one that tells you that I am at the
Dursleys?”

Professor Dumbledore’s eyes sharpened, and he whirled round to look at a small glass object on a
high shelf behind his chair.

Snape had his wand out pointing at Harry before the Headmaster had even turned back. He kept it
trained on Harry as Professor McGonagall stood in front of him, moving her wand over him
slowly.

Harry sat back comfortably in the chair, and watched.

“Regresso!” McGonagall snapped, with a flick of her wrist.

Nothing happened.

“I am Harry Potter,” Harry smiled at the taut woman.

“It is not possible to befuddle the detector with polyjuice,” Snape said with authority.

Oh, I know, Sir,” Harry smiled. He settled even more comfortably in the chair and crossed his
ankle over his knee again, gently toying with the knobbly bone. “No one can get in by using bits of
my hair or fingernails. It was a sensible precaution, but easy to overcome. It merely requires a live
part of me to be in the house.”

That intense, expectant quiet again.

“Would you care to explain?” Snape made his racking curiosity sound like a bored request.
“Sperm can live for several days if you maintain the right temperature,” Harry said conversationally.

Snape blinked.

Harry wanted to laugh.

“Mr Potter,” Professor McGonagall drew herself up, her paper soft cheeks stained pink, “you do not mean to tell me that you sent your Aunt semen samples?!”

“Spot on, Professor!” Harry smiled.

To Harry’s secret delight, Snape’s mouth actually fell open, before snapping shut, and he gave Harry an intense black eyed look before turning away and striding over to the fire, kicking a loose log back into the blaze.

“You sent your Aunt samples of… of…” Professor McGonagall couldn’t seem to get over it, and having said the dreaded word once couldn’t seem to manage to repeat it.

“She didn’t know what they were,” Harry said gently. “Not unless she opened the packages, that is. Which she may have done, but I can’t be held responsible for that.”

Harry leant forward and picked up the teapot. “May I?” he asked Dumbledore, and at the nod, refilled his cup, added milk and sipped.

Snape turned to look at the boy, sitting there with his legs spread and the cup cradled against his stomach, and was horrified to have an image flash through his brain of Potter not leaning back with his fingers wrapped around a tea cup, but of a naked Potter looking utterly debauched, sitting in the Headmaster’s study with his hands wrapped around his prick busy providing said sample. Horrified at the stirring in his body, Snape snapped back to look in the fire. He had never had sexual thoughts about his students! Never! It was vile! It must be that his libido was in overdrive after his night (and the morning – was it only this morning?) with Alex. He had not intended to take up Alex’s invitation to meet again, but maybe he needed to rethink. Much better that than having inappropriate thoughts about a student! About Harry Potter! Merlin, he was sick! He’d hated the boy for years. Except he looked very much the man sitting there right now, and – Damn!

Dumbledore coughed. “So you, ah, sent a sample along this morning?” Dumbledore inquired.

“Yes, I thought we’d be having this discussion,” Harry affirmed.

“And will you tell us where you have been during all the holidays? This summer? Easter? Christmas? Last summer?” Dumbledore sought confirmation of how long Harry had been evading them.

“I’ve been living in Brighton,” Harry said.

Snape glanced round. “Improving your suntan, I see,” he snarked.

“Working,” Harry said gently.


“On a building site. Hence the suntan. Though the sea was very nice this summer, thank you, Professor. And to earn money of course, to pay my rent.”
“Do you realise the danger you’ve been in?” Professor McGonagall said, getting her wind back. “Potter, -“

“I’m alive, aren’t I? Stronger, fitter and healthier than ever I was at the Dursleys,” he said sharply. “And of course I wore a glamour,” he said, taking the wind out of her sails and perking up the transfiguration professor’s interest at the same time.

“A glamour? You couldn’t have maintained a glamour for the whole summer –“

She was cut off by the look Harry gave her.

“It’s extremely draining on a wizard’s power to maintain a glamour,” she said defensively. “You took it off at home, I take it?”

“No,” Harry said patiently. “I was living with Muggles, one of whom I worked with. And yes, I found it a little tiring last summer, but then I was tired with the physical work anyway, so it all bundled together. And by this summer I was used to it. And it was good for me to learn to cope with a regular drain of power. It was only a head glamour, anyway,” he explained. “I kept my own body.”

“Will you show us, Harry?” Professor Dumbledore asked.

Harry shook his head. After last night there was no way he was going to reveal his identity. But there was another reason too. After inheriting Sirius’ wealth, he had bought a small house in Hogsmeade the previous Autumn. He had only been there a few times, but he had bought it as Alex, and had no intention of revealing that Harry Potter had a house in the village. It was his bolt-hole. And he might be using it a lot more, if he could persuade Severus to pursue their relationship. “I’d rather not, at the moment, Sir. I have lived under a false name and glamour for all the holidays for the last year and a quarter. I haven’t been captured or hurt and it has given me the opportunity to learn a great deal.”

“You’ve lived entirely in the Muggle world?”

Harry shook his head again. “No, though most of the time has been with Muggles. I’ve been to Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade without any problems –“

“Do you know how easy glamours are to detect to an experienced wizard, Potter?” Snape interjected. “I can’t believe you have been so foolhardy! Correct that! What else did I expect from someone who has made an art of flouting every rule –“

As he spoke, Harry looked at him intently, and slowly passed a hand over his face.

Snape juddered to a halt, because as Potter’s hand slid down to his chest his own face stared back at him. In uncanny likeness.

Professor McGonagall gasped.

“How the hell did you do that?” Snape snarled, when the spells revealed nothing. And then: “And how the hell do we know that the Potter face isn’t a glamour too?”
Harry looked at Dumbledore. “Is the Marauder’s Map now in your possession, Sir?”

Dumbledore looked at Harry sharply, then went to a cupboard along one wall, and after some shuffling withdrew the familiar parchment. Harry was not surprised that he knew the incantation. The map clearly showed them all, and Harry’s dot labelled as himself. No comments were made on the map, to Harry’s mild surprise.

As a transfiguration teacher, McGonagall seemed fascinated with Harry’s glamour.

“How did you do that, Mr Potter?” she asked, her voice rather less demanding and more filled with curiosity than Snape’s. “You didn’t say anything or use your wand,” she murmured in realisation.

“Body magic – to one’s own body – really doesn’t need it, “Harry said quietly. “It’s a little bit of a twist on a glamour, really – a glamour really acts on convincing people looking at you that what they are seeing is real – that’s why it’s so draining – your magic is having to reach out all the time. I did try that at first, but when I thought about it, this seemed a lot simpler. You just have to tell your body you want to appear in a certain way. It feels exactly as it looks,” he said, and nodded to allow the Professor to lean forward and stroke her smooth-skinned fingers down his cheek.

Snape felt himself oddly disturbed to see Professor McGonagall stroking what was in effect his face. Though it was the boy’s too, and he had to fight the urge to want to feel it as well.

“Want to check it out, Professor? See if it really feels like the face you shave in the morning?” Harry asked, his voice teasing.

Snape pulled himself up.

“In the interests of Science and all that, of course?”

Snape could not resist. How could the boy really know what he felt like? He found his feet taking him to stand between Potter’s legs. The boy stood up, causing him to back off quickly, which made his temper rise even more. However, seeing Potter still his normal height, reaching only up to his chin, somehow took some of the sting out of it. He put his hand forward and stroked it down the slight stubble along his jaw line. He always developed five o’clock shadow if he didn’t use his own depilatory potion, and this morning he had shaved with a spell, not having taken the potion with him. He moved his hand back to his own jaw, marvelling at the sameness. It truly was incredible. Not that he intended to tell the boy. And he smelled like him! Severus noted in shock.

Harry shivered at the feel of Snape’s fingers along his jaw, only just resisting the desire to let his eye lashes flutter down and to lean into the touch. As Snape felt his own jaw for comparison, he raised his own hand to Snape’s face to check if he had got it right. That was his excuse, anyway.

Snape recoiled as the touch of Potter’s fingers shivered through him, breaking the contact. Only years of training in hiding his reactions prevented him from allowing the sharp intake of breath and pounding thump of his heart to appear anything more than distaste. “It’s a passable fake, I suppose,” he drawled.

“Severus! He looks the spit of you!” McGonagall exclaimed. “Really, this is a most interesting magical idea! It’s more a type of transfiguration rather than a charm, isn’t it, Mr Potter?” she asked encouragingly, a whole new avenue of work obviously opening up in front of her eyes.

“Yes, I think so,” Harry agreed, smiling at her. He passed his hand back over his face, and reverted to being Harry Potter.

“And you don’t need your wand for it,” Dumbledore mused, as Harry sat down again.
"Well that was sort of accidental," Harry said, blushing.

Dumbledore cocked his head at him, a smile twirling his lips. "Trying to evade being caught by the ministry, Harry?"

"Well, I was when I first started trying it," Harry agreed, "as I was still underage then. It's funny how something you do for one reason ends up being the best thing in the end." He smiled.

"What made you realise you could do wandless magic and not get caught?" Professor McGonagall asked.

"Well, it was more body magic that I was thinking about, at the time," Harry responded.

Snape raised an eyebrow. Harry grinned back. "Nothing like that, Professor! I was thinking about girls."

"That's pretty usual for that sort of magic," Snape smirked.

"Severus!" McGonagall exclaimed, but her lips were twitching.

"Ah, that wouldn't have done me any good," Harry threw in casually. "Actually, I was thinking of the hair spells and stuff girls use all the time – you know, to keep it under control or make it into a different style or colour, and I thought how come they can do those in the holidays then, and that made me start thinking about body magic. And the fact that you can do anything to your own body without it registering. The wandless bit is neither here nor there, really. I think most people can do wandless on their own bodies, it takes very little magic when your will is behind it and pointed inwards. Most people just don't realise and use their wands automatically."

The three older wizards looked at the boy in astonishment. Even Snape found himself surprised at the depths of the boy's understanding of magic. Which he just seemed to have stumbled on. Typical Potter luck!

"Well, this is all very interesting," Dumbledore said jovially, "but I think we now have the answers to our questions. I can't say I'm happy that you went off without telling us, Harry, or that you chose to deceive us," he said, looking at the ward detector still winking happily on the shelf. He picked it up, and with a wave of his wand it became a dull lump of purple glass, which he placed on top of one of the piles of parchment on his desk. "You realise your – samples – could have fallen into the wrong hands? That a user of the Dark Arts could have put them to – ill use, shall we say?" He looked sharply at Harry, who was already feeling uptight at the 'deceit' comment.

"It was an acceptable risk, in my judgement," Harry said, emphasising the last word. "The packages were sent by Hedwig, and my Aunt sent back the old sample with her for my disposal. She didn't like touching Hedwig but swapping a package once a day was a small price to pay for getting rid of me and for Dudley's school fees. I had worried initially that it would look odd that I never appeared to leave the house, and I thought of asking Aunt Petunia to take the packages out with her in her handbag when she went shopping."

Professor McGonagall choked.

Harry gave her a smile. "Yeah, I felt a little odd about that too," he agreed, "and the house had protections, in theory. The sample would be less conspicuous there, no-one would know what they were looking for. And at the end of the day, you never noticed that I apparently never left the house. Ever," Harry said, unable to hide the trace of bitterness in his voice. He pulled himself together, and looked at Dumbledore. "So, you know what you wanted to know, even though you
probably wish you didn’t. I need to know that something will be put in motion for the protection of other wizard orphans. Will you approach the ministry, or shall I?”

Snape could not believe the young man in front of him. He was no longer a boy. He was more than a young man, somehow. He seemed to radiate intent and power, and the ability to wield it. Dumbledore obviously felt it too.

“I’m glad you have drawn these matters to our attention, Harry, and I am sorry for what you have gone through. I know that is not enough. I will talk to the ministry.”

Harry nodded. “I would like reports on your progress,” he said, for all the world as if it were perfectly natural to expect the most powerful wizard in the world to report back to him, Snape thought bitterly, and was further shocked when Dumbledore calmly agreed.

“As soon as I know anything.”

“Thank you. And if it’s convenient,” Harry continued, now standing in front of Dumbledore’s desk, “I’d like an appointment with you on another matter later in the week. Could you fit me in Thursday evening?”

“I could see you now, Harry,” the Headmaster said curiously, his eyes glancing in dismissal at his two teachers.

“No, thank you, I need to do some preparation first,” Harry said firmly.

Dumbledore looked intently at the young man. “At nine on Thursday, then?” he suggested.

Harry nodded. “Thank you.”

He turned to the room, his eyes giving it a quick sweep, Snape noticed, before he looked both of them in the eye and said, “Good evening, Professors.”

“Good night, Mr Potter,” his Head of House said warmly.

Snape remained quiet.

As Harry put his hand on the doorknob, he swung round suddenly, and looked straight at Severus. “Professor Snape? My apologies that you lost some of your holiday looking for me.”

He didn’t wait for a response, but turned and left the room.

The three professors looked at each other in the ensuing heavy silence.

“Firewhisky?” Dumbledore offered, pulling a bottle out of the cupboard behind him.
Dumbledore Tries Not To Be Dumbfounded.

It had been a busy few days, but Harry had the information, more or less, that he needed, and had made his decisions. They were controversial, and he had thought a lot about them.

Now he was in his room – as a seventh year, he finally got his own chambers – and for once was carefully choosing what to wear. His normal school robe was not appropriate, and in the end he went for a dark green wizarding robe of fine wool that he had bought over the summer. Neutral but elegant. Confident. *He hoped!*

Taking a breath, he concentrated on the small space behind a side table in Dumbledore’s study that he had noted at his meeting with the three professors. The space was small, and therefore Dumbledore was unlikely to be in it: splinching himself into the Headmaster would not produce the effect he desired.

He adjusted his eyes to the soft light of the study, pleased that he had successfully gained access without problem, and said quietly, “Good evening, Professor,” even as he noted Dumbledore rising from his chair, aware that his wards had been breached.

Dumbledore, for once, stared at him in open astonishment before concealing his shock.

“Harry. Right on time. Do sit down.”

Harry moved from the corner and slipped into the chair in front of the desk. He wondered if Dumbledore was going to ignore his method of arrival, and felt his lips twitch. He wouldn’t put it past the old sod! Then he sensed Dumbledore checking his wards, and smiled.

“They’re intact, Sir.”

Dumbledore looked hard at him. “And yet you are sitting in my office, having just apparated within the castle, and indeed into the most heavily warded room within it.”

“Sorry about that, Sir,” Harry said cheekily, “but I did want to show you that I was serious.”

“Indeed. About what, may I ask?”

I would like to take a class, Sir.”

Dumbledore blinked. “You wish to swap a class? I foresee no problem – “

“No Sir. I’d like to lead a class. Not exactly teach – it would be a mutual learning experience. Only a few students – six, to be exact.”

“Not another DA then?”

“No, though I feel this is essential if we are to defeat Voldemort. Which I intend to do this year,” Harry said conversationally.

Dumbledore blinked again. “I think you’d better explain,” he said, steepling his fingers together.

“Thank you, Sir. The defeating Voldemort or the lesson bit?”

Dumbledore laughed, and relaxed back in his chair. “Whichever you prefer first, Harry.”
Harry gave a small smile back. “I’ll start with the lesson bit. As I’m sure you’re aware, Professor, my marks have never actually been particularly brilliant,” he looked at Dumbledore for agreement.

“Most years you’ve been rather busy,” twinkled the Headmaster.

Harry’s lips twitched. “Yes. On the other hand, it seemed rather odd to me that I managed to survive Voldemort so many times despite being only an average sort of wizard. I know I had lots of help,” Harry said quickly, adding a heartfelt, “thank God!”

Dumbledore looked at him encouragingly.

“I spent a lot of time the summer before last wondering how I’d managed it, even with the help. And it was too much to be just luck. And I came to a conclusion, and I’ve been working on the principle of that conclusion, and I was right.”

“And?”

“I don’t respond to how magic is taught here, Sir. Oh, I know I’ve learnt some, but when I’ve really needed it – well! I call my magic need magic,” he said quietly. “When I’ve needed it, I’ve been able to draw on it. And that made me think about how I did that, and last year I spent most of my lessons thinking about how I could do whatever spell or transfiguration or whatever we were doing in a way that felt comfortable in me,” Harry said, his fist thumping into his chest.

Dumbledore was regarding him with interest. “And you’ve been successful with doing things… your way?”

“Yes. Magic here is made much too complicated, as far as I can see. Wands, and books, and words, and movements – but Professor,” and Harry leaned forward eagerly, eyes sparkling, “it’s just there. In us, around us. Waiting to be called! It’s - blissful. Not necessarily easy – it’s just that you have to get a feel for it, and then not get too terrified to lose that feeling and – “ he looked hard at Dumbledore – “you know this, because you feel it too.”

Dumbledore’s face had only a faint hint of a smile, though it was not an unpleasant look he carried. Shock, disbelief, maybe. “I do feel it, “he agreed, “though maybe not as much as you, Harry, and definitely not at your age. Tell me, how did you apparate in here?”

“Well, I’ve been able to apparate in the castle - and into the castle - for a year or so –“

“How did that come about?”

“The summer before last I discovered how to apparate, so when we got back I wondered what it was about the castle that made it impossible. I wanted to feel the wards. And when I pushed against them, I could feel them. And then, of course, when you can feel them, it’s easy to find your way through –“

“How?” Dumbledore said sharply. “Did you find weak spots?”

“No, I’ve checked them all thoroughly and they’re all fine,” Harry said comfortably, causing Dumbledore another minor shock. Checking the wards was an annual event that took the combined efforts of himself, Minerva, Filius, Pomona and Severus almost a whole day and evening and left them all utterly drained from the experience.

“How then?” he said, trying not to let his voice waver.

Harry looked at him a bit nonplussed. “Hard to say, really. I just – feel them. And they can feel my
magic, and I make my intentions clear – that I have no ill-will or ill-intent –“

“The wards can assess that?” Dumbledore said in surprise.

Harry raised his eyebrows. “Yes. Didn’t you know?”

Albus shook his head. “I didn’t think of them as being – active?”

“Oh, they are! So many different magics over the years, all intertwining! They’re beautiful! And not exactly animate, but – sort of, in the way that the castle has a sort of life – different than what we mean, but more than say a rock or stone on a beach. Sort of a crafted life. Like - -like, say, a painting. Even a Muggle one. All the paint and canvas on their own are nothing. But when it’s finished, it has meaning, and – life. It gives back to those who look at it; they can believe different things about it – it gives different things to different people – and its more than the paint, or the elements that the paint is made up of. And Hogwarts is like that but more so, because so many people have added to its crafting, with love, and care, over such a long time. And with magic, which gives it even more than, say, the Tower of London. So it does respond, even on its own a bit. More than just the staircases moving when it’s feeling mischievous, or the windows looking at scenes on the other side of the castle.” He looked at Dumbledore, hoping he understood. He must, surely! “And I love it here, and it can feel that – it knows I won’t bring it any harm – the opposite in fact – that I’ll protect it – so it doesn’t exactly drop the wards, but it lets me find my way through. Is there a chance of a cup of tea this evening, Sir? I think I might get a bit dry trying to explain everything,” he finished suddenly, reddening a little.

“Perhaps you ought to summon it?” Dumbledore said quizzically.

“I wouldn’t dream of usurping you in your own rooms, Sir,” Harry said quietly.

The Headmaster chuckled, waved his wand, and poured them both tea from the tray that had appeared.

A few refreshing sips later, Dumbledore asked, “So. Your class. Tell me more about it.”

“Thank you, Sir. As I was saying, I don’t respond necessarily as fast to the normal approach here – and I know it suits 95% of students, and I don’t dispute that one bit. It’s not intended as a criticism at all.” he said earnestly, “but we can’t afford to waste magical potential. And, uh, that’s another thing,” he said, looking down as he sipped his tea.

“Yes?”

“I can see people’s power levels – magical power levels.”

“Like an aura?” Dumbledore asked curiously.

“No, nothing so pretty. I can just sort of feel them; and I can feel if they’re underused. And I’ve done a sort of recce of the school, and there are some people so seriously under-using their power that I wondered if they were failing in school like me, unnecessarily. And that made me think about running this remedial magic class.”

“Remedial magic?” Dumbledore’s lips twitched, at the thought of a wizard with the power Harry was talking about needing remedial magic.

Harry laughed. “Yes, Sir. We could call it anything you like, of course. There are quite a few people, but despite the DA, I know I don’t really know enough about teaching, so I decided it would be foolish to try too much, and that I shouldn’t go for anyone under seventh year.”
“That’s sensible. Who’s on your list, then, Harry?”

“You may find it a little controversial, and I need your advice on a couple as well?” Harry said nervously.

“Fair enough. Fire away. I know I needn’t mention that this conversation is confidential,” Dumbledore added in an apologetic tone.

Harry grinned and nodded. “Of course.” He rubbed his hands down his thighs, and said, “Right. First up: Neville Longbottom.”

Dumbledore sighed. “Well, I suppose that’s no surprise. Between you and me, Harry, I always felt he could do a little better.”

Harry snorted. “There are only three wizards in this school more powerful than him, Sir. Including the staff,” Harry added.

“Pardon?”

“He’s very powerful, “ Harry explained, “but he’s only using the part that relates to Herbology. We – I – need to help him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“You can detect a sort of ranking of power?”

“Yes.”

“Care to elaborate?”

“Neville has the same power levels as Professor McGonagall, Professor Flitwick and Hermione.”

“Good gracious. Is Miss Granger next on your list?”

“No. The teaching suits Hermione just fine, she doesn’t need my class. When they’re coming on, though, I’ll want to ask her to be involved in a joint project I have in mind.”

Dumbledore could not believe the young man in front of him was the rebellious student of two years earlier. Or the diffident young boy he had been.

“Who else, then?”

“I needed to ask you about Eloise Midgen. She has a very high power level, much unused, but I’m not sure of her marks. She’s not talked of as someone particularly exceptional?”

“No, she is a middling to struggling pupil.”

“Right, then she’s a must. And Padma Patil? And Ernie McMillan?”

“Same for them.”

“Right, they’re in too, then, if they want. Draco Malfoy.”

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. “Draco Malfoy gets very good marks,” he commented.
“He could do better. He’s as powerful as Neville and that tier.”

“He does nearly as well as Hermione.”

“He needs it. I can feel it.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry. “You know what his father is.”

“Yes, and I’ve debated long and hard. I could exclude him. He’d never know, and he’ll hate being ‘taught’ by me. But he isn’t a Death Eater yet. And education is not about withholding opportunities. We have to make them available to everyone. And then let them make the choices.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry with pride glowing in his eyes. “I applaud your sentiments, Harry, but the risks –“

“I’ll be setting wards myself. To stop anyone taking knowledge of who else I am teaching to anyone else. I can’t stop anyone choosing to use what I give them in whatever way they want, but I’ll be trying my hardest to make the other options look stupid.”

There was a long pause when neither man spoke.

“Very well, Harry.”

Harry let out a long sigh. He hadn’t known how Dumbledore would react. He’d prefer not to have Malfoy to teach, but it wasn’t about preferences. He took his courage in his hands. “The last person on my list is Professor Snape.”

Dumbledore’s cup jerked and his tea sloshed over his hand.

“Sorry,” Harry said apologetically.

“Professor Snape?”

“Yes. He’s as powerful as you,” Harry said.

Silence. “Harry, could you be wrong? Your detection –“

“I’m not wrong,” Harry shook his head, “and if you think I would choose to have Draco Malfoy or Snape in my class you must think I’m mad already!”

Dumbledore burst out laughing. “Harry, I can’t see that Professor Snape will ever agree to be in your class! He’s a Potions Master, and –“

“He’s using only a fragment of his power,” Harry said, “the rest is wrapping around him reeking of disuse and dust. It’s painful.”

“You’re serious.”

“Yes. Get him to my class, and let me do the rest. It’s his choice, but I hope he’ll want to take it.”

“Don’t be disappointed –“

“I will be. Not only do we need him, but it’s a shameful waste. But it must be up to him, and I have to make him want to do it enough to over-ride his hatred of me -“

“He doesn’t hate you –“
Harry laughed. “Professor, don’t! I know he’s saved my life on numerous occasions, but no-one could say that he liked doing it!”

Dumbledore twinkled at Harry, then sat back again.

“Well, we’ve discussed who. Now we need to discuss what, before I can approve this idea. Though it would be worth it just to see Professor Snape’s face – but, anyway! Have you thought over your curriculum?”

“Some. I intend to teach them all to access their ability for wandless magic. And apart from that, there will be a lot of individual work – I need to encourage Eloise, Padma and Ernie to find what they’re good at; once we do that, I hope the rest will come. Conversely, I need Neville and Professor Snape to expand their range – to know that they can excel in other areas.”

“You don’t think specialising a good thing?” Dumbledore asked with interest.

“Oh yes, it’s inevitable in the end. But Neville and Snape have done it to the exclusion of everything else. As well as it being useful to have a more widely developed approach, I think they’ll find that the extra power and skills will bleed back to benefits in their favourite areas.”

“Professor Snape isn’t just about potions, you know, Harry.”

_Didn’t he just know it! Not that that was what Dumbledore meant!_

“I appreciate that, Sir. I know he has a vast knowledge of the Dark Arts – and maybe that’s why he isn’t using all his power. He’s tasted too much of the power of the Dark Magics and maybe doesn’t want to be drawn in. I don’t know. I don’t think he is aware of his capabilities. And he needs to have a bit more respect for the side of magic he regards as ‘foolish wand waving’! Maybe when he realises he doesn’t need his wand he won’t object so much. Or when he appreciates the real difference between wandless and wand enhanced magic.”

Dumbledore regarded Harry and felt his perceptions shift again. He knew this evening was perhaps one of the most important in his long life. People did not just come and sit and discuss such profound concepts as if they were Quidditch strategies.

“I think it is perhaps time that you showed me what you are capable of,” the old man said at last. Harry had been expecting as much. “What would you like me to do?”

“I think a wizard’s duel might be interesting?” Dumbledore raised an eyebrow.

Harry grinned. “Could be fun!”

Dumbledore reassessed once again. He knew of no other wizard alive, apart from Voldemort, who would willingly duel with him. Did the young man realise what he was going to face? “No holds barred, except the Unforgivables?”

“I’m sure you’ll defeat me, Sir, but I’m delighted to have the opportunity to try. Where would you like to go? I don’t want to damage your room again,” he said sheepishly.

Dumbledore thought quickly about the empty spaces in the castle. “There’s a large empty classroom on the fourth floor –”

“Can you picture it?” Harry asked.
Dumbledore nodded. “Of course,” he said, wondering the reason for the question.

Harry came round the desk. “I’ll apparate us there, then, if that’s alright?”

Trying not to appear dumbstruck once again, Dumbledore smiled and said, ”What a good idea.”

Harry linked their arms, and the next moment they found themselves in the classroom.

“It worked!” Harry said in delight.

“You’re surprised?” Dumbledore said, in surprise himself.

“Well, I’ve never apparated anyone with me before, or gone when I couldn’t see the location myself, but there didn’t seem any reason for it not to work, seeing as the castle is bound to accept you coming through the wards, so –“

“Merlin! It’s too easy to trust you, my lad!”

“No bad thing!” laughed Harry.

Three hours seventeen minutes later, Dumbledore conceded defeat. Harry took the wand held out to him for just a moment to acknowledge it, then handed it back, smiling broadly at Dumbledore.

“That was brilliant!” he grinned, putting his hand out and hauling the older man off the floor.

“Ouch!” as the older man’s grip squeezed the boils on his hand. “Amazing hex, that! Who would have thought boils could be so distracting! Every movement and there they are, grating at you! “

Dumbledore smiled. “I think we could both do with a little of Madam Pomfrey’s attentions,” he said.

Harry looked at him worriedly. “Shall I take us straight up to the infirmary?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “My chambers, if you don’t mind, Harry. We can floo Poppy. It might cause worry if the school thought the Headmaster was in the infirmary for any reason.”

“Which hex is troubling you?” Harry asked anxiously. “I’m sorry I had to –“

“Think nothing of it, dear boy! You did have to. I was impressed that you brought yourself to do it.”

“Well, you sort of gave me permission when you broke my arm,” Harry mumbled.

“Indeed, Harry!”

Harry put his good arm around the Headmaster and in a moment they were in his study. Harry settled the older man into an armchair by the fire, and put a fire call through to the infirmary. It took a minute or two before Madam Pomfrey appeared in her night clothes.

“Sorry to bother you, Poppy!” Dumbledore called from the chair. “Would you mind giving us a little assistance?”

”Albus!” and Poppy came straight through. “Whatever has happened to you two?” she said, glancing from the erupting boils on Harry’s face to his hanging arm to the Headmaster’s pale face.
“Just a little duelling fun!” smiled Albus, “But we wouldn’t be adverse to a little help.”

“Duelling fun? It’s two in the morning, Albus!”

“We got carried away, Poppy dear,” he said apologetically.

Poppy had been busy waving her wand over the Headmaster. “What is this? Your heart rate is completely —”

“Oh, I think that was probably the tachycardia hex,” Harry said in embarrassment.

“You shot a tachycardia hex at the Headmaster? Harry, I am ashamed of you!” she snarled. “And what’s this? Your shin bone is broken, Albus!”

“Oh, I hit that on the edge of one of those old drop down desk seats,” he said cheerfully. “And don’t blame Harry for the hex, Poppy! He’s got a broken arm and a terrible dose of furnunculus!”

Poppy had moved on to Harry, tutting away.

“And a stomach churning hex, from the feel of it,” she compressed her lips.

“Uh, I think that’s just reaction setting in,” Harry said. “I dodged that one.”

“I will be back in a moment with some potions. Sit down, Harry, and don’t move, either of you!”

She zipped into the fire.

“Thank you Sir,” Harry said quietly.

“No, thank you, dear boy. I don’t know when I last had so much fun! But I think you were playing with me at the end?”

Harry bit his lip. “Not playing with you, Sir. Just – learning. You were coming up with some really inventive stuff! I’d never have dreamed of half the spells you chucked at me!”

Dumbledore laughed, and took the boy’s hand lightly, not squeezing.

Poppy came back through, shaking off ash.

“I told you to sit down, Harry;” she snapped.

Harry blushed. “Can’t, Poppy,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows at him, even as she was handing a small bottle to the Headmaster.

“Boils,” Harry said, explaining everything.

“Everywhere?” she guessed.

Harry nodded.

“How long?”

Harry looked at Dumbledore. “Probably one of the first?” A nod of agreement.

“Nearly three hours?” he hazarded a guess.
“Oh dear! Well, you’ve two choices, Harry. Really, it’s too late to spell them away: you’ll reabsorb
the poison; I can do it if you want. Better for an enhancement spell: it’ll bring them on and they’ll
burst within the next hour. Painful and messy, but I can give you some Pain-Stop which will ease it
a bit, and frankly your skin will feel gorgeous by tomorrow night. It gets rid of all the
imperfections.”

“I’d better go with that then,” Harry moaned. “God, my new robes are going to be ruined!”

Poppy laughed. “A good cleaning spell –“

“Yeah, but I’ll know they’ve had pus all over them,” Harry gave a grimace.

“Why don’t you come up to the infirmary? I’ll give you a hospital gown to wear instead.”

“I don’t think I could lie down, Poppy.”

The mediwitch laughed. “I don’t expect you could, Harry, but you might as well wander up and
don down the infirmary as anywhere else, The Headmaster is definitely going to need to be in bed and I
need to stay here and look after him.”

“I could do that.”

“Not without seven years of mediwizard training, you couldn’t,” Poppy said firmly. “Now, let me
heal your arm.”

Several minutes later found Harry and Dumbledore both with healed bones. Poppy bustled off into
the Headmaster’s bedroom to make all ready, and Dumbledore looked intently at the younger man.

“Harry, I think it might be a good idea to go and see Ollivander about another wand,” he said
casually.

Harry looked up sharply. “I’ve already done that.”

Dumbledore looked quickly at Harry’s wand, and Harry could see his shoulders slump slightly.

“My other wand is with my other persona,” he said quietly. “He has a house in Hogsmeade.” Harry
decided to mention his other home after all.

“What is it? Your other wand?”

Harry looked carefully at Dumbledore. “Fawkes gave me another feather last Christmas,” Harry
said apologetically.

“Just like that?”

“I asked him,” Harry admitted. “I knew I needed another wand so that I wouldn’t be recognised by
it when I was wearing my other face. I had a fancy to make my own wand.”

He could see the restrained eagerness in Dumbledore’s face.

“And?” the old man prompted.

“I had trouble,” Harry said. “There’s an apple tree in my Hogsmeade house, and I wanted to use it. I
couldn’t seem to get it right. Then the Spring growth came, and it was lovely and whippy, and felt
wonderful, but I still couldn’t do it. In the end, I took some wood and the feather to Mr Ollivander
and asked him to make it for me.”
“Ah.”

Harry left the pause, teasing. He knew what Dumbledore was after, though he hadn’t known at the
time what it all meant. “He invited me to have a go at making it myself.”

He felt Dumbledore’s indrawn breath. “And did you?”

“Yes.”

Dumbledore sat there, breathing heavily. “Since Easter?”

“Yes.”

“You’ve known and haven’t said anything?”

“It doesn’t mean anything. Magic is a continuum. From Muggles to squibs to hedge witches to
whatever. It’s just a gift –“

But Dumbledore had levered himself out of the chair and was easing himself down onto his knee.

“NO!” Harry shouted.

Poppy came rushing in. “Albus! Whatever is the matter?”

Albus ignored her, and bowed his head to Harry, his fisted hands crossing his chest.

Poppy stared from one to the other. “Harry?” her voice quavered.

“Please get up, Professor!” Harry urged. “I don’t want this! It isn’t right!”

Albus raised his head, but stayed on his knee. “Mage, don’t deny me this pleasure. I had given up
hope of seeing a mage in my life-time. “

Poppy gasped, and fell into the same posture.

“Please! Get up, both of you!” Harry gasped. “I don’t want this! Magic isn’t like that!”

Both of them just looked at him, and Harry looked inside of himself for the right way to deal with
this.

He changed his voice, authority suddenly in it. “As a Mage, I ask you to rise.” Eyes widening, they
both did so. Harry felt his heart thumping. He had not really admitted to himself that he was a
Mage, or that it meant anything, since Mr Ollivander had given him the same obeisance all those
months ago. He hadn’t even dared read up about it, as if the act of looking it up in a book would
draw attention to it.

“As a Mage,” he said, gentling his voice, “I ask you to believe that I have some feeling about
magic, and it tells me I am not special, just that I have a little more power on the continuum that is
magic. I don’t want people to kneel before me,” he said, a little desperately.

“Do not we have a right to acknowledge it? To celebrate it? To offer our allegiance?” Albus asked
gently.

Harry’s eyes widened. “I don’t ask for allegiance,” he said shakily, “but if I may, I would ask for
two things from you?”
Albus regarded him with interest, Poppy with awe.

“I ask you to understand that I do understand magic a little, and to take note of what I say, even if it seems odd sometimes. And I ask that you don’t restrain your counsel, because it’s all raw to me, and I’m seventeen, and I need advice, and I trust you. Both of you,” he said, looking too at Poppy.

Poppy nodded, and wiped her eyes, which made Harry blush, and pat her arm.

“You have it, Harry.” Dumbledore said.

“Thank you. I won’t always take it, of course,” Harry grinned.

Dumbledore smiled back, then looked serious. “You don’t want people to know? Why not?”

“I don’t see that it’s anyone else’s business,” Harry said firmly.

“What about the Order?” Dumbledore pushed.

“I think you’re making too much of it,” Harry replied. “I don’t want Voldemort to know, for it to leak out. Surprise should give us an advantage. I suspect he’ll want to take me out whilst I’m still at Hogwarts, still a ‘child’. We have to finish this this year. I will finish this.”

Dumbledore felt like a weight had lifted from his chest. Harry Potter was on their side. Despite his anger earlier in the week, his disappointment in them, despite his treatment by Muggles, Harry Potter was on their side. And he was a Mage. The first English Mage born in at least 200 years. Merlin, there was hope!
The Pitch

Harry sat on the edge of one of the desks in a disused classroom on the fourth floor, practicing his meditation technique.

He had had little sleep, having eventually donned a hospital gown but spent his time walking round Dumbledore’s bed chamber, talking to the Headmaster, as the boils had burst and stained the robe with their oily pus. The shower he had had afterwards was one of the most welcome he had ever experienced. He had stunk of the putrid smell of the boils, overlaid with the dried sweat from his duel with Dumbledore. His hair had been matted with sweat and pus, and cleaning it had been absolutely disgusting. He had to admit to relief, when he woke up, to find that his skin had indeed healed over and no trace of the blemishes remained. Even the Boy-Who-Lived was allowed a little vanity, surely?

He and Dumbledore had agreed that the potential members of his class would be owled at breakfast, the message saying only that their presence was requested in the fourth floor classroom at 5pm that afternoon.

Harry had spent a lot of the day thinking about how to handle it. He could have given himself more time, but he really wanted to get it going, and he worked best under pressure.

Neville Longbottom pushed open the door and smiled with surprise when he saw him. “Hi, Harry! You got a note too? What’s it about? Who else is coming?”

Harry grinned at him, but didn’t answer as Ernie McMillan and Eloise Midgen walked in.

Greetings were exchanged.

“What’s this about, then?” Eloise asked, trying to make sense of why they were there.

“We don’t know either,” Neville answered for both of them without consulting Harry.

Padma Patil peeped around the door. “Sorry I’m late! Stopped off to drop a book in on Parvati. What’s going on? Can’t be in trouble already, can we?” she said, as she slung her bag down by a desk.

“Potter’s here: of course trouble is an option,” drawled Draco Malfoy, lounging against the door, taking in the odd assortment of occupants.

“In other words, you haven’t a clue either,” Padma sallied back.

Draco’s eyes narrowed, but he sauntered in and leant against the teacher’s desk. “I think I must have received the note in error,” he said after a moment, “I can’t imagine why I should be in the same room as such a collection of losers.”

The inevitable flare of antagonistic response burst forth, but Harry’s lips twitched. Draco noticed.

“Are you laughing at me, Potter?” he said dangerously.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Malfoy,” Harry smiled back.

Draco’s eyes narrowed again. “Do you know why we are here?” he accused.

“Yes,” Harry said, causing everyone to turn and look at him.
“Harry!” Neville exclaimed. “Spill it then!”

“In a moment. We’re not all here.”

Which made everyone’s eyes turn to the door, just as Professor Snape walked in.

“Professor!” Draco turned to him with a smile. “Is this about some extra club you want us to set up?” he asked, pointedly ignoring Harry.

Snape’s eyes swept the room, an uncharacteristic furrow in his brow. “I have absolutely no idea why we are all here, Draco,” he said, as if the matter were utterly insignificant, “I received an owl at breakfast. No doubt the Headmaster will let us know what he wants of us in his own good time.”

“Actually,” Harry said into the silence, “you’re all here for a remedial magic class.”

“Excuse me?” Snape drew himself up. “The Headmaster has not asked me to teach any such thing, though Merlin knows most of you need it,” he sneered, looking slowly at them all.

Harry gave a slight cough. And shut the door with a small pulse of magic. “I discussed this with Professor Dumbledore last night, and he has agreed that I’ll be leading this class.”

There was a thumping silence in the room.

Snape drew himself even straighter, swirled in a billow of robes, and strode towards the door.

Harry knew he could not let Severus embarrass himself by not being able to open it. In a blink, he had apparated across the room and stood leaning back on it.

There was a general indrawn breath of shock.

“Yes, I can apparate in Hogwarts. And I’ve locked and warded the door. No-one here can leave until I’ve spoken to you all. If anyone does not wish to take this class, having listened, that is entirely your choice.”

Draco pulled out his wand. “Are you trying to hold us prisoner?” he said, pointing his wand at Harry.

The next moment, it was flying across the room and was in Harry’s hand, instantly followed by the wands of all the other people in the room.

There were a number of gasps. It had escaped no-one’s notice that Harry had disarmed them all, without a wand, without saying a single word. On top of apparating. In Hogwarts. Silence fell. Harry gathered the collection of wands, made a show of placing his own with them, and sailed the whole collection up to the ceiling.

Snape pulled a chair from behind a desk, into the space between the front row and the blackboard, and sat down with an elegant sweep of robes. “Perhaps when you have finished showing off, Mr Potter, you would care to explain yourself,” he said maliciously, ignoring the loss of his wand and appearing utterly in control.

Harry nodded at him. He was not going to let the man fluster him. He was rather impressed with Severus’ cool demeanour – he must be utterly pissed off inside.

“The wands can stay there till the end,” he said quietly, “to avoid any - accidents. You are all here,” he continued, “because you are all extremely powerful witches and wizards - ”
“Cough – Longbottom! Ha!” Malfoy snorted, trying to throw his own embarrassment elsewhere.

Neville turned bright red, and lowered his head.

“And because you are not reaching your potential because the schooling here doesn’t meet your needs,” Harry continued.

“Speak for yourself, Potter,” Draco sneered, “there’s nothing wrong with my marks.”

“Some of you excel in one subject,” Harry glanced at Neville, whose head whipped up as if he could feel the glance, and then pointedly at Snape, “whilst some of you might feel that you are no good at anything. I can assure you, you wouldn’t be here if that was the case.”

“And how is it that you are in a position to decide that, Professor Potter,” Snape asked silkily.

Malfoy tittered.

“As I am sure you know, I’ve only been an average student myself,” Harry ignored the louder snorts from Malfoy and Snape, “and yet somehow, I have managed to not die several times when facing the most feared wizard of our times.”

Silence.

“And I wondered why. And I’ve come to discover that there are other ways of approaching magic, that I would be happy to share. That I think you could all benefit from.”

“Really? What do you think you could teach us, Potter?” Malfoy sneered.

“The first thing I would like you all to learn, Draco, would be wandless magic. Then you wouldn’t all be sitting here feeling insecure because your wands are on the ceiling. It feels pretty good to know that you can get yourself out of a tight spot without needing anything but a bit of self control and focus.”

Harry could feel the shift of interest in the class. Wandless magic was considered beyond the ability of most wizards and witches, but it was quite obvious that Harry could perform it.

“Could you really teach us that, Harry?” Neville asked timidly.

Harry smiled at him. “I’m positive you are all capable of it,” Harry nodded, “you just have to approach it a bit differently.”

“What do you mean?” Padma asked.

Harry shifted his position so that he had them all in clear sight. “Well, normal magic draws on the environment – your wand as a channel of magic to draw magic from around you. But wandless magic draws on magic from within you – which is why only the strongest witches and wizards find it worth doing – it’s too draining for most people, if they can do it at all.”

Harry saw interest piqued at this explanation, even from Malfoy. Snape’s expression was impervious, but he wasn’t turning away, which Harry took as encouragement.

“What else would you hope to teach us?” Ernie McMillan asked.

“Not the same thing for all of you,” Harry answered. “This class would essentially be practical – I’m not going to set essays or written work unless it’s absolutely necessary. There’ll be a class a week unless something specific comes up. I’ll be setting you each different tasks. For all of you,
I’d like to broaden the scope of your magic. That doesn’t mean your specific skills are going to be ignored, for those of you who already know where your main interest lies. But I think you’ll find discovering other areas will help in your specific field.”

“And is Professor Snape here to help you with the Potions side, then?” Eloise asked.

Harry took a breath, wondering if there was going to be an explosion. “I hope to learn things from all of you. This isn’t a one-way traffic class – I’ll be wanting to learn things too, and I hope you’ll help me there. But Severus is a student in this class, and hopefully learning will be a two–way street.”

There was a shocked silence. Harry wasn’t sure if it was because he had used the Professor’s first name, or said he was to be Harry’s student. Everyone waited for the explosion.

It was Draco who came into the breach. “Potter, you do realise that Professor Snape is a Potions’ Master?” he said intimidatingly.

“I am fully aware that Professor Snape is one of the top five Potions’ Masters in the world,” Harry agreed, surprising the other students, and even Snape himself, “but he is only using a fraction of his magic at the moment, and it is a waste.”

Everyone looked at the older man.

“I don’t think you have any concept of the amount of magic good potion making requires, Potter,” Snape said venomously.

“A lot, I should think,” Harry said, “but as far as I know you are the equal of the second most powerful wizard in the world as we know it, and you aren’t using it.”

Utter silence filled with scurrying looks greeted this pronouncement.

“Have you gone completely mad, Potter, or is this some perverted attempt to ingratiate yourself –“

“You are Dumbledore’s equal,” Harry interrupted firmly.

“Rubbish!”

“I can feel people’s power levels,” Harry explained. “That is why I asked to have you all in this class.”

“Potter, why in hell would you ask to teach me?” Draco Malfoy said, for once his voice revealing that he was genuinely puzzled. “We’ve hated each other’s guts for six years.”

Harry nodded: “Yes, but how is that relevant?”

Draco looked absolutely shocked. “Potter, I wouldn’t offer you the time of day, let alone anything that could be of benefit to you.”

“Good thing we’re different, then, isn’t it?” Harry smiled cheerfully. He looked around them all. “I’ll come clean.”

He saw Malfoy sit back: the boy was happier thinking there was self interest for Harry. Well, fine.

“You all know that I’m against Voldemort.” He ignored the hiss at him using the name. “As far as I am concerned, the more people we have opposing him, the better, and the more powerful they are, better than that. I need to learn stuff too, and I can do it with you. I realise,” he added, looking
round at their faces, “that maybe everyone does not have the same political views as I do. That people may have opposing views, or prefer to keep out of the fight. I thought long and hard about that: I know it seems crazy to put a weapon into the hands of your enemy,” Harry studiously avoided looking at Malfoy or Snape – the one as a potential enemy, the other to protect his cover, “but I believe everyone has the right to the best education possible, and I don’t think I have the right to choose who to deny. I also hope,” he added, “that once you realise the extent of your powers, you might feel reluctant to hand them straight to a lesser wizard to do with as he will.”

“I beg your pardon?” Malfoy leant forward, incredulously.

“Voldemort is not a particularly powerful wizard in his own right,” Harry said calmly, “he draws his power through the Dark Mark. He effectively milks his followers as and when he wants. Personally, I have no intention of being a magic transfusion service to someone whose views I despise, but of course if one believes totally in what he is doing maybe it seems a sacrifice that is worth it.” And let Malfoy chew on that! Harry thought. He hoped very much that the Malfoy pride would lead the bastard away from the Dark Lord. It was a risk he would have to take. “Oh,” he said as an afterthought, “I’ve taken measures for your own protection. You’ll find you won’t be able to tell or write or inform anyone of any information you gather about the other people in this room without their consent. The only people you will be able to discuss such matters with are myself and Professor Dumbledore.”

There was some obvious relief about that from most people, for various reasons.

“Well, Potter, are you all talk? Because, frankly,” Malfoy said dismissively, “I haven’t seen anything very tempting to make it worth bothering to attend this class.”

“Harry, would there be a lot of work?” Eloise tagged on, trying to deflect attention from Malfoy’s rudeness.

“Well, it won’t be a doddle,” Harry said, smiling at her, “but it’s essentially going to be a practical course. As I said, I’ll only ask for written work if I think it’s really important – I haven’t the time either to be marking essays, and frankly, they won’t be relevant.” He glanced at Malfoy. “Let’s have a taste of what this is about, and my teaching style. Would you all gather into a circle, please,” he said firmly, “and touch the person next to you. Skin on skin contact. You don’t have to hold hands but maybe just touch the back of each others’ hands.”

Harry saw with a smile the shuffling as people tried not to have to touch certain others. Neville wedged himself between Harry and Padma, Malfoy went between Padma and Snape.

“Right, I’d like you now to close your eyes and try and clear your mind.”

Ernie McMillan looked at Harry in awe and dread. “You’re not trying to apparate us all are you, Harry? Out of Hogwarts?”

They all stared at him, even Snape, with narrowed eyes that gave nothing away. They had all seen him do the impossible – apparate across the room within the castle. But surely he couldn’t take them all? Apparating even tandem was tricky.

“Ernie, trust me! I won’t splinch you,” Harry promised.

“But I’ve never apparated!” wailed Eloise. There were nods of agreement.

“You don’t have to do anything. Leave this to me,” Harry said quietly. “In fact, it’s better this way.”
“But I don’t know how to clear my mind,” Padma whispered.

“Right. That’s easy. What I want you all to do,” Harry explained, “is to shut your eyes.” He waited till they had all done so, Snape finally dropping his lids. “Good. Now imagine a piece of parchment.” He waited. “Can you see it?” There were nods. “It’s green,” Harry said, his voice soft, “a deep, dark green, rich, velvety. Can you see it?” Nods again. “Good.” Harry sent forth a burst of magic.

“Open your eyes.”

Very satisfactory gasps met Harry’s ears, as the students looked in awe at the rich foliage under the dim light of the trees’ canopy.

“Holy shit!” muttered Ernie.

“Where are we?” Padma asked, looking at Harry.

Harry looked at Malfoy, who was beginning to go paler than his normal pale.

“You’ve brought us into the Forbidden Forest?” he ground out.

Harry smiled.

“Take us back at once!” Malfoy snapped. “It’s fucking dangerous in here!”

“Malfoy! Language! And you too, Mr McMillan!” Snape barked.

“See you back at base,” Harry said, and disappeared.

“Fucking hell!” snarled Malfoy, oblivious to the reprimand Snape had just given him, “he’s apparated out and left us here!”

“Without our wands!” squeaked Ernie.

There was silence, and some shuffling closer to each other.

“You recognise this part of the Forest, Draco?” Snape sought confirmation.

Malfoy nodded. “Potter and I came in here with Hagrid for a detention in first year.” He could not prevent the bob of his Adam’s apple as he recalled his fear.

“Would you happen to remember your way out?” asked the Professor dryly.

Padma jumped and screeched and grabbed Neville as a creature scuttled out of the undergrowth, its tail swishing her robe as it shot past.

“A rat? That can’t be a rat! It was enormous!” she choked.

Neville put his shaking arm around her waist.

“It is the Forbidden Forest for a reason, Miss Patil,” Snape said sarcastically.

“A bloody rat is the least of our worries,” Draco bit out.

“Your language continues to be unacceptable, Draco,” Snape said calmly. “I do not wish to have to take points from my own house. Perhaps you would care to answer my question about whether you
remember the way out from here?"

Harry, who had not apparated but was watching under an invisibility spell, marvelled at how Snape’s reference to the mundane house points appeared to have a calming effect on all the students.

“I’m afraid I’ve no idea, Sir,” Malfoy mumbled, looking round.

There was a path, and as one they began to move down it.

“How do you know this is the right way, Sir?” Eloise asked after a few tense minutes punctuated with rustling noises in the undergrowth and strange grunts of an unidentified creature, which appeared to be tracking them, unseen.

“I don’t.”

“What? I mean, pardon, Sir?”

“I have no idea where in the Forest we are, Miss Midgen, but a path tends to lead somewhere.”

“But it might be leading further into the Forest!”

“Indeed. But there is an equal probability that it will be leading us out of it.”

She looked at him in shock, hopes wilting.

Snape relented a little. “We are moving eastwards, Miss Midgen. The Forest is to the west of the castle. Therefore our chances of moving in the right direction are increased.”

“You could have just said so,” muttered Neville under his breath, as he bent down to look at a plant beside the path.

“Did you have a contribution to make, Mr Longbottom?” Snape said silkily.

Neville looked up. “This is an odd variety of Leucothoe,” he commented.

“How intriguing,” Snape said sarcastically, as he held back a branch with ingrained politeness for Eloise and Padma. “This is the Forbidden Forest: there are likely to be varieties of plants that even the most knowledgeable of gardeners will not have seen before,” he continued, dismissing Neville’s knowledge on every front, as he allowed the twig to snap back and hit Neville in the stomach just as he reached it.

They continued walking until the sudden screech of an unknown predator startled the air, making them all leap into a huddle. Harry watched Snape’s reflex to reach for his wand. Despite his nasty comments to Neville, he stood herding the students behind him.

Nothing happened. After a few moments, they started walking again.

Harry noticed that Neville continued to study the bushes and plants. Neville’s words must have had some effect on Snape, because suddenly the man said, ”The air smells of mould and dampness. Keep your eyes open for mushrooms. Don’t touch them until I have identified them. There are several varieties that are hard to find and useful in certain potions. They tend to have – nasty qualities, so do heed my warning.”

“Only Snape could find a bonus in being in a creepy hell like this,” Ernie whispered to Eloise.
Harry smiled.

Several more minutes passed.

“How big is this Forest?” Padma whined.

No one answered.

“It’s getting dark,” Ernie whispered, after another few minutes.

No one answered again.

The screech of an owl and wind from its wings as it swooped just over their heads, grabbed a vole from the path in front of them in its claws and swooped off again, caused several answering screeches from the group.

“I’m going to fucking kill Potter,” Malfoy growled, and pushed forward. As he did so he pushed into Neville, who tripped on a tree root. Neville fell face down into the bushes at the side of the path. He raised his head, sniffing at the plant on which he had landed, sliding his hand up the stem to look at the pale greenish flowers.

“He’s as bad as Snape,” muttered Eloise to Ernie, getting a returning grin from him.

Suddenly Neville was on his knees, pushing the stems apart and digging into the earth with his fingers.

“What in Hades are you doing, Longbottom?” growled Malfoy.

Neville ignored him, his hands scooping down, down in the earth.

“You hands are filthy,” Malfoy said in disgust. “I hate to think what is under your fingernails.”

“You needn’t worry, Pretty Boy,” Neville spat, ”I wouldn’t dream of putting them anywhere near you.”

A shocked silence thundered in their ears.

“What did you call me, Fat Arse?” Malfoy hissed, unable to believe the ineffectual class flunker had actually said what he did, but throwing in the insult just in case.

Neville ignored him, much to Malfoy’s building fury. “Aha!” Neville had one hand under the root ball, and holding the plant carefully, pulled the whole thing out.

To his surprise, Snape knelt on one knee beside him.

“Well?”

Neville carefully separated the root strands, looking over each part carefully. At last he looked up at Snape.

“We’re not in the Forbidden Forest, Sir,” he said cheerfully.

“What?” Ernie demanded.

Harry couldn’t contain his grin, although there was no-one to see it.
Neville pulled a handkerchief from his pocket – it looked well used, but he wound it around the roots carefully, and stood up. He shoved the plant under his arm, then dusted off his hands.

“Longbottom!” Malfoy snarled.

Neville grinned. “The Leucothoe back there was all wrong. So I’ve been looking at the plants. There isn’t enough variety for a forest this old. They keep repeating themselves. And they have odd things about them. The soil in this bit isn’t right for what’s growing here –“

“Oh for Merlin’s sake!-“ snapped Malfoy.

“Even Professor Snape noticed it,” Neville said, a touch defensively. “The smell’s wrong for what’s growing –“

“Get to the bloody point! What’s with that plant?” Malfoy pressed.

“The point, Malfoy,” Neville said with quiet authority, “is that *Fritillaria pontica* flowers in the Spring. Not in September. And it is a bulb. This one,” he held up the plant, “is flowering. And it has roots. It’s been created by someone who has seen one but doesn’t really know about them. Like Harry.”

Suddenly, the Forest around them dissolved.

Harry was sitting on a desk swinging his feet, grinning at them.

“Well done, Neville!” he exclaimed happily.

“What the hell was that?” Ernie asked, staring at the classroom.

“That was a – a construct,” Harry said.

“But you apparated us,” Padma squeaked.

“No, you assumed I was apparating you,” Harry said gently.

“But you said you wouldn’t splinch us!” she argued.

“Well, I didn’t, did I?” Harry responded, smiling.

“But – the Forest?” Eloise asked.

“You haven’t left the classroom,” Harry answered the unasked question.

“But it was real. We felt it. Smelt it. There were creatures –“

“Did you enter our minds?” Malfoy said fiercely. “You bastard! You drew on my memory of that detention –“

“I drew on MY memory of that detention to help me build it,” Harry interjected, “though I knew you’d recognise it. But I have not entered your minds, and I wouldn’t, without permission.”

“But it felt real,” Padma said again.

“Well, it was sort of real,” Harry agreed. “It was physically there – you’ve still got your plant, Neville?” Harry asked.
Neville waved the bunch, the drooping, bell-like flowers swinging gently.

“Physically real, but wrong, because as Neville pointed out, I didn’t know enough about plants to get it quite right. But it was enough to make you believe for a short time.”

“But how did you do it?” Eloise asked. “You can’t have transfigured everything –”

“This is where I find it helps to have been raised by Muggles,” Harry said with a smile at the shocked faces of his students. “Sit down, I’ll try and explain – oh, there’s some juice if you’re thirsty,” he said, bringing over a tray of fruit juice and small cakes, which he set on one of the desks.

People helped themselves, although Severus, he noticed, just sat and waited. Harry bet he was dying of curiosity.

“When I first learnt I was a wizard – I was eleven,” Harry said, noting the surprised looks of everyone except Neville, “it was like a whole new world had been opened up to me. Magic was real! It was unbelievable – and yet – I *could* believe it. To Muggles, magic is all about operating outside of the normal rules of life, of the world – to believe in magic is to believe that *anything* can happen. So you can imagine my – shock, I suppose, when I realised that to the magical community, magic was bound up in as many rules as the world outside it. You needed a wand – even though the first magic most children do is spontaneous – big and powerful and definitely wandless – and you needed to know the right words, and the right way to flick your wrist, and so on. And of course you just accept that’s how it is. Only now I don’t.” And he sipped at his pineapple juice, which he’d asked Dobby to bring as a change from the standard pumpkin juice. Another disorientating experience for his class.

“You think you can do *anything*?” Snape sneered.

“I don’t know,” Harry answered honestly, to a shocked intake of breath from the other seventh years. “I think it helps to believe that anything is possible, and find the limitations as you go. It makes you strive harder. I’m not saying everything is easy,” he said, sitting back, “or that it works out, or that you can do it without other knowledge – a bit like Neville’s superior knowledge has just made clear –”

“Are you suggesting that I could just chuck anything into a potion and that it would work?” Snape said dangerously.

“No, but I’m pretty sure the amount of magic you put into it gives you a lot more flexibility than other makers, because you can twist the properties of your ingredients better. Which is why even though potions’ recipes are written down, and should in theory all come out the same, yours will always be infinitely better, because not only do you have the power, you have an affinity with the task. It probably makes it harder when you are creating them, because things that will work for you might not be so successful for others, but they probably work well enough so that others know what could be, and that enhances your reputation further. And finding exactly the right ingredients and right quantities makes it easily repeatable – probably less draining on your magic than when you are creating?” he looked to the Potions Master for confirmation, and received a small nod in response.

Harry smiled.

“It must have taken a lot of magic to do all that,” Padma said cautiously. “And your wand is on the ceiling, so you’re saying that was all internal magic. Your magic?”
Harry's face turned serious. “It was a bit silly of me,” he said apologetically. “It would have been much more sensible to use ambient magic for that - there would probably have been less obvious errors in the environment, because the magic itself would have drawn on reality to create the Forest as it knew it. So that was an important lesson for me too. Know when to use your wand.”

Snape noticed that the boy did not deny that the illusion – construct, Potter had called it – had been entirely created from his own magic, but as he had done earlier, he was giving a response that led the listener to think that the question had been answered, whereas in fact he was leading you down a different path. The last week had shown him there was more to the sodding Boy-Who Lived than he had thought. Maybe the lad had just grown up. He ran his eyes over him, noting that although he was still a shortarse, the boy’s shoulders had definitely widened, and taut against the fabric of his robes, he could see the boys thigh muscles flexing as he swung his legs casually from his desk-top perch. He quickly slid his eyes up to the boy’s face, ignoring the unwelcome stir of interest that the flex of thigh had created. There was something wrong with him! He *never* lusted after pupils. Maybe he would see Alex again after all. Just to tell him he couldn’t follow up any relationship. After he’d checked whether the heat that had burned between them had been a one-off. The sudden image of Alex arching beside him, candlelight gleaming on the sweat-silvered skin, his own pale hand ghosting over – he yanked his mind back to the present, crossing his legs to hide his body’s response to the mental images. Merlin! One week and his life….he felt anticipation in his gut for the meeting the next day, and that too was an unfamiliar sensation: there had been little in his life to look forward to. He pulled his attention back to the conversation, noting the darkened skin around Potter’s jaw. Five o’clock shadow. Not a boy anymore at all. His teacher! And however much he hated the brat, he wanted to learn. What he had seen the boy – man - do so effortlessly! He could not believe the tosh the boy had spouted about his- Severus’ - power, but if he did have more…He was regarded as a pretty powerful wizard already, it was foolhardy of him to think that the way to get him to take part was to promise him power….and yet…

“….so I’d like you to think about it over the weekend,” Potter was saying, and Severus pulled his attention back. “If you would like to continue, this class will take place here on Tuesdays at 8pm. Just turn up. If you don’t come, I’ll know you’re not interested, and that’s entirely up to you. If you have questions, you can talk to me or Professor Dumbledore any time between now and then. There’s just one or two more things I’d like to make clear. In this class, everyone calls each other by their first name. I’ll be learning too and the ‘Professor’ tag isn’t appropriate. We’ll all be working closely together and surnames can be off-putting. Professor Snape will be Severus during the classes, but outside of this room, you will, of course, revert to his official title. Nothing in this class is compulsory. If at any point you are uncomfortable with what I ask you to do, don’t do it. But I do ask that you discuss it with me afterwards, because there will be a reason for everything I ask of you. On the other hand, you might come up with a better idea, and that will be great! I expect you always to come unless you have a really important reason not to. And on that point, I look forward to seeing you all next week!”

He held out his hand, and the wands lazily circulating by the ceiling zoomed down into it. He grasped them, then opened his palm flat. The wands lifted off and flew to their respective owners. The door clicked open. There was a moment that felt a lot like reluctance to leave, and then Ernie said, “Thanks, Harry,” and strode to the door, followed moments later by Padma and Eloise, also murmuring thanks. Malfoy walked languidly to the door, tapping his wand against his hand, glanced back once at Harry, his expression inscrutable, and left.

“Shall I wait for you, Harry?” Neville asked, glancing anxiously at Professor Snape.

Harry looked at Severus. The man drew himself up, his black eyes as unrevealing as Malfoy’s grey gaze.
“Potter,” he inclined his head, and swept out.

Harry smiled inwardly. The man had such presence!

"Let’s go!” he smiled at Neville, picking up his bag and heading side by side out of the room with him.

Severus swept along the corridors to his rooms, deep in thought. Temptation, annoyance and excitement were vying for place in his emotional maelstrom. If what was being offered was by anyone but Potter! And could he believe what was on offer? He could not believe everything Potter had said, yet he had witnessed magic beyond his imaginings. Performed by a seventeen year old without a wand. Who kept provoking a sexual response in him. Maybe it was the power of Potter’s magic that provoked these unwanted urges in him. Something about the boy just heightened awareness. He felt his skin tingling, his stomach full of butterflies. He should be furious, of course. How did that boy have all that power? Knowledge? Insight? Bloody Harry Potter! But on the other hand, he liked learning. Knowledge was one of his key pleasures in life, whether it was the harvesting of information from his spying, or the trial and error of finding new solutions via his potion-making. Potter had the nerve to suggest that he spread his knowledge base, that he was too narrowly focussed—yet hinted that to do so would help his potion making. That was clever, he had to acknowledge. And the outrageous comment that he was as powerful as Albus! Whatever made the idiot suggest such an absurd thing? It had hardly been necessary. And thinking of Albus! The bastard! How dare he send him to be in a class taught by Harry bleeding Potter! Without a sodding word to him! The fact that he knew Albus was as sneaky as they get and knew he would never have gone had he known had nothing to do with it! Where was professional courtesy? Respect for their friendship?

He stopped at the portrait of Eric Thimbletwine, one of the most useless wizards known to man, as far as he could make out, who guarded his rooms. The man appeared to have been completely inept, his one redeeming feature having been his loyalty: he had died in 1492 rather than tell hostile wizards where his sisters were hiding. Snape valued him for that, and had never had cause to complain about his work. His attempts at conversation, were, of course, another matter—he was the sort of fellow who would be a bosom buddy to Longbottom. He muttered his password, ignored Thimbletwine’s cheery enquiry as to why he was late, and swept into his room.

He had a small kitchen to one side, and instantly went in and lit the fire, turning to fill the kettle at the butler’s sink with fresh water. He looped the kettle onto the hook of the gurney, and swung it over the flames. Magic was all very well, but a really good cup of tea was a work of art, and he wasn’t prepared to hurry it. He took out a cup and saucer—blue Spode—the dark brown teapot, and a milk jug from his cooling cupboard, and readied them on a tray. He really was furious with Albus. Part of him wanted to go and rave at the man, tell him exactly what he thought of his manipulative behaviour. To ask Albus what the hell he was thinking of letting a student take a class, let alone reversing the teacher/student role. But in his heart he had already decided to go along—once or twice at least, to see what in Hades Potter was up to—and without a doubt the Headmaster would go straight to the crux of the matter and ask him about his decision—and then say it was all for the best. The old so-and-so knew him far too well. Better to save his battles for more important issues. He grinned, as he warmed the pot with a swirl of almost boiling water: he would bet it would confuse Albus more if he didn’t go storming to see him! Let him stew!
Another Unexpected Encounter

Harry sat, book on the table, glass in his hand, in The Tufted Duck, the wine bar opened the year previously by Justin Finch-Fletchley’s older brother. The place was doing well, with a nice ambience. At this hour of the evening – 7.35pm – it was just beginning to fill up. Harry had had plenty of time to peruse the menu, which was full of very muggle nouveau ideas, and the bar served muggle beers and wines as well as traditional wizard brews. The prices weren’t cheap, and the mix seemed to attract the more sophisticated younger set, although Harry was intrigued to see several older couples enjoying the food too. The early eater menu, at a distinct reduction to the usual tariff, was a clever idea as it obviously attracted custom and had the place looking bustling from early on. The food looked and smelt delicious.

Harry wondered whether Severus would turn up. He was relieved that he wasn’t the only loner – there was an elderly witch eating alone at one table and a wizard at another, and a couple of singletons at the bar.

He was pleased he had chosen the place: he had only been in it once before, just seen it before it had opened when Justin had taken a few of them to have a look, but it was just the right sort of place to meet. Comfortable for him, and not full of students, which would be better for Severus, should he turn up.

Harry felt itchy, hoping that he would, but now that he had seen him in Professor mode again, he was more than slightly uncomfortable. The man would not take well to being tricked, but there was no way he could tell him who he was. On the other hand, he had promised to be here for the next three Friday evenings, and he at least intended to have the courtesy to do that.

Harry spent the next twenty minutes reading and sipping and feeling his stomach’s knots slowly unwind with relief, whilst at the same time his chest seemed to tighten with disappointment. He was amazed, in a detached sort of way, at the visceral response of his body – that his emotions were transferring to actual, physical sensations. It was whilst mulling these weird symptoms over that Harry saw Snape wending his way through the tables towards him, and his heart seemed to literally start in his chest. So he was definitely pleased after all! A smile spread across his face almost without volition.

“Sorry I’m late,” Snape said, sweeping into the seat opposite him.

“I’d have been here another hour or so, so I reckon you’re early,” Harry smiled. “Can I get you a drink?”

He had just returned from the bar and slid the drinks onto the table when he heard a distinctly familiar voice prick up his spine.

“Severus! What a surprise!” drawled Lucius Malfoy, walking up behind Harry to stand beside their table. “I didn’t realise you frequented this place.”

Snape picked up his beer and took a mouthful, leaning back and looking at Malfoy over the rim. Lucius’ eyebrow raised, then his lip quirked. His eyes turned to Snape’s companion.

“I’m here with a friend,” Snape said, putting the drink down as he licked the froth from his upper lip, his eyes glancing across at Harry. “And no, I’m not introducing you,” he added crushingly.

Lucius’ eyes swept over Harry, and then Harry’s eyes widened in amazement as Lucius gave him a
more thorough, and absolutely blatant perusal.

_Lucius Malfoy was gay??? Or – bi, at least! Draco Malfoy’s dad was eyeing him up!_ Harry could feel a smile bubbling up even as his brain was working overtime.

“He’s mine, Lucius,” Snape said, voice hard, reaching his hand across the table and grasping Harry’s hand. Harry curled his fingers into Snape’s almost reflexively, loving the dry warmth of those long fingers, and grinned at Snape.

Malfoy reached round for a chair from the next table, swirling it and sitting astride it in one smooth motion, his long legs apart and his arms resting along the back. His thigh muscles flexed against the silk fabric of his robe. He didn’t take his eyes from Harry.

“So possessive, Severus? He is rather gorgeous,” he purred, looking admiringly at Harry. “You’re eating here? I’ll join you,” he said firmly.

Harry could see Severus’ lips tighten. He had intended that they eat here, but it looked like Malfoy was going to be a pain. Nothing new there, then.

“Sorry, we’re only having a drink here,” Harry said easily. “I’m cooking for Severus at home.”

Both Severus and Malfoy looked at him.

“I like to cook,” Harry said simply.

“You don’t have house elves?”

Harry could hear the sneer Malfoy was barely restraining.

“I’m sure my elf would love to cook for us, but it’s so much more...satisfying...to meet one’s partner’s needs oneself,” Harry said suggestively, picking up Snape’s hand that was entwined with his, and slowly bringing it to his mouth. He gently rubbed his lips against just the tip of Snape’s index finger, watching Snape and apparently ignoring Malfoy. Snape’s eyes darkened, and he stretched his finger out. Harry’s tongue darted out, rough as a cat’s, licking the edge before he pulled the fingertip into his mouth, gave it a quick bite, then slid his lips slowly over it as it withdrew again.

You could almost smell the arousal at the table.

“What are you making me?” Snape said, his voice low and husky.

“Hard, I hope,” Harry whispered, his calf brushing against Snape’s.

Malfoy cleared his throat.

Harry looked up, and blushed. “And stir-fry. Followed by pecan ice cream,” he grinned apologetically at Malfoy, then back at Severus.

“Sounds delectable,” Malfoy said, his eyes wandering over Harry’s torso. He got up. “Another time, then,” he inclined his head towards Harry, then looked across sharply at Snape as an idea occurred to him.

“I’m having a little card party shortly. You must bring – “ he waited for Harry to be introduced.

Harry made a quick decision. “Alex. Alex Johnson.” He held out his hand, and Malfoy shook it. This could be interesting.
“Lucius Malfoy. I’ll look forward to seeing you soon, Alex.” Malfoy nodded with a satisfied grin at Snape, and sauntered away.

“He’s beautiful but you don’t want to know him,” Snape said, his voice cold.

Harry looked at him, seeing the tight lips.

“Ex-lover?” Harry asked, not knowing how he dared.

Snape snorted. And didn’t answer the question.

“I’d never heard he was into men,” Harry said instead. “His wife is incredibly beautiful,” he added.

“Yes, they make a stunning pair,” Snape agreed.

“But?”

“You think there’s a ‘but’?”

“He’s trawling other people’s partners,” Harry said. “Openly. Of course there’s a ‘but’. ”

Snape leaned back in his chair and sipped his drink.

“You interested then?”

“In him?” Harry said in surprise.

“You didn’t exactly put him off. I expect he was as hard as I was. Was the performance for me or him?” His voice was harsh.

Harry finished his drink and stood up. “I’m going home. I’m cooking stir-fry, and then eating ice-cream. Then hopefully I’m eating you. Are you coming?”

Snape held Harry’s eyes, then tilted his throat back and swallowed several times as the remaining half pint of cold beer slipped down his throat. Harry felt himself stiffening just watching Snape’s throat work.

“It sounds like I’ll be coming,” Snape smirked, and followed Harry from the bar.

Severus was surprised to find Alex taking him around the market. The lights were still on, though most of the stalls were shutting down for the night. Harry had already chatted and laughed with the butcher as he cajoled the man into getting him some prime steak, then had bantered with the greengrocer for some vegetables in tip-top condition.

Harry had turned to Snape, smiling. “I hope you don’t mind. I’d planned on buying you a meal in the bar but I wasn’t going to share you with Malfoy. I hadn’t got anything much in foodwise, but I can knock up my standard stir-fry with this. I was a bit worried that there might only be the rough stuff left at this time of night, but we’re ok.”

They stopped at a wine merchant's where Severus insisted on buying a good bottle of red.

The walk through the village was surprisingly companionable.

Soon they were in Harry’s small cottage, and Severus was opening the wine to give it a moment to
breathe, whilst Harry was busy chopping the vegetables.

Severus watched him with interest. His hand seemed comfortable with the knife, and although the pieces weren’t even and precise as his always were, the man seemed to know what he was doing.

He followed Alex’s directions and found cutlery and crockery, laying the table that sat in the centre of the kitchen.

“Do you entertain much?” he asked.

“Not at the moment,” Harry answered. “Why?”

“It’s a big table for a single man,” Snape commented.

“Yeah, but I haven’t got a dining room, and I really like the idea of having loads of friends round and everyone sitting round while I cook. You can chat whilst you work and it’s fun. I’ve stayed in a friend’s place that was like that and really liked it,” Harry said, thinking of the Weasley’s kitchen.

“Have you not had this place long?” Severus asked.

“About a year, but I’ve been really busy. Is that wine ready to drink yet?” Harry asked.

“Not really, but it’ll do,” Snape said, and poured him a glass.

“Love having a drink whilst I cook,” Harry grinned sheepishly. For years, he had cooked at the Dursley’s, plain meat and potato and two veg, the ingredients chosen by Petunia, a chore to do and uninvigorating on the plate, though he was glad enough of it if he got to eat some at the time. When he had moved into Derek’s flat, it had been a revelation that cooking could be relaxed and fun. Even at The Burrow, Mrs Weasley usually looked rather hassled, catering for so many and doing a hundred other jobs at the same time. Derek, and later Andy, loved curries, and Chinese and Thai, introducing Harry to culinary delights with the same laid back ease with which they had shown him a world of more earthy pleasures.

The food smelt delicious – a hint of ginger, not overdone, and lemon grass, plus the stronger scent of red meat and sweet potato, amongst other things. Snape had come out in two minds about the evening – and certainly hadn’t thought he would at any point be feeling so relaxed.

In no time at all Alex slid the food onto two plates and carried them to the table. Snape had put some bread they had also bought into a basket and there was a pat of fresh butter.

They sat and ate. It was surprisingly light and the flavours delicate. After the hearty meals at Hogwarts it was perfect.

Snape wiped his mouth on his napkin.

“I’m impressed,” he smiled across at Alex. “That was delightful. Thank you.”

Harry grinned, pleased with this relaxed, comfortable Snape. A Snape he had impressed with cooking, which was as near to potions as one was likely to get.

“Good,” Harry stood up, clearing the plates. Snape stood up too, bringing the bread basket across the kitchen. They tidied things away companionably.

“Ice cream, or not?” Harry turned to Severus, remembering his comment that he preferred salty
flavours, and finding him much closer than he expected. His eyes slid down to Snape’s mouth, and saw Snape’s tongue catching a stray lick of flavour from his lips. Suddenly the atmosphere was hot and heavy.

“Mmm, I’ll give it a go,” Snape said.

With shaking hands, Harry got the carton from the ice cupboard and served two bowls’ full. Harry turned to Snape.

The next moment he was in his arms, Snape’s mouth on his, Snape’s tongue sweeping round his mouth. Harry’s arms were waving to the sides, still holding precariously the bowls of ice-cream. Snape pulled back, and they laughed. Snape pulled the bowls out of his hands, shoved them on the side, and with a smile, held his arms out again. Harry flung himself into them. His hands free to roam, Harry took every advantage of it, his palms sliding up Snape’s muscled back as his mouth slipped down Snape’s throat, feeling the clean-shaven skin under his lips, his nose loving the scent of Snape.

Snape’s fingers had pulled Harry’s shirt free from his trousers and were now undoing the buttons. Harry’s heart was hammering.

Snape reached behind Harry and lifted a spoonful of ice-cream out of a bowl. Passing it in front of Harry’s gaze, he proceeded to swallow it.

“Hey! Not fair!” Harry grinned, then groaned as Severus bent forward, his chilled mouth closing round Harry’s nipple.

“God!”

Harry couldn’t help thrusting forward against Snape, his erection dying for friction and pressure. He could feel the heavy weight of Snape’s arousal pressing into his own belly, and ground against him.

Snape’s hands slid down to Harry’s arse, and lifted him. Harry’s legs automatically came around Snape’s waist. Snape walked two steps forward, and plopped Harry onto the sturdy kitchen table, smoothing him down onto the surface with a hand stroking along his belly. Harry allowed himself to flop back, his arms spreading out to the side, his legs open in a gesture of total submission.

“Merlin, I could fuck you through the table,” Snape whispered.

Harry wanted it. His body ached with the ferocity of his need. But he had promised himself he wouldn’t let Snape fuck him – or vice versa – until the man knew his identity. In the haze of his desire, it seemed a silly distinction, but he knew he had made it.

His hand fumbled for his flies, and he pulled the zip down.

Snape’s indrawn breath sent his heart pounding even harder.

He turned his face to look at the man. “Suck me,” he whispered. “Put that freezing mouth around me and –“

He lost track of the words. Snape’s eyes gleamed as he yanked Harry’s trousers down, then stooped to pull off Harry’s shoes and socks, sweeping his trousers the rest of the way from his body. Harry lay there, shirt open and otherwise naked, feeling erotic as hell.

Snape took another spoonful of ice cream, and Harry moaned. Severus stuck his fingers in the bowl
and scooped some out, then thrust his fingers into Harry’s mouth as his own mouth swooped down on Harry’s cock. He was so aroused that he knew he would barely last. The fingers in his mouth, the sensations down below....Severus knew how to play him, and he did. Harry writhed and moaned, loving every minute, until his orgasm exploded from him, his body arching up from the table, his hands scrabbling in Severus’ hair.

He felt Severus slide onto the table beside him and thanked Merlin that he had bought such a sturdy piece of furniture. He turned to Snape, smiling, and was thoroughly kissed, tasting his own flavour in Snape’s mouth. His hand slipped down to Snape as they kissed, loving the feel of the man’s hot cock in his hand, feeling its turgid urgency. Snape thrust into his hand, his mouth ravaging Harry, Harry’s other hand pinching Severus’ nipples. He loved the feeling of Snape gasping into his mouth, the taut string his body made in the moment before his orgasm hit, the feel of Severus’ come pulsing over his fingers.

As Snape came down, Harry’s hand stroked over his chest, then slid up to soothe gently behind Snape’s neck; he pulled his other hand away and licked Snape’s come, then leaning up across Snape, took a spoonful of melted ice cream and swallowed that down. Snape laughed. Harry grinned.

“Coffee?"

Snape chuckled again, then nodded. It was such an unexpected sound, and Harry felt honoured by it.

Harry sat up, then bounced off the table and pulled on his trousers, leaving the pants and socks. His shirt hung open, and he felt sexy and content as he pootled about making the coffee.

Severus too got up. He did up his fly buttons leaving the top one undone, and left his shirt open.

“You look hot,” Harry smirked, bringing over the coffee to the sofa by the living area fire.

“Am I supposed to reciprocate?”

“Bastard,” Harry said amiably.

Severus’ lips curved. They sat at each end of the sofa drinking, coming down from the high whilst at the same time wondering what was next.

“You staying, or do you have to get back?” Harry asked at last, after they’d had a second cup, now slightly bitter.

He watched at the uncharacteristic flash of emotions across Severus’ face, and steeled himself. Now was the moment.

Snape sat forward, his elbows on his knees. “Alex. Before Lucius bloody Malfoy came along I was intending to meet you only to say that I thought this was not a good idea. To save you waiting for me for the next 3 weeks.”

Harry looked at him. “Don’t lie,” he said quietly, startling his companion, who raised an eyebrow at him. “You thought you’d see if you fancied a last fuck or whatever and would then tell me.”

There was no recrimination in his voice, and Snape paused, before nodding assent. “You’re right. But I’m afraid I can’t really have a relationship with you, Alex. My time is very limited and it really wouldn’t be fair –"
Snape ground to a halt as Harry pulled his wand from his pocket, before carefully laying it on the coffee table in front of them. Snape looked up at Alex.

“And you can’t have a relationship anyway because how many times can you fuck someone without taking your shirt off,” Harry said quietly.

“I beg your pardon?” Snape said in his most deadly tone.

“You have the Dark Mark on your arm,” Harry continued. “You don’t want to bed another Death Eater because you don’t want to get involved with anyone who supports that philosophy. But you can’t appear to be involved with any of Dumbledore’s lot because you’re spying on Voldemort and you need the Death Eaters to trust you —

Snape’s wand was at his throat. “Who the fuck are you? Who sent you?” he snarled, his whole frame looming over Harry’s.

Harry kept perfectly still. “No one sent me – “

Harry was cut off by a prod from the wand. Snape seemed to draw himself in, then: “You’re telling me your pathetic attempt at seduction at The Leaky Cauldron wasn’t planned?”

“Yes! No!”

“Do elaborate. I find myself thoroughly enlightened by that answer,” Snape sneered, perching himself on the edge of the coffee table in front of Harry, Harry’s wand pushed behind him, Snape’s long legs imprisoning him. His wand staying lodged against Harry’s jugular the whole time.

Harry swallowed. Carefully. “Yes, I’m telling you it wasn’t planned. And I didn’t seduce you – “

“You stripped off at the table five minutes after meeting me!”

“I got caught in my top!”

“You expect me to believe that?”

“You saw me!”

“I certainly did. The goods were well displayed.”

“We were in a public bar! This is ridiculous! It was an accident – “

“I don’t believe in accidents. Who sent you?”

“For fuck’s sake! Have you never picked up a stranger in a bar before? Not everything is some great conspiracy – “

“And yet here you are telling me all sorts of tales about my life,” Snape said, in acid tones. “Don’t deny you knew who I was.”

“You know I knew who you were! You were in the damn potions’ journal! We talked about it.”

“The journal article is completely irrelevant. And I’m losing patience. Are you denying that you knew me apart from the article?”

Harry sighed. His hand went up to rub his face; the point of the wand dug harder into his neck, and he dropped his hand. He hadn’t thought this through enough. His stomach was churning. He was
an idiot.

“Yes, I knew who you were,” he said at last. He looked up at Severus. “I work for Dumbledore too. But I had no idea you’d be at The Leaky Cauldron. Or that I’d end up having the hottest sex of my life. And shit, I don’t mean you any harm! I’d just like to go on seeing you.”

Silence.

“Define ‘work for Dumbledore’.” Snape ignored the rest of the comments.

“I’m a member of the Order of the Phoenix,” Harry said.

“I could take you to Voldemort right now,” Snape threatened.

“You could,” Harry agreed.

“Or I could take you to Dumbledore.”

“Yes.”

“Get your shoes on,” Severus snapped.

Harry dressed, whilst Severus did the same. He still didn’t know how this would play out. He had put Snape into an almost impossible position.

Snape pocketed the two wands and walked beside him to Hogwarts. The journey seemed to stretch and the air was chill and damp. It was a relief to get into the castle, though Harry wondered how Dumbledore was going to react.

Harry noticed that Snape allowed Harry to lead, watching to see if he knew his way to the Headmaster’s office. Harry reached the gargoyle and murmured to it. He could feel Snape’s surprise when it responded and allowed him in.

“Severus! Do come in! Would you like hot chocolate?” The Headmaster asked as they came through the door. The man already had on a velour bedrobe of mustard yellow with purple stars that startled both of them as they walked through the door. “And a friend! Do introduce us!” Dumbledore’s eyes darted between the two men.

“Snape held his wand directly at Harry.

“This man says he knows you. That he is a member of the Order of the Phoenix,” Snape snarled. “How did you expect to get away with it?” he demanded of Alex.

“Give him my wand,” Harry answered.

Snape stared at him, but handed the wand over to Dumbledore. The old wizard turned it over in his hands, sniffed it, then glanced up sharply at Harry. “Applewood,” he said quietly. “And the core?”

Fawkes burst into a trill, and flew over to Harry’s shoulder. Harry petted the phoenix, to Snape’s astonishment. “One of Fawkes’ feathers,” Harry nodded at the wand.

“Then this man is indeed a member of the Order,” Dumbledore said to Snape.

Snape lowered his wand. “You didn’t recognise him. I have never heard of or seen him before,” he said disbelievingly.
“This isn’t how I usually look. Or my real name,” Harry added. “And personally, I’m praying to every higher deity that Albus has dozens – hundreds – more people like me tucked away doing the Order’s bidding, because we’re in deep shit otherwise.”

“Unfortunately not hundreds,” Dumbledore said, sinking into his chair. He leant over to hand Harry back his wand. “Sit,” he ordered them both, conjuring a tea tray and handing Snape a cup first, his favourite, Severus could tell from the aroma.

Dumbledore drank his slowly, observing the two men, and playing for time. No clearer as to what was going on, he said at last, “I can vouch for him,” he nodded towards Alex, “though I do not understand how you came to have him in your custody,” he prompted.

“We are in a relationship,” Harry said firmly.

“We’ve had a couple of sexual liaisons,” Snape amended.

Dumbledore looked between the two, his eyebrows drawn together.

“Why would he need to tell you about his role in the order for a mere sexual tryst?” he asked Severus, eyebrows knitted.

“He can’t take off his shirt, can he?” Harry snapped.

“Pardon?” Dumbledore enquired.

“He can’t have a relationship with that on his arm, can he? He was going to finish it because he couldn’t take his shirt off and let a stranger see that. It’s not bloody fair on him!”

“And what you are doing is?” Dumbledore snapped back.

Harry flinched. “There’s something between us,” he said quietly. “I – and I hope Severus – would like the chance to explore that. He’s safe with me.”

“Safe?” Dumbledore’s eyes were thunderous. “I do not think this is a good idea at all. Your identity –”

“Needs to remain a secret at the moment,” Harry interrupted.

“You don’t trust me?” Snape asked, actually curious.

“Yes, I do, but to tell you would endanger more than a relationship, and I can’t do it at this point. I will, when I can,” he added pleadingly.

Dumbledore sipped his tea, and watched the interaction between the two.

“Albus?” Snape said. “Alex has a point. Frankly, the sex is great and I’m unlikely to get it elsewhere. You’ll be pleased to hear it’s had a rather positive effect on my temper. If he is indeed safe, what is your objection?”

“Surely you could pursue your sexual interests elsewhere, Severus. I am sorry that I have not appreciated that you are a young and vigorous man, still –“

Harry snorted, and regretted it at once. But really! “Good word,” he mumbled, remembering their first night.

Severus’ eye twitched.
“He is convenient –“

“Thanks!” Harry said in mock outrage.

“And, potentially, I may enjoy more than just the sex. I’d like to find out,” Snape said calmly.

Harry could not stop the smile that bloomed across his face. “Me too,” he nodded.

He turned to Dumbledore. “Sir, I appreciate and understand your concern. I will do my best not to hurt him and will let him know as soon as I am free to do so.”

Dumbledore could not fail to be aware of the tingling zing of magic between the two, the lively chirrup of pleasure and interest. But when Severus found out...the man would feel so betrayed.

“I cannot approve,” he said quietly. “You will both be hurt and I do not want that for you, my boys.”

Severus looked at him. “It will not compromise my role as a spy?”

“No.”

“Then I am old enough to make my own decisions, Albus. Thank you for your concern, and our apologies for waking you.”

He got up, and Harry followed.

Dumbledore stood too. “I wish you well, then, my children. Consideration and kindness, that’s all I can say.”

Harry nodded, feeling the force of Dumbledore’s worry.

They were on the moving staircase down.

“He really loves you,” Harry said gently.

“He’s looked out for me for a long time,” Snape answered.

“Perhaps –“ Harry began.

They had reached the bottom. Severus thrust Harry up against the wall and kissed him breathless. “You must have courage,” he said.

“What?” Harry answered through swollen lips.

“To be acting for the Order in disguise. So why feel fainthearted now? This doesn’t feel worth it to you?” He ground himself against Harry, lifting the younger man slightly so their cocks rubbed against each other.

Harry was glad Snape’s weight was pinning him to the wall. His legs felt like water, and he moaned as he pushed back against the rock hard torso of his would-be lover.

“Worth it for me,” he gasped, “it’s you I worry about.”

“I can take care of myself,” Snape said, his lips sliding down Harry’s neck, where he took a sharp
bite at the juncture of his throat.

He pulled back, stroking a soothing finger over the mark. “It’s too late for me to return with you,” he added regretfully. “I should get back to my House.”

Harry nodded. “Are you free next week? I’ll owl you.”

“Do it,” Snape nodded, and kissed him hard once more before pressing the door release and striding off, leaving Harry hard and wanting and wondering how to get Snape to like Harry Potter enough that it would be alright.
The next few weeks were the busiest of Harry’s life. He carried on with his normal classes, plus his teaching, plus the exercise routine he had started in his holidays, plus running every morning.

And there was his relationship with Severus, which was now taking up Friday or Saturday evenings and half the next day, plus Wednesday evenings as well. The sex was incredibly hot. Snape was undoubtedly the most amazing lover in the wizarding world, Harry had decided: sensual, strong, urgent. Half of him was desperate to go the whole way and have what he had denied himself, and the other half just relished the mind-blowing orgasms that Snape wrenched from his body with his mouth and tongue and hands and fingers....

On top of that was the startling discovery that they not only enjoyed each other’s company, but had found mutual interests. Harry had discovered muggle cinema during his time living in Brighton. He had never been to the pictures as a child, though he had seen films on the television at the Dursleys, usually broken up by the demand that he make tea or wash up or whatever other mundane job needed doing. The big screen had been a delight. After their second weekend together, Harry had discovered that a film he had been looking forward to over the summer had come out and was on in Edinburgh. With some trepidation, he invited Snape along. At least if he offered an alternative, it didn’t seem as if he was just meeting him for sex.

Though Snape was a half-blood, he had been brought up almost entirely in the wizarding world, and had never seen a film. He had been enthralled, shocked, fascinated, plying Harry with questions afterwards, trying to establish what was real and what was fiction and how on earth people flew through the air without broomsticks. Not that Harry could answer all the questions, but it did give an evenness to their relationship that Harry liked. They had gone to see films every Wednesday since, Harry apparating them all over the country in pursuit of films Harry had heard of and thought might be worth watching. In fact, everything seemed worth watching, because the direr films brought out Severus’ sharp tongue and Harry ended up in stitches with laughter. And they always had splendid sex afterwards as well, though Severus needed to go back to Hogwarts mid-week, which of course suited Harry too.

He had been surprised to find that several other pupils had started to join him on his morning runs around the grounds, the group building daily for a while as the news spread, then dropping back as enthusiasm waned. He was left with a hardcore of witches and wizards who were truly keen on improving their fitness. Harry had asked Dumbledore for a fitness room, and to his surprise it had been granted. Most of the members of his teaching group, and his dorm-mates, had all tried one or the other. Neville, who was the most ungainly runner Harry had ever seen, was incredible with weights.

“S’all the diggin’,” he said with a grin, “strong arms and legs, see?”

Harry even saw Snape in the fitness room, though he had never joined in the running. Harry had had to avert his eyes, to stop himself drooling.

Harry had had to have a heart-to-heart with Hermione and Ron after the Remedial Magic classes took off. It had been difficult to broach, but had actually gone a lot better than he expected. Hermione had seen the class as she’d glanced over Harry’s shoulder at his timetable one morning.

“Remedial Magic? That’s not a very clever name if you’re having extra lessons with Snape,” she
Harry picked up her hand that was on his shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze.

“I wanted to talk to you and Ron about that,” he said. “Meet us at break?” he asked.

“Sure. Ron, you free at break? Not got any last minute reports to write up?” Hermione said seriously. Ron often did cut it to the very last moment possible.

“Nah, I’ve got a free period after break, I can get my Charms stuff finished then. Where do you want to meet?”

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, but accepted that she was way too late to change Ron’s habits now.

“Your chambers?” Harry said, looking at Ron. He knew he would prefer to finish his work lying on his bed rather than in the library.

So at break time Harry met his two friends, who were already sitting companionably on Ron’s bed, eating a slice of fruitcake that Ron’s Mum had sent. Ron held out the tin, and Harry snagged a piece.

“You’re Mum is such a brilliant cook,” he mumbled, round a mouthful.

Several contented moments later, Harry braced himself.

“It’s about the Remedial Magic class,” Harry began.

“That name is so stupid,” Ron said, his mouth still full. “What was Dumbledore thinking?” he grinned.

Uh, Ron, you’ve got sultana stuck on your teeth,” Hermione grimaced.

Whilst Ron was picking it off, Harry forged on. “Actually, the crap name is down to me. I’m teaching the class.”

“Hey, cool, man!” Ron exclaimed. “What day are we down for?”

“You’re not,” Harry said. “You don’t need this class. There’s only half a dozen in it.”

“Hey, I’d like to come anyway,” Ron carried on. “Sgot to be fun, innit?”

Hermione was quiet.

“Who’s in it, then, Harry?”

“I can’t really tell you yet,” Harry said in embarrassment. “There’s an agreement not to mention each other out of class.”

Ron was beginning to look belligerent, and Harry wondered how to head off the impending explosion. “Yeah, but if you’re teaching it, you can tell. Or don’t you trust us?”

“You know I trust you,” Harry sighed, “but I made a promise, Ron.”

There was a stiff silence.
“So what are you teaching, Harry, that these unknown individuals need and we don’t?” Hermione asked.

And Harry explained, as he had to Dumbledore, about the teaching methods at Hogwarts not suiting everybody and so some needed a little help.

Ron sat silently, and then said, astutely, “And Hermione doesn’t need it because she’s brilliant anyway and books suit her best, and I don’t need it ‘cos this is as good as it gets. Me. Middle of the road wizard.”

Harry’s heart ached.

“Ron...”

But Ron was getting up to leave.

“Don’t worry, mate. Think I didn’t already know that?”

Harry grabbed his arm. “You’re right,” he agreed. “You have a middle power level –“

Ron tried to pull away, but Harry held fast.

“Magic isn’t everything, Ron. Not for winning the war and not for anything else.”

Ron’s chin was up, waiting.

“You’re brilliant at strategy, mate. A natural at it. Do you have any idea how useful that’s going to be? The planning for this war is crap, as far as I can see. We’re so busy reacting, rather than taking the initiative. I’m alright at the get-up-and-go stuff, but my problem is I’m too impulsive. I know I am. And I’ve dragged you into it in the past. But I need you to stand up to me now. To take a good long look at things and plan for what we should be doing, not just knee jerk stuff. And then I’ll be really glad to have you at my side, whatever the strength of your magic, because I’ll know we should be there, it’s thought through, and we’re prepared, and I have a man I can trust at my side. And you can’t train for that, Ron, but it’s the most valuable thing in the world.”

Ron looked at him for a long moment, and then just nodded. But his eyes were warm, and he patted Harry on the back with a rather diffident move.

Harry patted back, and turned to Hermione, who was smiling at him.

“Muggles have some puzzles for improving strategy,” she said. “I’ll get Mum to send some. Sharpen you up, Ron. They’re fun! Then, when Harry’s ready, you can do what he asks.”

“Thanks,” Ron nodded, throwing himself back down on the bed before bending over the far side and fishing a bag of Bertie Botts from the bottom of his bedside cupboard. “I’ll start looking at history books and see what’s been done so far in this war. May find some pointers,” he added.

Hermione leant over and gave him a kiss.

“Ronald Weasley, you have earnt in my pants tonight,” she grinned at him. “I can’t believe my ears! You have just volunteered to read a book!”

“But I get rights for each one I read?” Ron grinned, his face bright red. Harry watched with amusement as he shifted onto his side on the bed, trying to hide his groin with a casually raised leg.

“I think I’m going to leave you wicked people to it,” he smirked, getting up and strolling to the
“You don’t have to go,” Hermione began.

Ron groaned, and Harry laughed.

“Ron’s got a free period and a hard on. Much as I like men, I’m not staying to help. And thanks,” he added softly, as Ron buried his head in the cover. “Is it alright if I ask you to do some stuff later, Mione?”

“Not if it’s like what I’m going to be doing to Ron in a minute, much as I love you,” Hermione grinned.

Harry threw his arms across his chest as if warding off evil. “Stay away from me, woman, it’s only your mind I’m after!”

Hermione lobbed a pillow at him.

Ron suddenly looked up, his brain disengaging from his cock. “Hey! Did you just say – “

Harry slipped out of the door, then peeped back around the edge. “That I like men? Oh, yes!” And he snapped the door shut, even as he heard Hermione berating his flame-haired friend, “Honestly, Ron! Don’t tell me you hadn’t realised that!”

It was now nearing Halloween. Harry thought back to the first proper lesson of the Remedial Magic class. He had waited anxiously in the classroom on the Tuesday following the initial meeting, wondering who would turn up. He was pretty sure Neville and Padma would, and reasonably confident of Ernie and Eloise. It was his Slytherin colleagues that he was unsure about. He had felt a huge sense of relief when Malfoy had strolled in, followed a moment or two later by Snape.

Harry had set the desks into a block, so that they all sat round a rectangle together. There was a pile of strips of paper in the middle, and a bunch of biros. Harry launched straight into the lesson as soon as everyone had arrived.

“Right. Good evening, everybody. Thank you all for coming.”

He saw Malfoy’s lips curl, but kept his voice calm and even.

“Today there are two objectives to the lesson; first, we will have an information gathering activity, and following this, we will make a start on wandless magic.”

He could feel the buzz of interest in the latter, and the uncertainly about the former.

“Right off, I’m going to say don’t expect everything to happen all at once, and don’t be downhearted if others master it before you. It might sound corny to say it, but it really isn’t a race. Someone will be first and someone will be last, but – I am positive that you are all going to get there, ok?”

He looked at them all, taking in Eloise’s shy nod, Ernie’s grin, and the dubious look on Padma’s
“So, the first task. Pick up a biro and 3 scraps of paper. I want you to write what you think you are best at on one piece – it can be anything, not necessarily a school subject. Quidditch, cooking, being a good friend...whatever you really think is your forte. On the second piece, I want you to write what you think you’re crap at – “ there was a giggle from Padma and a snort from Neville, “and on the last piece, I want you to put down what you most want to be doing in 70 years. You have 3 minutes.”

They stared at him gobsmacked.

“Come on! 180 seconds and counting!”

There was a scuffle for the pens.

“What on earth are these?” Malfoy sneered, twirling the biro in his fingers.

“160 seconds. Use it, Draco, and I will explain afterwards.”

“But this isn’t even parchment!”

“No, it isn’t. 145 seconds.”

As the time closed, everyone had finished the task, and was hoarding the pieces in front of them.

“Well done,” Harry grinned. “Right, now you remember that you are unable to pass on any information you learn in this room about the others?”

At the nods, Harry continued. ”Good. Can you all put them in the middle?”

“What are you planning on doing with them, Mr Potter?” Snape said, holding on to his. He had done it, though, and without much hesitation, Harry noted.

“We’re going to look at them all – “

“But it’s secret!” Padma wailed.

“Padma, is it in my nature to deliberately hurt anyone?” Harry asked. She looked at him wide-eyed, and after a moment, shook her head. “Trust me on this. If you are unhappy with anything revealed at the end of the session, I will ask Severus to obliviate that memory from everyone for you. That holds for everyone,” he said, looking round. “Is that fair?”

There was still some wriggling.

“I suspect there may be things people would rather I didn’t remember at the end,” Severus said languidly.

Harry could understand that. “The thing is,” he said, “that Severus is well-known as one of the best Legilimens in the country, so I thought it best if he did the obliviating. Given that he can most likely look into the brains of any of us any time he likes, he could find out these wishes anyway.”

Harry wanted to laugh at the horrified looks of everyone except Draco. And Neville, which was interesting.

“Tell me now why we had to use that inferior paper and those...those things?” Draco asked, changing the subject.
“Those things are called biros, after the chap who designed them. Or just pens.”

“They’re muggle. This is a school for witchcraft and wizardry. Why are we using those nasty little things?”

“Did they work?”

“So?”

“So Muggles used to use quills. But they developed better things. They keep at it. These ones are so cheap that charities send them free in the post to encourage you to write them a cheque. They used technology they discovered going to the moon to make ones that work upside down. You can get pens that write underwater. All I’m saying is, Muggles keep improving things. Why do wizards, who have even more power available to them, rely on old stuff? If there’s a good reason that I don’t know because I’m not wizard-raised, that’s fine, but I’d also like to know. And if there isn’t, why not take advantage of Muggles’ advances and add witchcraft on top of it? Use everything there is to our advantage?”

There was silence.

“Okay, moving on,” Harry said, and looked at Snape. “Can you put your slips in the pool, Severus?”

Snape thrust his bits of paper into the pile, and tight-lipped, sat back.

Harry waved his hand over the pile, and with a flurry, the pile rose into the air, and then settled back down.

“Hey!” Ernie exclaimed, “the writing’s changed!”

Harry smiled. “I’ve put them all into typescript, so you can’t tell who wrote what from the writing. Ernie, pick up the top one and read it out.”

“It says ’Running my own specialist plant company’”.

“The person to your left – Eloise, yes, that’s you, needs to guess who said it, and what category it is. I think the last bit’s obvious,” he smiled.

Eloise blinked. “It’s Neville, isn’t it? His future plans?”

Neville nodded, a slight blush on his cheeks, but he held his head up, Harry noted.


“Actually, the best companies charge a fortune,” Snape said calmly. “If you provide the rare plants needed for the discerning potions’ specialist, it’ll be a good career.”

Eyes stared at him in shock.

“Thank you, Sir,” Neville stuttered.

“It is merely an observation,” Snape said off-handedly.

“And it’s Severus in here,” Harry reminded Neville gently. “OK, Eloise, you next.”

“’Potions’, ” Eloise read from the scrap of paper.
All eyes turned to Snape.

“Not me,” the Potions Master said.

“You don’t think your best thing is Potions?” Draco said in surprise.

“I daresay you will find out during the course of this silly game what I consider my best skill to be,” Snape said in a bored voice. “I presume Long- Neville – is the author?”

“Not guilty,” Neville said, his chin tilting up a little, a fierce look in his eye despite the pink washing into his cheeks.

“You think you are even worse at something - worse than at Potions?” Snape said in disbelief.

Harry coughed.

“It was me,” Ernie said with a squeak.

Snape looked at him. “Mr McMillan – “

“Ernie,” Harry interjected.

Snape glared at him. “Ernie. Whilst I would not have admitted you to NEWT Level Potions even had you had any desire to do so, I think had you ever visited the Gryffindor/Slytherin class you would have found yourself placed amongst the most able element.”

Everyone stared at Snape, and then at Ernie. Ernie swallowed.

“I know I just about scraped along,” Ernie said with a gulp, “but I never really felt I understood any of it. I followed the instructions, I can read, but had we had to create anything – I couldn’t have done it.” He looked cautiously at Snape.

“Very few can. That is what differentiates potential masters,” Snape said coolly. “You show a great deal more intellect than most in having even considered the question.”

Ernie swallowed so loudly even Neville put his hand to his own throat as if to soothe down an obstruction.

“Thank you, Sir,” he croaked.

“It is barely a recommendation,” Snape said. “And I believe you need to endeavour to use my forename, or Harry will be hissing again.”

Harry grinned. “Next!”

“Shagging!” Ernie read, laughing. He turned to Padma next to him. “Who do you think’s best at shagging, Padma?”

“Maybe someone thinks they’re crap at it,” drawled Malfoy.

Everyone was sniggering; even Snape’s lips were curling.

Padma looked round the table. “Malfoy – Draco? Best at, that is, “she blushed, and hid her face in her hands.

Everyone was laughing out loud now.
“Why Padma,” Draco smirked, “I’m touched. Unfortunately, I didn’t think to put such a private skill down. How remiss of me.”

Padma looked round the table, gulped and blushed again. “Profes – Sev- Severus?”

“Best or worst, Miss – Padma?” Snape said silkily.

“B-best!”

Everyone was chuckling.

“I’m afraid you are wrong again. Sensible choice though,” he added, to hoots of laughter.

Everyone looked at each other with curiosity.

“OK, I own up,” Harry said. “Not best or worst, though. What I hope to be doing in 70 years. Frequently. Preferably with a tasty man that I have spent the last forever with.”

“You’re queer, Potter?” Draco sneered amidst the laughter that stumbled to a halt in shock.

“Yes. But you needn’t worry, you aren’t my type, Draco.”

Padma giggled.

“Next question?” Harry swept on.

“Staying alive,” Neville read. He looked at Draco next to him.

“Well, it’s got to be P-Harry, hasn’t it? The thing you’re best at.”

“Or is it the thing he’s worst at?” Snape murmured.

“Good point,” Neville said. He grinned at Harry. “You’ve missed death by a hairsbreadth loads of times.”

“Yeah, but he’s still here,” Ernie said, “so it has to be best.”

“Good thinking, but it wasn’t me,” Harry said.

The silence stretched.

“I regard it as my best skill,” Snape drawled.

The rounds continued until all the slips were discussed.

“Well,” Harry drew it to a conclusion. “Part one done. Grab another bit of paper. Don’t groan. This’ll be quick. One minute to write down what you think we may have gained from this exercise. All comments acceptable.”

A minute later Harry swirled the pile and once again rendered them incognito.

“Padma, pick up the stack and read them out.”

“The first one says -” she paused.

“Read it out, Padma, doesn’t matter whether it’s good or bad.”
“It says, ‘I learnt Harry Potter is a poof,’” she blushed, and looked up at Harry in embarrassment.

“True enough,” Harry said calmly, “go on.”

“The next one says, ‘I learnt a lot about everyone!’” She looked up again. Harry motioned her on.

“The next one says, ‘It was surprising how hard it was to tell who thought what of themselves, and what their dreams were.’”

“That’s a good point,” Harry nodded. “I don’t know if that shows us how little we know each other, or how much we’re actually similar.”

“And this one says ‘Very little.’”

“Fair enough,” Harry said, hoping the comment was from Snape and that there wasn’t anything even more damning to come.

Fortunately that was the worst of it.

Harry magicked a tray of pumpkin juice, hot chocolate, coffee and biscuits.

“Take what you want, we can eat and work at the same time,” he said. He was very pleased to see Severus helping himself to coffee.

“Right, the bit you’ve been waiting for. Wandless magic. Everyone take out their wands and pass them along 2 places.”

“I beg your pardon?” Snape said, in his coldest voice.

“You can all see them. No one is going to steal your wand. But I want you to have a try with another wand.”

“Harry, a wand is tuned to the individual,” Neville reminded him mildly.

“I know,” Harry returned, “but you’re going to have to learn to do magic without one at all. It feels weird, at first. You need to find that feeling before you can do it. Trying to do magic with a wand that’s not your own is a step on the way to that. You know how to do the motions, you know the words, you have a conduit. But it won’t feel the same. Give it a try.”

Harry had thought of this idea after getting his second wand. It had felt so different to his first that he had had to work at getting the feeling right. Now, it felt much better – stronger, more sensitive, than his trusty old one – but it hadn’t felt that way at first. And frankly, he preferred wandless for most things.

The people at the table reluctantly swapped.

“We’ll start with that old favourite, wingardium leviosa,” Harry grinned at them.

Snape’s wand was in his hand, and almost without thinking, he ran his fingers down the length of it. Snape glared at him as if he had personally molested him.

“Sorry,” Harry muttered.

Harry threw some feathers onto the table, and they all began to try, with mixed success. “Swap again,” Harry said, and they tried again. “And pass it on again,” Harry said after a few minutes.
It was interesting. Snape wasn’t bad, but the two girls were by far the best at getting results out of the other wands. He wondered whether they were more empathic, and whether this made a difference.

He brought the topic up with the group. He could see they were quite unused to being asked why they thought things happened, but the atmosphere was relaxed and the ideas began to flow.

The bell rang to warn of lights out for the lower years and Harry decided to call a halt. “That’s it for today, then. A little homework –“

“You said there wouldn’t be any homework!” Eloise protested. “I’ve got loads of other stuff to do!”

“Nothing too much,” Harry said soothingly. “I want you all to try to manage for two days without magic.”

There was a shocked huff.

“Harry –“

“I know, you may need it. But see where you can do without it. And then try and keep a record for the week of what you do use it for. I’m not going to ask for details – we all use it for personal reasons, I’m sure,” he grinned. “But if you can just keep a tick box record in categories – for example, school work, personal care, safety, heating charms, etc etc. We’ll collate next week and no one’s individual uses will be under scrutiny, ok? See you next week, same time, same place. And thank you all for coming.”

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It was on Harry’s first visit to Severus’ rooms, just before half term, that Harry saw the invitation from Malfoy.

The whole process had been odd to begin with – Harry was determined to keep his two personae separate, and so had apparated out of Hogwarts to his home, put on his glamour, changed into a deep navy shirt and some snug jeans, donned a navy outer robe and headed back up to Hogwarts.

He had knocked on Snape’s door, and although the castle was familiar to him, the moment he walked into Snape’s sitting room, he was fully Alex, because Harry had never been in these rooms. Snape smiled his pleasure at his arrival, running a hand down his arm rather than leaning in to kiss him, with the sort of restraint that Harry found endearing, especially knowing how unrestrained Severus could be, and hopefully would be later!

 Severus had invited him for a meal and a drink. Harry was rather anxious about whether he would be recognised through his glamour by the elves, and had debated long and hard about whether to speak to them first. But when he had slipped into the kitchen the night before, there were so many elves there that he decided that there was no way that he wanted to tell them all his secret, and he didn’t know who was responsible for serving Severus or if it was arbitrary. He had instead accepted a mug of hot chocolate and some cake, and sat chatting to Winky. He thought he could ask Dobby about elf powers, but Winky told him that Dobby was on a mission for the Headmaster. Winky was much more cheerful and seemed to have resolved her inclinations to imbibe more than she could tolerate, and Harry found her company surprisingly pleasant. She had quite firm views on
things, but Harry found her ideas refreshing and that looking at things from a different perspective made him question his own views. The chance meeting made Harry determined to visit more, and value the contribution of the elves. They were so taken for granted and yet their magic was so powerful – he could feel the kitchen throbbing with the energy of it – that they really needed to consider whether the elves would be willing to take a more active role in the war, or whether they were essentially neutral. He needed to talk to Dobby and Dumbledore and Ron.

Whilst Severus was pouring them a drink, Harry looked around. The room was much lower than the Gryffindor common room, with a vaulted ceiling, stone arches filled in with warm golden bricks. The walls were mostly lined with books, giving a richness to the room. There was a large desk at one end, covered in papers and more books, and wicker containers on the floor beside it full of scrolls; Harry recognised them as the containers students’ work was collected in. The light was soft and mellow, from flickering tapers on the walls, and the fire hissed merrily in the grate. There was a small sofa and a single chair facing each other in front of the fire, both looking comfy and well used. Above the mantel was an oil painting of a snow scene, the bright light of a rising sun casting light and shadows on a range of mountains. Harry stepped closer to look at it, when he spotted the card addressed to ‘Severus and Alex’ propped behind a candlestick.

He picked it up, reading it, and glanced across at Snape.

“It came this morning. I’ll send our apologies,” Snape said, bringing Harry a glass of red wine.

Harry took the glass and sipped. “You’re not free?” he asked.

Snape looked at him. “You don’t want to get involved with Malfoy. Whatever it is you do for the Order, you must know he’s trouble.”

“Exactly!” Harry said. “The closer eye we keep on him the better. And there may be other useful contacts at this card party.”

“You don’t appreciate the danger –” Snape began.

“No. You don’t appreciate that you’re not alone,” Harry interrupted.

Snape sucked in his breath, his eyes furious.

Harry put a hand on Snape’s chest. “I’m just saying. We want to win this war, and it’s going to take a joint effort, lots of people all doing a tiny bit, not one or two players with the whole effort on their shoulders. That’s what the Order is about, surely? And here we’ve got an opening – “

“I can deal with Malfoy –“

“I don’t doubt it. But there will be others there, and at future occasions, and two of us has got to be better than one, hasn’t it? Are they all likely to be Death Eaters?” Harry asked, changing tactics. He had dropped his hand, but still stood close to Snape. And Snape hadn’t moved away.

“No. They’re all likely to be sympathisers with the Dark Lord’s views, but Lucius knows a lot of very powerful people who like to sit on the fence. They’ve too much to lose and they’re cautious. Malfoy cultivates them because they’re his safety policy, lots of contacts in the right places, all able to say that he had behaved with perfect propriety.”

“So there’s no major danger in going, then?”

Severus swirled his wine, inhaled the bouquet, and took a sip.
“What?” Harry said softly.

“I preferred to keep our relationship away from all that,” Snape said quietly.

Harry felt a warm swell of emotion in him, and stepped forward to rest his head against Severus’ chest. Severus didn’t move, but didn’t reject him.

Harry looked up, brushing his lips over Severus’ jaw.

“Mmmn, newly shaved,” he murmured, distracted. His body slid closer to Snape’s, and he felt his sudden intake of breath.

Severus stepped back swiftly, but before Harry had a chance to feel bereft Severus had put his glass down, taken Harry’s and done the same and then pulled Harry roughly into his arms, kissing him fiercely.

Harry felt like swooning like a maiden! His arms started to move up around Severus’ neck, then changed direction, pulling out Severus’ shirt and sliding up his back underneath. He needed to touch skin, and felt the smooth glide of his fingers over the bunched muscles, the knobs along Snape’s spine, the thrust of his shoulder blades. His groin ground into Severus’ without conscious thought. Snape pulled his tongue from Harry’s mouth and bit his bottom lip. The sharp pain, the tang of blood, the fierce grip of the man shot straight to Harry’s already hard cock.

“God!”

Severus roughly licked the blood, then his mouth was sliding down Harry’s neck and he bit into the juncture of neck and shoulder.

Had Harry been asked whether biting was erotic twenty minutes earlier, he would probably have said it was alright. Now all he could say was,” God, Severus, don’t! I’ll come!” He felt delirious with the intensity of his arousal.

Severus growled and pulled back. Even as Harry felt the loss, Snape yanked his shirt from his trousers, pulled at the top, shredding buttons from holes, leant in and bit Harry’s nipple hard, at the same time twisting the other.

Harry screamed.

And came in his pants, convulsing as Severus continued to bite and squeeze, soothing slowly to gentle licks.

Tears were coming from the edges of Harry’s eyes.

He felt shocked and sated and ridiculously wobbly.

Snape held him tight and then returned to his mouth, kissing him gently.

“What the hell was that?” Harry whispered, his voice croaking.

“Generally called an orgasm, Mr Johnson,” Snape murmured, his deep voice stroking over Harry. To his disbelief, his cock twitched with renewed interest, sticky as it was in his damp underwear.

“Also known as coming, le petit mort, an ejac –”

“Yeah yeah,” Harry snorted, pulling back to look the man in the eye. “God, I need to sit down! My
legs are like jelly.”

Snape laughed, and led Harry to the sofa.

Harry’s eyes were drawn to the erection tenting Snape’s trousers. He licked his lips.


“What’s wrong with now?” Harry murmured, his hand snaking up Snape’s thigh.

Snape slapped his hand on top of it. “Unless you have no objection to an audience, I suggest we wait. The house-elves are about to bring us dinner, and I’m afraid Albus asked if he could join us.”

“Albus? Why?”

“He did not say. When I mentioned that I wouldn’t be at supper because you were coming to dinner, he asked to join us. I hope you don’t mind too much?”

“Oh, I’m thrilled,“ Harry said glumly.

“Wonderful!” Dumbledore exclaimed, stepping through the fire.

Harry did the quickest cleaning spell of his life, and blushing, rose to greet Dumbledore, extending his hand.

Severus, he noted, had risen quickly and was slipping on a robe that was over the back of a chair, his back to them momentarily. Harry’s lips twitched.

“So good of you to invite me, Severus,” Albus beamed, thrusting a bottle into Snape’s hand.

“Thank you, Albus,” Snape said, surprised.

Albus bent down, and Snape’s and Harry’s eyes met over his head, glinting with amusement, which turned into horror as the old man handed Harry a button.

Harry’s eyes shot down his front as he realised that his shirt was still undone and ripped to shreds.

A quick spell and it was fixed, and Harry’s face was as red as Ron’s hair.

Suddenly, the noise of house elves could be heard, and to Harry’s immense relief, Snape led them into his small dining kitchen without Dumbledore saying a word.

The first course passed with desultory conversation. Harry could barely taste the food, but when the pudding appeared his eyes lit up and his mouth watered. It was as Harry had just taken a mouthful of chocolate mousse that Dumbledore asked, “So you two boys are getting along well, then?”

Harry choked, as a smidgen went down the wrong way, but waved Albus off as the man offered to thump him on the back. He looked at Severus, but he was already answering.

“He wants to come to a do at Lucius Malfoy’s with me.”

Well, that was an interesting tack.

Albus looked at Harry. “Why do you want to go?” he asked. “I’m sure the delights of Malfoy Manor are an attraction, but have you any other reason?”
Harry snorted. “I’m sure that I could do without the pleasures of Malfoy Manor, but there are opportunities for getting information and Severus tells me it is unlikely to be a Death Eater rally.”

He wondered what Dumbledore would think. It hadn’t been his intention to tell him – not till he’d been, anyway. Dumbledore knew who he was and Severus didn’t. In more ways than one. Whilst he might object to the Man Who Lived walking into a Death Eater’s home, would he feel a mage to be unable to take care of himself?

“What sort of information do you hope to glean, if that is the case?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry looked at him. “This is based on an idea from a friend,” he said, thinking of the surprising amount of research Ron had been putting in – and apparently loving it. And he outlined the idea.

Both Dumbledore and Snape looked reasonably impressed.

And agreed that it was worth a try.

Later, Dumbledore had enquired how Alex liked Hogsmeade, which had led to a discussion of his house and then pursuant to that, of his overgrown garden. The odd upshot of which was that when Harry had jokingly said he would have to get a gardener, Snape – Snape! – had recommended he ask Neville Longbottom, as Madam Sprout had been singing the boy’s praises in the staff room only that day. Dumbledore’s eyes had, of course, reverted to their regular twinkling, and he had agreed that should Mr Longbottom wish to take on a little work outside of school, he would have no objection.

Later, after Dumbledore’s departure – he had given Harry a heavy look as he left, but Harry wasn’t sure what it was intended to mean, though he was pretty sure the Headmaster was warning him that he had better not hurt Severus – they sat once again in front of the fire, Harry’s head on Snape’s shoulder and the older man’s arm loosely around him along the back of the sofa. Harry felt incredibly content to be there: tingly, mellow from the wine, and very satisfied with his lot. And talking of satisfaction....he leant across Snape to pop his coffee cup down on the side table at the end of the sofa, turning his body into the older man as he did so. He felt the bunch and shift of Snape’s muscles under him. The new position left him sprawled across Severus, his face close to his. His hand came up to Snape’s face, smoothing down the side of his jaw. Snape’s dark eyes looked back steadily into his. Inviting. As he leant in, the tension suddenly tight and hot between them, a loud knock sounded on the door.

“Blast!” Snape muttered.

Harry pulled himself back.

“A student? Will they go away?”

Snape was looking at a mirror beside the door. Not a mirror, Harry realised, as it now showed the section of corridor directly outside the room, and the young man who was knocking.

Draco Malfoy.

“I need to see to it,” Snape said, getting up. “Mr Malfoy was in charge tonight; he wouldn’t disturb me unless it was urgent.”

Harry nodded, standing also. “Do you want me to wait in the kitchen?”

Severus paused. “If you have no objections, Mr Malfoy is Lucius’ son. It will not hurt for it to get back to his father that he met you here.”
Harry nodded. “You can send me away if it’s private.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry –“

“Not at all,” Harry said, a hand on his arm briefly as Snape strode to the door just as Malfoy raised his hand again.

“Professor, I’m sorry to disturb you – “

“Come in, Mr Malfoy,” Snape said.

Draco jerked to a halt as he realised that there was another man in the room.

“I’ll leave you if this is private,” Harry said.

“I – no!” Draco said jerkily, with less than his usual cool, as his eyes took in the low lighting, the cups and glasses, the casual dress. Snape’s robe wasn’t even done up! And his shirt was open at the collar – and the next button down. He could see a curl of Snape’s chest hair. How very weird.

“It isn’t private, and – and I’m very sorry to disturb you, “ he said, looking from one man to another, a blush beginning to steal up his pale cheeks. “It’s just that Daventry has had a bit of an accident. I’ve taken him to the hospital wing, but Madam Pomfrey says that his parents must be contacted and –“

“You were quite right to disturb me, Draco,” Snape nodded. He turned to Harry.

“I’ll go,” Harry said, walking to the door. “I’ll see you at the weekend?”

“Indeed,” Snape said. But his voice was warm. Draco had never heard it so deep and rich before. It sent shivers down his spine.

Harry held out his hand to Draco. “Pleased to meet you, Mr Malfoy. I’ve recently met your father.”

As Draco shook his hand, Snape briefly made the introductions.

Harry smiled at him, and left.

Snape listened to the details of the accident, thanked Draco, and decided to check out the boy in the infirmary before contacting the parents, as it sounded serious but not life-threatening. His evening was going to be busy.

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Draco returned to the common room, his adrenalin levels slowly dropping. He had dealt with a serious accident, kept the house calm, and had confirmation that his Head of House was indeed gay. Well, strictly, he could have been entertaining a friend, but there was a definite warmth between the two, a comfortableness – and more - that had surprised Draco. Although he had heard from his father that Snape preferred his own sex, he had never seen him with another man. He’d never seen him be less than severe, either – even when he was talking to his House, and lacing his speech with witticisms, his posture, and demeanour were always restrained, self-contained. Even in Potter’s classes, when he was as much of a student as they were, he was still a cold fish. To see him looking relaxed, and entertaining someone....not that it should be odd that teachers had private
lives, they must have – however would they get teachers otherwise, but he had never been aware of it before. It was the sort of tasty bit of gossip that one wanted to share with someone, but even as he felt this he became aware of two things: he couldn’t think of anyone that he really wanted to share it with, and it might be better for his relationship with his Head of House if he showed that he could keep private matters quiet.

He didn’t know what to think of Severus Snape.

Or of Harry Potter, come to think of it.

Potter had been his arch rival for 6 years, and yet now was offering him help. Why? And Snape too. Didn’t he know Snape was a Death Eater? Even if he didn’t know whether he still was – Draco didn’t know himself - he must know that Snape used to be one. And he still had the Dark Mark, which must mean that Voldemort could summon him; he’d seen his father being summoned many times, and had seen Snape give that infinitesimal jerk that his father also gave when the Mark first flared.

What game was Potter playing? Was he really so naive as to believe that they would make up their own minds when they had come into their powers?

Did he himself believe that he could be more powerful? He knew he was already more powerful than most wizards, and on top of that he had wealth, status and influence.

And yet, the astounding power that Potter had shown that first day was so far beyond his limits – so far beyond the limits of anyone he knew – that he even knew existed – that he’d be stupid not to explore the possibilities. And Draco Malfoy was no fool.

He had to admit that the classes were surprising in a number of ways. Who knew Neville Longbottom wasn’t a complete dunce at everything? Of course, he’d known that he was a favourite of Professor Sprout, but he’d never put much store by gardening. They employed several people on the estate for that sort of menial labour. But Neville had surprised him by using that knowledge to solve a puzzle. Whilst he himself had been stymied by his fear of the Forbidden Forest, Longbottom had used his knowledge to make deductions and get them out of there. Of course, what with him and Potter being chummy, maybe they had set it up together to make him and Snape look bad. But he didn’t really believe that, just acknowledged that it could have been done, had Potter not been such a Gryffindor.

And if the people in the class were really the most powerful people around, then he’d certainly gain by being intimately connected with them.

And surprisingly, the sessions were remarkably interesting. Potter had a real knack for making you consider why and how and what for?

Of course, he was better at almost everything than the others there – apart from the herbology incident, and of course potions. Surprisingly, Potter had set him to explaining some basic potions principles to McMillan – Ernie – and Potter himself. Potter had breezed over Draco’s embarrassment at being asked to do this in Snape’s presence, and had set Snape a Charms task with Padma, using each other’s wands. It was surprising how hard it was to explain something which you almost innately understood to someone else. He had quite enjoyed the challenge, even though he had huffed a bit about being there to stretch himself rather than to act as a free tutor to others.

His wandless magic wouldn’t seem to come. Frankly, if Potter didn’t use it all the time, unconsciously, as if it was just an extension of himself, he would have thrown in the towel, and not believed it possible. But Potter was living proof that it was possible, and if that little runt of a
mongrel could do it, there was no way he was going to give up.

Harry had had a bizarre interview with Neville. Dressed smartly, his classmate had arrived at his house after Alex Johnson had written to ask him whether he would consider working on his garden for a small wage.

Neville had stood on the step and peered silently at Harry. When Harry had invited him in, he had asked Harry to step out and show him round the garden, going through the front and then walking through the house to the back garden. Harry looked at the wilderness through fresh eyes. He could see that there had once been a herb garden near the house, but as with everywhere else it had become overgrown with sticky weed and convolvulus and every other invasive plant known to man. Harry had done enough gardening with the Dursleys to know how much work was involved. The only bit he had really taken a positive interest in had been the orchard at the end, where he had found the wood to create his new wand.

Neville had asked him what he wanted to achieve. Harry hadn’t really thought about it. He didn’t want a garden like the Dursleys which was so prim and proper that it made him feel ill.

“I’d like it to be a comfortable place to sit in,” Harry answered at last. “To sit with a cup of tea and lunch or a glass of wine in the evening. I’d like to have nice smells and a bit of colour. Some herbs to cook with. Not regimented – sort of tidy but natural, if you know what I mean,” he said, looking at his quiet friend. Harry felt peculiar at deceiving him; but as Harry he probably wouldn’t have asked. Nev might have felt some sense of obligation – through friendship, or the extra classes – and he didn’t want that.

Neville nodded.

“I like it natural under the apple trees,” Harry added quickly, thinking. “There’s lots of wild flowers in the spring. It feels sort of magical,” he said apologetically.

“Fair enough,” Neville answered. “May I add in plants? Once these weeds are under control there’s going to be some big spaces. Is there anything you’d like?”

“I – I don’t know,” Harry said. “Perhaps I could leave that to you? Nothing too expensive, though, unless you talk to me first. Would you like some money up front to buy things?”

Neville laughed. “I’ll be trying to grow them from cuttings or seeds, mostly, so you needn’t worry about that! If that’s ok with you?”

“Yes, thank you! But you must charge me for your time and everything – I mean the time growing the plants, as well as the actual working here,” he added awkwardly.

They discussed money and the deal was done.

Neville had been round twice a week ever since, and already Harry could see the improvement. Snape had arrived early one Wednesday when Neville was still there.

“Mr Longbottom,” he said cordially.
Neville, who had been untangling a rose bush buried beneath the overgrowth, pricked his finger, and jerked in shock and pain.

“Professor!” He gave his finger a quick suck, and seemed to get his poise back. “Did you need to see me, Sir? Is there an emergency?” he asked hurriedly.

Snape snorted.

Neville stared: Snape’s lips curling in amusement was just peculiar.

At that moment Harry opened the door.

“Sev!” he beamed.

“Good evening, Alex,” Snape said, his voice low and warm. “Mr Longbottom is finding some life beneath the weeds, I see.”

Neville was staring from one to the other.

“Do close your mouth, Mr Longbottom,” Snape drawled. “Your tongue is purple. I presume you have been indulging in some Weasley nonsense.”

Neville snapped his mouth shut, but then managed to retort, “Honeydukes Blackcurrant and Mint Bursts, actually.”

“I stand corrected,” Snape bowed his head in mocking acknowledgement. “It makes no difference to the effect, however.”

Harry laughed and smacked Snape on the arm. “Don’t be so horrid, Severus! And after you recommended Neville to me too.”

Neville’s eyes almost bugged out of his head, first at the blow, for which there was no retaliation, and then at the comment.

“You recommended me?” he squeaked.

“Professor Sprout mentioned you were passable in Herbology,” Snape said off-handedly, flicking a speck of dust from his sleeve. “I didn’t think there was much for you to ruin here,” he added.

“Hey! This garden is going to be brilliant!” Harry grinned.

“Indeed. Mr Longbottom, I see you have your work cut out. We will leave you to it.”

And he headed into the house.

“We’re going out in a minute,” Harry said to Neville. “I’ll set the wards to let you in; help yourself to a butterbeer from the cool store.”


“We are,” Harry agreed, hoping Severus wouldn’t mind Neville knowing that he liked men. Though why shouldn’t he?

“Okay,” Neville mumbled. He glanced up and back down again quickly. “Have – have a nice time then. Going somewhere nice?”
Harry wanted to burst out laughing at the stuttering attempt at coolness.

“The pictures. We like films.”

“Alex,” Snape appeared at the door.

Harry grinned swiftly at Neville and followed Snape in.

The door shut with a firm click, and Snape pulled him through into the kitchen, then leaned into him against the counter.

One thorough kiss later, and Snape growled against his ear lobe, “Do you want him?” and bit the tender flesh.

“Wh–what?” Harry’s mind was completely blank. His blood was pounding through his body, all apparently congregating in the south. He could smell the cologne Snape was wearing, lemongrass and sage and underneath the scent of Severus. The body against him was hard all over, Snape’s breath hot against his skin. He shivered.

“Your gardener. Do you find him attractive? All hot and sweaty and –”

“Neville?!” Harry squawked, realising what Severus was saying. “Fancy Neville? Are you mad? Hold on! Do you?”

“A boy? Certainly not!” Snape sneered, his tongue licking down Harry’s neck. “But you took your time. And I can see he has attributes…”

“No way!” Harry laughed. The thought of fancying Neville! Six years in a dorm with him and he had never felt the slightest flicker of sexual interest in boy or man. Harry had a horrible worry for a moment that the animosity between the two was due to an unspoken attraction. He pulled back from Snape, leaning hard against the counter and pushing his palms on Snape’s chest. He didn’t like the idea at all.

“Wait! You think he’s attractive?”

“I have eyes, Alex. He’s a fit young man, good muscles, pleasant face –”

“And you like that?”

“I am saying that I can see the potential. Personally, he doesn’t appeal to me. He is my student – “

“That can’t stop how you feel –“

“Yes, it can. I don’t ever think of my students in sexual terms. It’s not appropriate.”

“You just did think of him in sexual terms,” Harry pointed out anxiously.

Snape looked at him. “Jealous?”

Harry opened his mouth to deny it, and halted.

“Yes. Should I be?”

Snape laughed, and then took him tight in his arms and kissed him till his head was spinning.

“No,” he murmured, against Harry’s lips. “You are quite enough for me. And were I ever to
consider a student conquest – which I won’t – it would not be Mr Longbottom.”

Snape wished he hadn’t said the last thing. Because he had a sudden image of Harry Potter in his mind that made him want to swear. Alex was right. He had noticed Potter in sexual terms. There was just the odd movement, the occasional gesture, posture – no! He was not going to even think of the damn boy! He was glad he had Alex this year. If his libido was going to start going into overdrive he was glad he had a mutually satisfying outlet. He pressed tighter to Alex, rubbing against him.

Harry groaned, thrusting back.

“We need to leave,” he said regretfully.

“Mmmn. I can stay a little later tonight, perhaps,” Snape suggested against Harry’s jaw.

“Thank Merlin for that!” Harry groaned. “You do it on purpose, don’t you? You know I’m going to be half hard all night.”

“Only half? I must be losing my touch,” Snape said, voice like dark chocolate, as his fingers ghosted over Harry’s cock.

“Bastard!” Harry thrust into the touch.

Snape pulled away.

“Indeed,” Snape smirked. “Shall we go?”

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Later that night, in his bed at Hogwarts, Harry, sated but not relaxed, tried not to think of what Severus would say when he discovered that he had been dating one of his pupils after all.
Harry ran his fingers down the stem of the wine glass, admiring how the soft light from the candelabra caught and sparkled on the planes of the cut glass, the wine within it glowing like a fat and ostentatious ruby. He looked around at the company: Lucius Malfoy to his right at the head of the table; a man called Smethlewick to his left, a chap whose name he could not recall next to him. At the foot of the table was Aramis Purefoy, a rather beautiful man with a mane of golden brown hair and golden eyes. Unfortunately, Harry thought the man had overdone it, having added a moustache and goatee to the ensemble, making him look very lionesque.

And moustaches – ugh!

As far from him as he could possibly be, and next to Purefoy, was Severus, looking absolutely delicious in bottle green silk velvet, the severity of the cut belied by the sumptuous fabric. Felix Catismore sat in the middle next to Snape. And opposite Harry a rather thin, drawn-looking man in impeccably cut black robes called Haydn Fell attempted to monopolize Malfoy’s attention, an endeavour that had met with little success, as Lucius had been flirting outrageously with Harry throughout the meal.

The food itself was delicious – how could it not be? The place screamed quality. Harry felt like he was sitting in one of those National Trust houses he had seen in the Dursleys’ Sunday supplements. The room even echoed. Each of them had a servant behind their chair to serve their every whim, which Harry thought was really overdoing it, but seemed to be accepted by the others, so Harry assumed this was the normal way of life chez Malfoy.

Give him a meal at the Burrow any day!

Whilst Fell was once again trying to engage Lucius, Harry turned to talk to Smethlewick, though his eyes strayed to Severus, who looked at him steadily over his glass. He didn’t think Harry really welcomed Malfoy’s attentions, did he? He saw Snape glance briefly at Harry’s fingers on the stem, and the look sparked an idea. A flash of magic later, and he asked Smethlewick his views of the latest Puddlemere/Cannons match, whilst watching Severus out of the corner of his eye. He saw Severus raise his glass to his lips and acted. The wine sloshed hazardously in Severus’ glass, but he was amused to see his lover get a grip, calmly putting his glass down then looking discretely round the table even as he maintained his conversation with Catismore.

Moments later Harry acted again. Snape shuddered. His eyes met Harry’s across the table, and Harry gently slid his fingers down the stem of his glass with one hand, whilst nonchalantly spooning a little of the classic trifle into his mouth, sucking on the spoon.

“Severus!” Lucius’ voice along the length of the table called them back to reality.

“Really, I know Alex is a handsome young man, but do restrain yourself till later! You look positively bewitched!”

There was tittering around the table.

“Oh he is!” Alex chuckled. “Quite literally though: I’m afraid I was trying out a little something on him. You can’t blame him for being distracted.”

Severus was leaning back, frowning a little, and Harry was beginning to regret his childishness, more so when Lucius observed condescendingly, “I thought school boys found watching erotic
(play with wine glasses provocative. Really, Severus!"

Hmmm, thought Harry. He needed to be more cautious with Malfoy: he was more observant than he thought. But it was quite useful to have the man finding him attractive. Perhaps he could play this to his advantage though.

“Well, it was a little more than that,” Harry grinned.

“Alex,” Severus warned.

Harry looked at his lover. “Don’t you think they’d like it, Severus?” he asked, raising his brows.

A moment of thought, and Severus laughed.

“As you will.”

“Of course, some of you gentlemen being straight, you might not want me to do this,” Harry murmured.

There was a moment of reservation warring with even greater curiosity.

“I don’t expect anything you could do at a dinner table is likely to change anyone’s orientation, Alex,” Lucius said with a smirk.

There was a laugh of agreement.

Harry slipped his wand out, and raised his eyes to Malfoy: he was sure it was only polite to seek permission for using a wand at the table.

Malfoy nodded.

Harry made a little show of waving his wand in one loop around the table, muttering a few unintelligible words. In truth, it was an intention spell, but he wasn’t going to show that hand.

“I don’t feel anything,” Catismore complained.

“You will. Do eat,” Harry said.

Slowly, the men began finishing their desserts, feeling rather cheated. Harry ate a spoonful and then touched his glass. There was a jerk in every seat. Harry wanted to laugh at the mental pun. Severus excepted, of course. Still eating with one hand, he nonchalantly slid the fingers of his other hand down the stem.

Smethlewick gasped.

Harry’s fingers did an upstroke. He could see four of the men had cottoned on, and were watching his fingers avidly even as they slid with an even firmer grip down the stem.

“Merlin and damnation!” Fell exclaimed, shifting abruptly in his seat.

Harry ate his last spoonful, his fingers just keeping a firm grip at the base.

The tension mounted.

After carefully sucking every morseful from the spoon, he looked at Malfoy and said, “Delicious!”, then as Malfoy opened his mouth to answer, Harry slowly lifted the glass and felt
Malfoy grind to a halt, felt the indrawn breaths around the table, and wanted to chuckle with glee. His eyes met Severus’ dark ones, and he smiled, gripped the glass tighter, feeling the tension rise a notch again, and just as the glass hovered a centimetre from his lips, as he opened them as if to sip, as the tip of his tongue moistened his upper lip, just as the tension in the room could be cut with a knife, he said, “Maybe not,” and put the glass down again.

“Holy shit!” Purefoy hissed out. “Now that’s what I call a party trick!”

The ice broke and everyone laughed. There was a lot of shuffling and adjusting of robes.

Harry grinned.

“How long was he doing that to you?” Purefoy asked of Severus. “You must have balls of steel!”

Severus gave a trademark smirk. “It pays to have an inventive lover,” he drawled.

Harry waved his wand over the table, appearing to cancel the spell.

Lucius turned to Harry, and briefly placed his hand on his. “A neat trick, Alex. You must allow me to repay the favour some time.”

Harry’s eyes widened. This was one notch up from flirtation. He needed to rein it back.

“A pleasant offer, Sir,” he said, using the formal term to create a bit of distance, “but it was just a trick. Severus is more than enough for me to handle, I assure you.”

“Mmmn.” The man leant back in his chair, sipping his wine. “I am aware of Severus’ skills.”

Harry felt his stomach lurch. He shouldn’t be surprised, of course.

“We all have a past,” Harry said quietly, hoping that it was entirely in the past. The thought of Severus with Malfoy hurt. In his chest. The feeling was unexpected, Harry told himself. But of course it wasn’t. It had always been more than fucking between them. The revelation of where that thought was leading him made Harry look across the table at Severus, taking in the ugly nose, the pale skin, the broad shoulders narrowing down to impossibly small hips, his body completely fat fee, just muscles and sinews, firm and taut. Had he fallen in love with the man? How? When?

Severus looked at him, his eyes quizzical under the intense stare. Harry gave a half-hearted smile, and turned back to Lucius, who had watched the small byplay.

“Jealous?”

Harry felt his eyebrows snapping together before he forced his face to relax.

Malfoy laughed. “You needn’t be,” he said silkily. “My tastes have moved on. However good he is in bed, he’s still an ugly bastard. You come to realise that you could be with someone equally skilled in the intimate arts but a lot more attractive to wake to in the morning. When you realise that, my dear Alex, I may be able to help you,” Malfoy purred.

Harry sat back in his chair. “Another generous offer,” he said softly. “From one of our world’s most handsome men,” he added, and saw the smugness in Malfoy’s expression, as Harry casually perused his features. “But I like Severus’ face in the morning, Lucius,” he finished with a smile.

He saw the flicker of annoyance in Malfoy’s eyes, and then the man laughed. “Well! Severus is a friend; he’s lucky to have such a loyal companion!”
Harry couldn’t believe the nerve of the man who had been trying to win his attentions away from his old friend for the last two hours.

“Come!” Lucius said, rising. “Let’s adjourn to the study.”

In the study there was port and coffee and entirely unnecessary small cakes, as well as a table set up for cards.

Harry had asked Severus what the stakes were. Although he had played various games – poker and the like, with his muggle friends over the summers, and felt he could hold his own, he wondered how high the betting would be in this elite company. He had been surprised to find that pureblood wizards thought the idea of playing for money to be beneath their dignity: scores however, were recorded in books held within the family homes for generations.

Despite this reassurance Harry didn’t feel that inclined to play, and saw his opportunity when the man whose name eluded him collected a coffee and sat on the sofa beside the roaring fire. The servants had left the provisions on a side table and had been waved away by their master. Harry collected coffee too, and with a brief word to the men settling round the table, that he would play a later hand, sat down beside the man.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry apologised quietly. “I didn’t quite catch your name when we were introduced.”

“Sebastian Flight,” the man smiled easily. “And you’re Alex. Not keen on cards?”

“I don’t mind, actually. Just didn’t feel in the mood. I’ll join in later, perhaps. You’re not keen?”

“No, I don’t really understand it. I spend all my day gambling on figures and outcomes, so I don’t really want to do a variation of it in the evening. But I had a meeting with Mr Malfoy today so he’d asked me if I’d like to stay; I haven’t seen Catismore for a while, so it seemed a good idea.”

“What sort of juggling with figures do you do?” Harry asked. “Are you an accountant?”

“A stockbroker,” the rotund man grimaced. “I’m afraid that’s usually a conversation killer.”

“Not at all,” Harry said, swinging round to face the man more. This could be very useful! Ideas were popping into his head at a fast rate of knots. “Forgive me: I expect it’s awfully bad manners to talk business; but I’d be very grateful if you could recommend someone to help me expand my investments.”

Sebastian Flight looked him over with some interest. “Most people just ask me outright what sort of investments they should make.”

Harry grinned. “Just as if you were a doctor and they suddenly brought up their haemorrhoids!”

His companion laughed.

“Please ignore my asking!” Harry said. “Tell me, what do you think of Longsdale as the British Seeker?”

Mr Flight sipped his coffee and regarded Harry over the cup. “You’ve piqued my curiosity. No need to change the subject. You don’t fancy me acting for you but ask me to recommend someone else? What area are you thinking of investing in?”
Harry sat forward earnestly. “Please! I had no intention of being rude! Of course I wouldn’t be so presumptuous as to ask you to advise or act for me – you are handling Mr Malfoy’s business - I need someone to deal with what I am sure are much smaller investments.”

“Mmmm. What have you got into so far?”

“Oh, not much,” Harry said deprecatingly. “I’ve an investment in the entertainment industry,” - well, what else could he term the twins’ business? – “a little in property and in a Muggle building company. I want to get more involved in wizarding businesses, but as far as I can see things are not done as openly as they are in the Muggle world.”

“You have no objections to investing in Muggle businesses?” Mr Flight said, with a quick look towards Lucius Malfoy.

“I cannot see any objection to allowing Muggles to work to make money for me;” Harry said blandly, sitting back.

Sebastian Flight chuckled.

“An interesting point. What sort of amount are you looking to invest?”

“Well, that depends,” Harry said cautiously. “I’d be rather anxious about putting all my eggs in one basket, especially with the – ah, current political climate, should we say. I’m thinking of perhaps a hundred thousand galleons at the moment. I could increase that later, of course, but there’s some security in Gringotts, isn’t there, at the present time?”

Would the man bite? Harry wondered. He hoped his parents would forgive him for spending his inheritance, but if it could help defeat Voldemort then it was money well spent.

“That’s rather more than I would have thought to be a small investment,” the man said carefully, “and you are obviously a sensible man.” He reached into his pocket and handed Harry a card. “Come and see me. I may be able to help you.”

Harry felt well satisfied. Ron had pointed out that Muggles with insider knowledge had made huge movements of their investments prior to major developments in past wars: he hoped that by making such investments with the right people, they might benefit from such a tip off. Of course, he was more likely to be taken for a ride unless he was seen as a person of influence; hopefully the significant sums available to him, his presence in Malfoy Manor and Lucius’ obvious show of interest would stand him in good stead. This was exactly the sort of advantage that he hoped to gain from being there.

The rest of the evening continued peaceably. Harry took a round at the card table, and despite the earlier discussion Malfoy continued to flirt. Harry wondered if it was meaningless, but his gut told him Malfoy would have him on his back given the slightest chance. You could see the thrill of the chase, the desire for conquest, in his eyes. He needed to keep stringing the man along whilst ensuring that he knew Alex was not ready to ditch Snape. And to be honest, there was fun in the give and take of the conversational rallies. He wondered why Lucius was interested: he rather thought his glamour was not particularly attractive – he had after all, aimed for it to be unmemorable.

Later that night, Harry lay, sweat slicked and panting, against Severus’ chest, hearing his lover’s heart beat slowly steadying to normal. However he felt he looked, Severus had showed him –
thoroughly – that he found him desirable.

“You’re absolutely incredible,” Harry whispered the words that he was thinking, brushing lips against the chest, loving the salty sweat taste that told of their exertions.

“I don’t have Malfoy’s looks,” Snape’s voice rumbled against him, and Harry could feel the tension returning to the man’s body.

He pulled himself up to look at Snape, his hands stroking the fine hair. “You don’t,” he agreed.

Severus looked at him. The tension was fierce for a moment, and then Snape laughed.

“Bastard.”

Harry grinned back. “You’d know I’d be lying if I said otherwise. He has to be one of the most handsome men on the planet. All that ethereal beauty and all that hard nastiness underneath. Uurgh!” Harry shuddered.

Snape stroked his back, his large hand gliding slowly over his cooling skin. It was delicious.

“You flirted with him all evening.”

“I told him I liked your face in the morning.”

Severus looked up at Harry. “You did?”

“I did and I do,” Harry said. “Not to mention your chest, and your arms, specially when they’re around me, and your –“

“You told him all those bits?”

“No. He was familiar with all those bits. I had no intention of re-arousing his interest.”

Severus pulled out from underneath Harry so that they were lying facing each other.

“It was a long time ago.”

“Good. Not tempted yourself to go back to him?”

Severus snorted. “The fucking was good. Malfoy wouldn’t know an emotion if it bit him on the arse. Well, pride, maybe, and anger. Nothing one wants in the bed with you though.”

Harry felt a warmth in his chest. His hand tentatively stroked Severus’. “This feels good, doesn’t it?” he said softly, his eyes reluctant to look up.

Snape took hold of his chin and looked at him. His mouth came closer, and Harry felt his breath hitching in his chest. Snape’s lips brushed his, gentle, erotic. “It does,” he answered, and kissed Harry breathless.
Tough Measures

It was moving towards the Christmas break. Harry was in the gym putting himself through a punishing regime. Remedial Magic had finished an hour previously and Harry was facing hard decisions.

He had held a brief review of progress session with each of his students, and although some interesting pluses had come forth, he felt weighed down by his failures.

As he forced himself through the repetitive motions, Harry tried to rein in the uncomfortable feelings in his stomach and get to grip with the issues. His foremost worry was that no-one was yet achieving the skills that he had wanted. He needed to work out how to make it right. Muscles burning with the work, he forced himself to review the situation logically. First, he needed to consider his objectives; secondly, he needed to consider what had been achieved so far; thirdly, he needed to decide what still needed to be done; fourthly, how it could be achieved.

He moved to the bench press, allowing his mind to blank whilst he set up the weights. Magic took away the need for a spotter. He settled into position and began to work, using the movements like counters in his thoughts.

Right. His objectives. He had first and foremost promised the class wandless magic.

None of them could do it.

Although the girls, especially, had done really well with using other people’s wands, that different feeling of drawing on internal power had eluded them all. He needed – but he would come back to that in a minute. He slickly pushed the weights up again, breathing in slowly as he lowered the bar back towards his chest. He had only promised them one other thing – to broaden the scope of their magic. He thought about whether he had achieved that.

Well, Ernie’s work with Draco seemed to have paid off. Although Ernie wasn’t studying NEWT level Potions, Severus had checked some of the potions Ernie had made with Draco and been satisfied with them. But Ernie had produced satisfactory work in class before his OWLs anyway. In his review, Ernie was enthusiastic. Whereas before he had done the work by closely following instructions, now he felt he understood what was happening. As he said to Harry, he’d probably knock up any uncomplicated potions he needed himself, in future, when frankly, he had intended to just buy anything he needed before Draco’s help. And Draco had shown him how to customise stuff for his individual use. This had been valuable too, as Draco had shown him how to analyse his unique body composition, and adjust accordingly. Ernie was well pleased. He felt his charms had also improved, and he found it helpful watching how other people went about their magic in the small class setting. Harry was rather disconcerted that Ernie felt his charms had improved because he had better perfected the shape of some of the spell movements after watching the others. With wandless magic, and wordless, the shape or sound wouldn’t matter at all; he wondered why it had had any effect on Ernie’s? Had it? Or was it an increased concentration and observation of the spell? He needed to think about that.

Draco had actually enjoyed teaching. It had made him think about something he took for granted, and he had appreciated the subject all the more because of it. Harry knew Draco was pretty good at practically everything he attempted; he didn’t feel he had achieved much for him and yet he knew there was much more to Draco’s powers. Their session had been uncomfortable, though Draco was not as aggressive as Harry had feared he might be. He was quite surprised that Draco was even bothering to continue with the class – he suspected that Draco just couldn’t stand that Harry could
do some magic that he couldn’t, and was determined to master it. His determination was interesting. Harry hadn’t really registered it before, except, of course, in quidditch. Now, he could see that Draco brought that same attitude to other subjects, although as he usually found them easy, it didn’t show. Draco admitted that he had been using the gym too, although he obviously chose times when Harry wasn’t there. Draco was actually quite reedy, and Harry was interested that Draco wanted to build up his body. Draco took a lot of care with his appearance, and Harry thought maybe Draco had deliberately cultivated the thin and willowy look. From the sound of their conversation on it, Draco was working hard to build up his muscle mass. Harry wondered whether he wanted it for aesthetic reasons, or for fighting. He didn’t ask. They did not discuss Draco’s loyalties, and he could almost sense Draco’s surprise at that.

Eloise Midgen was interesting. Harry had hardly known the girl previously, she had appeared so quiet. However, in a small group setting the girl had a wicked sense of humour and had even made Severus smirk on several occasions. Harry felt that she had perhaps had the greatest leaps in magical ability. She seemed to have blossomed almost from the attention alone. She told Harry that her marks had significantly improved in all her classes, so much so that she had twice been asked whose work she was copying, much to her chagrin. She did not appear to have developed any particular area of interest, but was just happy to be there and was a key member of the group. As with Padma, she had taken to using other people’s wands like a duck to water, producing spells accurately and powerfully after just one or two attempts to get the feel of the wand. Harry was fascinated by this ability: for practical purposes, he had both girls seeing if they could get the ‘feel’ even before a spell was cast, so that in an emergency situation they could use any wand and produce a positive result. The fact that they needed to do at least one spell indicated that they needed to feel the flow of the magic to do it; on the positive side, this meant that they could feel the flow of external magic well: just not their internal source. It was useful none the less: he needed to think how that could be used. Perhaps they needed a group brainstorming session on that. That could be good. And maybe it would prompt the men’s ability, give them a window into understanding it.

Padma was surprisingly stubborn. Harry had to constantly battle against her reluctance to try anything new and her belief that she couldn’t do it. It was frustrating and annoying. No amount of reassurance seemed to help. Even her skill at using other’s wands didn’t seem to translate into anything like enthusiasm. Despite having seen her more through her visits to Parvati in Gryffindor over the years, he felt he actually knew her the least of the people in the class. He had even wondered if he had been mistaken about her power, but he knew he hadn’t. Perhaps he needed to think about branches of magic that they hadn’t touched on, to see where her talents lay. Some wizards and witches were, rarely, able in one area only: perhaps Padma was one of them?

Neville, thought Harry fondly. He heaved himself up from the press and did squats to work on his legs. Somehow that first success at calling Harry’s bluff had done Neville a lot of good. He seemed to have an air of quiet confidence about him. His work in Harry’s garden seemed to add to his success. Harry had asked him to develop his herb bed – in particular, to grow any plants that would be useful for Potions, and as well as the standards, to have a go at anything rare or more difficult. Neville had taken to the idea with zim. He had created micro-climates, got plants that Harry didn’t recognise, and generally thrown himself into the project with abandon. It had been an off-chance conversation that led Harry to discover that the rather peculiar specimen under his back window came from China.

“How did you get it shipped?” Harry had asked.

“Oh, you couldn’t trust one to shipping!” Neville had exclaimed in horror. “I collected it.”

It turned out that Neville had been apparating long distance all round the globe in search of rare
plants, establishing contacts with all sorts of people. His charm and enthusiasm seemed to melt the stoniest hearts and he had amassed cuttings, seeds, plants, etc. None of this had he brought up in their meeting – just that he had been developing a translation spell that actually included intonation and expression – it made a huge difference to how a person reacted, Neville said, and existing spells didn’t seem to go that far. Harry had no worries about Neville at all.

And then there was Severus. Harry was really rather surprised that Severus had not mastered wandless magic yet. He also disliked using anyone else’s wand, and generally produced poor results doing so. The man seemed to come to the classes to learn how others were learning – a professional interest – rather than gaining any increase of power for himself. Harry had kept a straight face when Severus had introduced a blitzing session in his top year potions class on suggestions for improving the potion they were studying that week.

He needed to do something about it. He picked up his towel and wiped his face, doing a few stretches and moving into his warm-down before heading off to the showers.

He knew what he had to do, really. He had just been putting it off, hoping it could be achieved painlessly. He had found his own abilities through fear and desperation.

Now he would have to try that route.

Later that evening, he went to Dumbledore to outline his plan, and to make arrangements.

“Severus still doesn’t know?” he asked Harry, “Not an inkling?”

“No. I don’t think so,” Harry amended. Sometimes Snape looked at him – at Harry – strangely. But he was sure that Snape couldn’t know. “No,” he said firmly.

“And you plan to tell him when? He’s going to be very upset, Harry. I’m not pleased to be involved in this deception.”

“I know, Sir,” Harry said, rubbing his forehead. “I’m really sorry. I’m not sure what else I could have done. He’s been happy, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t doubt it, but he’s going to be very angry. With both of us.”

“I can’t tell him until he’s got his wandless magic. I can’t risk him giving up the classes. At least he might understand then why I couldn’t tell him. And have something really positive.”

“Hmn. Well, I hope this idea of yours works. I’ll clear the homework for the weekend with the other teachers, and I can do Severus’ marking.”

Harry gave his thanks and left, worried.

He sent a note to his class telling them to meet him in the classroom on Friday night at 5pm for an extra class.

He and Severus had not arranged to meet that Wednesday, as Severus was delivering a paper at a symposium in London. Harry really wished he could see him. Be in his arms, held tight and warm against his chest. He could feel the weight of his fear, but he had no option. This had to be done.

Severus had been due to come to his cottage late-ish on Friday evening, after supper: having been absent for the symposium, he was expected to show his face in the Great Hall that night. Although it hurt, Harry knew that Severus’ frustration at missing their meeting and not being able to tell Alex would help.
At five to five, all the classmates had appeared.

“What’re we doing, Harry?” Ernie asked, his leg swinging as he sat on the corner of the desk.

“Going on a trip,” Harry said. “All been to the loo?”

Padma giggled but no-one moved to leave the class.

“What time will we be back?” Severus said sharply.

Harry looked at him. “That’s up to you lot really,” he said genially. “Right, can everyone stretch out your arms to their full lengths at the side, and just touch each other’s fingertips?”

“You apparating us or tricking us, this time?” Draco sneered, even as he got into position.

“Decide for yourself,” Harry answered. “Shut your eyes, everyone.”

“Why?”

“Cos I asked you to?”

Ernie snickered. “We going to turn up on the stage of a ballet or something?” he asked, causing a few chuckles at the weird position.

“Or something,” Harry agreed, and apparated them.

“What the fuck!”

“Hey!”

“Harry! This isn’t funny.”

“Mr Potter. Remove these shackles at once!”

Harry moved away from the wall and stood in the centre of the room, looking at his class. His heart was thumping, but he was determined to remain calm. With a wave of his hand, all six wands flew into his palm. Harry pocketed them. He pulled a bottle of water out of his robe pocket, and put it down in the centre, placing a small key beside it. He raised his eyes, looking round at the 6 people now shackled to the walls of a dungeon. The arm restraints had less than a foot of chain before they were bolted into the wall, so that they all stood with their arms spread out but drooping slightly. A couple of wall sconces flickered, casting looming shadows as they moved.

“Would you care to explain yourself?” Severus said, his voice at its most venomous.

“Your task today is to get yourself out,” Harry said calmly. “The key to the cuffs is here,” he indicated the key on the floor. “And water, if you get thirsty,” he saw Ernie lick his lips, and knew just how the suggestion of it would bring feelings of thirst to the fore. “I’ve cleared your absence with the Headmaster –“

“Professor Dumbledore knows that you’ve chained us to a wall?” Padma squeaked. “I don’t think so!”

“Well, I didn’t tell him the details,” Harry agreed.

Draco snorted. “Merlin, Potter, you should have been in Slytherin!”
“The Sorting Hat certainly thought so,” Harry grinned, watching Draco’s eyes widen in disbelief. “We could have been friends years ago, Draco!”

“If tying your friends up to walls is part of your normality, I’ve seriously been underestimating Gryffindor,” the blond haired boy retorted.

“Mr Potter, some of us may have made other arrangements for the evening,” Severus said silkily.

“Harry,” Harry gently reminded him. “I’m afraid you’ll have to give your apologies later if you had other plans,” he said to the group as a whole. “The sooner you get yourselves out, the sooner you can do that. Now, I’m going to leave you to it, but if there is an emergency you may call me. I have a monitoring spell set up. But it is only for emergencies,” he added.

“You’re going to leave us here?” Eloise squeaked.

Neville turned to Snape. “Is this one of the Hogwarts dungeons, Sir?”

Snape looked at the boy – no, man - with dawning respect. No panic or comments from Mr Longbottom, just astute questions. He looked around carefully.

“I don’t recognise it,” he said at last.

Harry had walked over to him. “I’m very sorry to do this to you, Severus,” he said, “but it will be too easy for the group to be tempted to put you in charge.” He leant forward and carefully slid a silk scarf over Snape’s mouth.

Snape stood there, involuntarily inhaling the scent of the boy as he leant in, feeling the hard body brush momentarily against his own. To his horror, he found the soft brush of the boy’s hair against his cheek, the hard body against his, the gentle hands tying the cloth behind his head, forcing his head forward onto the boy’s shoulder, to be unweltingly erotic. He forced himself to stand stiffly, not to turn his head to sniff the boy’s neck. He knew fear could increase arousal. That was all it was. And he hadn’t seen Alex for a week, what with his trip to London. He had been primed for a hot evening with his lover. His anger towards Harry increased, even though he could see the logic of silencing him. He opened his mouth to utter a blistering set down when he felt the tingle of the boy’s magic against his lips.

“The spell to keep you silent. The cloth to prevent lip reading,” Potter said softly, his breath ghosting over his face.

Severus glared.

“Right, I think we’re set,” the boy said, standing back and looking round.

“Harry! This is ridiculous! What do you hope to achieve?” Ernie snapped.

Harry looked around at them all. “You’ll need wandless magic to get that key,” he answered, and with a pop that sounded remarkably like apparition, he blinked himself invisible, setting a silence spell around himself as he did so. He settled himself down on the floor to watch.

He suspected it was going to be a very long night.

There was several moment’s silence.

“Bastard!” Ernie said at last. “This is ridiculous! How long can he leave us like this?”
“My arms are aching already,” Padma moaned.

“Just let your arms flop,” Eloise suggested.

“But the cuffs dig in!”

There was a lot of rattling of the chains as they all attempted to find comfortable positions.

“I wish he hadn’t left that bottle,” Ernie said after a few moments of silence. “It makes me thirsty just looking at it.”

There was a muffled giggle in response.

More chain rattling.

“How come you’re so quiet, Draco?” Ernie said at last.

Silence.

“Draco?”

“For Merlin’s sake!” snapped the Slytherin. “I’m attempting to get the key to move! You might be better using your time if you tried too, instead of wittering on.”

Silence.

“But he can’t really leave us here for long, can he?” Padma said. “I mean, this is silly. And I’m sure he didn’t realise these things would hurt. Harry’s always trying to save people, not hurt them. And he knows we can’t do wandless.”

“How long do you reckon before he comes back?” Ernie asked cheerfully. “I reckon he’ll make us sweat a bit. An hour and a half, or something.”

Three hours later, the atmosphere had changed considerably. “That fucking shit!” Ernie snarled. “This is bloody ridiculous!”

The key and bottle were in exactly the same positions.

“I’m cold,” Eloise said miserably. “I wish I’d worn trousers today.”

“That’s the problem with having nice legs,” Ernie said, looking Eloise over.

“What?” she answered.

“Well, if you had big fat legs, you’d probably want to cover them up more. As your legs are nice, you want to show them off. Hence short skirt and cold legs.”

In the silence, everyone stared at Eloise’s legs, even Snape, Harry noticed, had a quick glance.

“That is the worst, sexist, -“

“Compliment?” Padma interjected.

“Huh?”
“He says your legs are nice. They are,” Padma said, looking at them critically.

“They are,” Draco agreed. “However, unless you are a contortionist and you can twist yourself up and crack these cuffs off with a pincer movement, can we concentrate on the job in hand?”

An hour later, Padma’s voice wobbled out. “Are the candles burning down? We’re not going to be in the dark, are we?”

At once, everyone was aware that the candles were guttering.

“Shit! He can’t leave us in the dark!” Ernie exploded.

“He can. He’s not scared of the dark,” Neville said quietly.

“Well bully for him!” snapped Padma, “’cos I am!”

There was a moment’s silence.

“He can’t,” Ernie said, voice troubled.

A moment later, one of the candles went out.

Padma screamed.

“Shut up!” snapped Draco. “Concentrate on the bloody key! We’ll never be able to do it in the dark!”

There was an intense silence, and the weight of concentration.

Then the other candle flickered, and gutted.

“No!” Padma didn’t scream, but a thin, reedy wail came out.

It was pitch black, a darkness that felt oppressive, pushing in on them.

“Please,” Padma whispered.

Harry steeled himself.

Padma screamed.

Chains rattled as everyone jumped.

“It’s only me! It’s only me!” Ernie shouted.

“A creature! Something!” Padma was hyperventilating.

“Calm down! I touched your fingers! I thought it might make you feel better!” Ernie shouted.

The dungeon silenced, only the sound of Padma’s gasping breaths echoing around.

“I can’t!” she said. “I can’t do this! I’m going to call Harry.”

“Look Padma, I don’t like the dark either –“ Ernie began.

“I can’t,” she whispered, “it’s pressing in on me! I can’t!”
“Don’t give the bastard the satisfaction!” Draco hissed.

“I can’t,” she cried, sobbing. “Harry!” she shouted. “Harry! Help!”

There was a silence. Had there been a pin to drop, they would have heard it. Harry curled his head into his knees. It hurt. It hurt to ignore her.

“Harry!” she shouted again, voice desperate.

A moment.

“Harry!”

“The prick’s not coming,” Draco said, surprise in his voice.

“No! Yes! He must come! Harry!” Padma shrieked.

Silence.

Padma started to sob.

“Neville?” Ernie asked. “What the hell is going on? He can’t leave us here in the dark.”

Neville took a long time to answer. Padma’s sobs punctuating the silence. “He can,” Neville said at last, his voice sounding resigned. “He’ll do what he thinks best. That’s what he does.”

“Best?” Draco snarled. “Best to leave us here with that madwoman shrieking?”

Padma sobbed louder.

“I’ve got to get out of here! He’s right, he’s right, I’m going mad!”

“Padma,” Eloise began gently, when suddenly a light flickered.

A second of silence, and then a cheer. The light flickered slightly stronger.

“He’s not abandoned us!”

The light dimmed.

Neville looked round. “Prof – Severus? That’s you, isn’t it?”

Harry looked across at Snape. He himself had been amazed, had wondered if some emergency system had kicked in.

Snape had his head leaning back against the wall; a trickle of sweat on his brow caught the light. He gave a slight nod.

“You’re doing the light wandless?” Draco exclaimed, voice excited.

Snape nodded. The light flickered.

“Holy shit!” breathed Ernie.

“Thank you! Thank you, Sir,” whispered Padma.

“Can you get the key?” Draco asked urgently.
The light went out.

“No!” Padma’s voice groaned softly.

There was a strange scraping noise.

“He’s doing it!” Ernie yelled excitedly.

Many moments passed.

And then silence.

“What’s happening?” Eloise asked tentatively.

The light flickered on again, to Padma’s relief.

The key had moved only an inch.

They all looked at it in disappointment.

Snape nodded his head towards the light.

“What? Yes. Severus, if you can keep the light going, the rest of us will keep trying, ok?”

Severus nodded. It was obviously a strain.

An hour and a half passed; spurred on by Snape’s success, the key had jerked in odd movements around the floor, but was still within inches of the bottle.

“God, I need a drink! Strong beer would be best, but I could murder for that water!” Ernie groaned.

Several pairs of eyes looked at him.

“What? It’s an expression!”

“I - “

“What?” Neville said gently, turning to Eloise.

She shook her head. “Nothing. I’m going to concentrate on moving that damn key.”

Three quarters of an hour later, the interminable rattling of Eloise’s chains was annoying everyone.

“Eloise! For god’s sake, I know your legs are cold but can’t you keep still for a minute? I can’t concentrate with that noise!” snapped Padma.

Eloise shifted, then rattled again, a moment later.

“Eli!”

“I can’t help it!” Eloise snapped back.

“Of course you can! We’re all cold,” Ernie said.

“I – I -“

“What?” Draco snarled.
“I need the loo, alright!”

There was a horrified silence.

“Oh shit,” Neville said softly. “Er, not to be offensive or anything, but – well, which sort?”

The profound embarrassment of the situation was evident in the fact that nobody even snickered.

“A wee. I need a wee,” Eloise whispered. You could hear the blush in her voice.

“Can you hold it?” Ernie asked.

“What do you think I’ve been doing for the last three hours!” Eloise snapped.

“You’ve wanted to go for three hours?” Ernie asked incredulously.

Eloise nodded.

“Blimey, I’ve wanted to go for half an hour and that feels bad enough,” Ernie said.

Eloise gave a little grin. And clenched her legs.

“Don’t make me laugh, anyone,” she warned.

“I think we’re past laughing here,” Padma said.

Fifty minutes later the key was still in the middle and Eloise was sweating and pale.

“You have to go,” Neville said suddenly.

“I can’t wet myself,” Eloise grimaced.

“You’ll be ill. You’ll do yourself a damage. I’m going to kill Harry,” he said grimly, making all eyes turn to him.

Harry’s heart lurched.

Should he end it? He was so tempted, but it was just this sort of desperation that might work. He prayed it would.

Ten minutes later Eloise looked ready to pass out. The key was jiggling but going nowhere.

“Eloise, just go,” Ernie said. “It’s only piss. We won’t look.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed.

After a couple of moments of unbearable tension, punctuated only by her sniffles, Ernie said, “Did you hear about the international convention of brewers?”

Everyone turned to look at him as if he had grown an extra head.

He stood up straight and carried on. “Yeah. The bosses of various Muggle brewing organisations had gone to the hotel bar at the end of the day’s conference. Bruce, the boss of this Australian company, shouted to the barman: ‘In 'Strylya, we make the best bladdy beer in the world, so pour me a bladdy Fosters, mate.’” Ernie did a really good Australian accent, then went on, “Bob, boss of
an American lot, calls out next: 'In the States, we brew the finest beers of the world, and I make the
King of them all, gimme a Bud.’”, changing his accent accordingly. Everyone was listening
intently. He went on, “Hans steps up next: ‘In Germany ve invented das beer, verdamt. Give me ein
Becks, ya ist der real King of beers, danke.’”

“Relation of Krum’s?” Draco inserted, to a snorted response.

Ernie picked up, “Paddy, the Guinness boss, steps forward: ‘Barman, would ya give me a doyet
coke wid ice and lemon. Tanks.’ The others stare at him in stunned silence, amazement written all
over their faces. Eventually Bruce asks: ‘Are you not going to have a Guinness, Pat?’ Paddy replies:
‘Well, if you pansies aren't drinkin', then neither am I’”.

Everyone burst out laughing. Even if they hadn't really understood the joke. The craziness of even
telling a joke in this situation, the fact that they were all thirsty, the funny voices…

As they stopped sniggering, Eloise’s quiet sobs could be heard.

Everyone looked at her.

And the puddle at her feet.

Ernie stretched his fingers out to touch her hand, but she kept hers hanging limply.

“It’s not the end of the world,” he said softly. “It isn’t.”

But Eloise continued to cry.

“Bugger it,” Ernie said. “I might as well be comfortable.”

They all stared at him, and even in the gloom saw the wet patch start on his trousers, visible
through the front of his robe, and the sound of urine trickling onto the floor.

“Aah,” he said at last. “That’s better. Nice and warm for a minute too.”

Eloise sobbed and laughed and snorted at the same time.

“Bugger this!” Draco said. He looked at the key, and concentrated. It shifted more than it had done
before.

“Hey! That’s working! Go, man, go!” Ernie shouted.

Unfortunately, several minutes later the key had only moved a foot across the floor.

“Let’s think about this,” Draco said, breathing heavily. “Has everyone been able to make it move a
bit?”

Everyone nodded.

“Okay. If we haven’t the power to do it individually, perhaps we can do it between us? We need to
plan what we’re doing – all concentrating on making it do exactly the same thing. Say the same
spell. Get it to move in the same direction.”

Twenty minutes later, the key was in Padma’s hand. Carefully, she rotated her hand and opened the
lock on Ernie’s wrist. Ernie took the key. Moments later, they were all free.

Ernie grabbed the bottle and took a sip, before passing it to Eloise.
“God, that’s the best drink I’ve ever had!”

Snape had removed the scarf, and found to his surprise that he could speak.

Harry felt that the others weren’t relying on his leadership, so now it was ok. Without speech, he might be excluded. He felt a huge sense of relief that they had all managed to escape. He hadn’t envisioned the working together, but that was good. He kept himself out of the paths of the group as they stretched their legs.

Eloise however, huddled against the wall, arms round her knees, robe pulled around her, head down.

Harry saw Snape watching her. The man appeared to make a decision. He motioned to Ernie, who was also watching Eloise, uncertain of what to do. Ernie went over. With an indrawn breath, a murmured word and a hand movement, Ernie’s and Eloise’s clothes were dry. The light barely flickered. Harry smiled. Severus was getting it.

The girl looked up at her teacher. “Thanks,” she whispered, but looked quickly away.

Snape sat himself down against the wall next to her. He was aware of the others in the room quieting.

“Eloise, I know you’re worried about what people will think of you. You feel you will never live it down. You will,” he said firmly.

Eloise buried her head further in her arm, her face hidden.

“We all have so much pride that we hate the indignity of presenting ourselves in any way that we prefer other people didn’t see us. But sometimes, circumstances are beyond our control. We all do the best we can. You do discover you can still live afterwards.”

“You don’t understand – “

“I do, Miss Midgen,” Severus said, deliberately giving her the respect of her title. He looked at her as she raised her head at his tone.

“I have been the guest of the Dark Lord. I have lain in my own piss and shit and vomit under torture, begging and screaming, with people that I had known and respected laughing at my disgrace. It isn’t easy to believe that you will ever feel human again, but someone said to me, and I took it to heart, that we all shit and piss and vomit and scream and beg; it was just the occasion that made it seem so unbearable. I was so angry when that was said to me, but, actually, it’s true. I expect everyone in here will be running to the lavatories in a minute or two when we get through that door. We are all human. There are many things in life to be ashamed of – letting down your friends, deliberately hurting people - but this, I assure you, isn’t one of them.”

Eloise looked at him, her eyes wide.

The dungeon was silent, people taking in what Snape had said. It was hard to picture the controlled man in that situation. Harry couldn’t believe he had opened his soul to comfort Eloise, but he turned and looked at the others and could see the profound effect his words were having. Draco looked gobsmacked.

And it was Draco who had responded to Eloise’s distress with action.

He hoped this was going to work out well.
Snape stood, and reached out his hand to Eloise. She tentatively took it, and let him pull her up.

Harry noted that Snape had maintained the light the whole time.

Padma came forward and hugged the other girl, and a moment later, Ernie and Neville did too. Draco looked rather horrified at this exhibition of support, but gave the girl a slight nod.

“Let’s get out of here,” he said, turning to the door.

They crowded behind him.

As he stretched his hand forward, the stupidity of expecting the key to fit dawned.

There was a huge lock.

As Draco’s hand with the minute key hovered before the gaping keyhole, reality dawned on them all.

They were still trapped.
“I don’t believe it,” Ernie groaned.

“Look around – maybe the other key is hidden somewhere,” Padma suggested.

With little other option, they all took up her suggestion, though it did not take long to look. The only things they found of any interest were that there was a tiny barred grille high up, that water dripped down one wall, and that the grate in the corner didn’t lift off.

The purpose of the grate became evident.

Two hours of trying to open the door later – including spells and physical violence - they were no further advanced. They had all used the grate, the others turning their backs, and conversations, if not already ongoing, were started to camouflage the noise and ease the embarrassment. Once they had all been, it seemed easier, somehow, as if the action had invoked a sense of camaraderie.

Neville said quietly, “I think we should stop.”

“Huh?” Ernie said.

“We’d be better to sleep and continue in the morning,” he said. “There’ll be light then; Severus can help with the magic: it must be using up loads of power to maintain the light.”

Draco turned to Severus: even in the dimness he could see how drawn the man was. He cursed himself for not having noticed before.

“I agree,” he said firmly.

The swift acquiescence of the others indicated that it was a good idea.

“Shall we keep a guard going?” Eloise asked quietly. “I’m happy to take first shift.”

They looked at each other.

Nothing could apparently get in, but they could not trust the environment.

“Why don’t we pair off and do three 2 hour shifts?” Ernie said. “We can keep each other awake, and it’ll be morning by the time we’re done. I don’t mind joining Eli on first. You need to rest, Severus.”

Padma quickly offered to pair up with Neville: the options of Snape or Draco were still rather too scary.

The sleepers spread out. The light began to flicker even as Snape settled. The floor was hard and cold. Padma began to panic.

“Severus, hold the light a second,” Neville began. Snape raised his head on his elbow.

“Can anyone else do the light?” Neville asked.

After a few tries of flickering flames, it seemed that it was too much.

“Right. I suggest we huddle up,” Neville said calmly. “Padma, I’ll snug up to you and Draco and
Severus can come behind. It’ll help us keep warm, help the two guarding know where we are, and we won’t have to worry about the light. Alright?"

Surprisingly, everyone scooted up without much objection.

Neville cautiously wrapped an arm and his robe over Padma, who had her back to him.

“Allright?” he whispered.

She nodded.

The light went out.

The chill of the dungeon seemed to eat into one’s bones.

Draco couldn’t believe how cold it was. He could feel that Severus behind him was already asleep. He wished he had on more than a silk shirt under his robe. That he wasn’t commando. That he was wearing thick long johns under his trousers and a thermal vest like Goyle wore.

He started shivering and couldn’t stop. His teeth started chattering. Noisily.

He heard rustling, felt the air move, and then Neville’s voice.

“Draco? Shift over here and snuggle up. It’s a lot warmer if you have body contact.”

It was a measure of how cold it was that Draco did so.

Harry sat in his corner watching over them, a charm enabling him to see despite the lack of light, listening to the quiet talk of Ernie and Eloise, feeling like he was intruding. Although their conversation was not particularly personal, the process of it, the quiet, the dark, was fostering a sense of intimacy between them that was almost tangible.

Just as their time was almost up, Harry, head lowered onto his arms, could hear the definite sounds of them kissing.

Well, that had been an unplanned outcome.

Ernie shook Neville awake, before moving to Padma.

Neville felt himself surface, enjoying the feeling of the bodies on either side of him. He was surprised to find Draco’s arm slung over his hip, the man snug up behind him. He lay there a moment as Padma was woken, waiting for her to move so he could roll over forward and not disturb Draco too much.

He had never slept with anyone before.

Maybe the harsh floor made the warmth and give of the human bodies feel better, but Neville couldn’t help thinking that he wished he hadn’t discovered how nice it was to be so close to others, how comforting. He suspected it would be a long time before he again found himself in another’s embrace.

Harry was interested to note that although Padma and Neville were civil, that was it. No romance
there! They didn’t talk much, both half asleep still. The two hours seemed interminable. Harry took a sip of the draught in his pocket. He couldn’t afford to fall asleep.

Draco and Severus rose without complaint, quietly and smoothly. They took turns at the grate before settling beside each other in companionable silence.

After some time, Draco said quietly, “Severus? Why did the Dark Lord torture you?”

Harry held his breath.

Snape didn’t answer for a long while, and then said, simply, “Which time?”

Draco’s head whipped round to stare at him, even though Harry knew he couldn’t see in the dark. Draco’s head dropped onto his arms.

“How! I heard he was vicious with Muggles, but with wizards?”

Snape laughed harshly. “Friend or foe, Muggle, wizard or squib, makes no difference.”

“Then I don’t understand how he has so many followers,” Draco interjected.

Snape was quiet.

“How is a great motivator,” he said at last.

“But why did you join him?” Draco asked.

Snape sighed. “Because I was a teenager who thought he knew more that he did; because he was charismatic then; because I thought what he said made sense.”

“And now?”

Snape was silent.

“What are you asking me, Draco?” he said heavily. “You want to know whether you should join him? Decide whether you believe in what he stands for. Then decide whether you believe the end justifies the means. Then decide. You have enough moral stature to make your own judgements; you can’t survive if you base your actions on what you believe people want you to do: you can only ever have any sense of justification if you believe yourself.”

A long period of silence ensued.

“What do you think of what Potter said?” Draco whispered.

“How nugget of wisdom are you referring to?” Snape drawled.

Harry almost snorted. He loved Snape’s sense of humour. How had he come to enjoy the man snarking?

“How us being powerful and deciding whether we wanted to serve someone less than ourselves?”

Snape sounded very weary, Harry thought.

“There’s nothing wrong about working for someone with less power than you,” was Snape’s surprising answer. “They may have all sorts of other qualities you don’t possess. Drive, ambition, motivation. On the other hand, I believe he is right in that more power gives you more choice on
deciding how to act.”

“Do you think he’s right? That Voldemort draws power through the Dark Mark?”

Harry waited, breathless, for the answer.

“I have been paying particular attention to it since Mr Potter said that,” Severus said. “I believe he is correct.”

Even in the gloom Harry could detect the look of horror on Draco’s face, though he said nothing.

“It is ingenious, is it not?” Snape said.

Draco was silent, then said, curious, “You don’t mind? Were you told before you got the Mark?”

Snape made a weird sound. “I had no idea until Potter mentioned it.”

“But – whatever one’s beliefs, “ Draco said cautiously, “doesn’t it feel like a - a violation? For it to be taken without your permission.”

Another silence. Draco wondered if he had gone too far. Would Snape report on his disgust to Voldemort?

“The Dark Lord has been known to violate people on many occasions,” Snape answered at last. “You have to decide whether one’s initial choice to join is permission for all that follows, or not.”

Draco gasped.

One of the sleepers tried to turn over, and thought better of it.

“His followers? Not just Muggles?”

“Draco, he made one of his followers wear him on the back of his head for months. What do you think?”

“But – sexual? He rapes his women followers?” Draco was having horrid thoughts. He had always been surprised at his mother’s reluctance to have Voldemort in the manor – surely Voldemort hadn’t – couldn’t have –

“You think he would only discipline women?” Snape jeered, sotto voce. “Rape is about control, Draco. Most of his followers are men.”

Draco took this in. Surely not - ?

“You would be wise to refrain from asking the question that is on the tip of your tongue,” Snape said.

Draco gulped.

Harry’s heart was breaking.

There was silence for a long time. At last, Severus looked up.

“Dawn,” he said quietly, observing the now grey square that was the window high up on the wall.

“Should we wake them?” Draco asked.
“Give them half an hour. Then it might be light enough to be useful.”

They sat quietly.

Eventually, their fellows were roused.

“All water left?” Ernie asked. “My mouth tastes of mouldy fur.”

Padma took up the bottle; there was only an inch in the bottom. “Just a tiny sip each, then,” she said.

They all carefully moistened their mouths, making sure there was enough for everyone. No one needed the grate. Their bodies were dehydrating.

“Well, I’m cold, stiff, miserable, thirsty and starving,” Ernie said. “Can we get out of here so I can hit that bastard? Not even a drop of water! I bet he’s been fucking someone all night and forgotten about us!”

“Who?” Padma asked with interest.

Harry was interested too.

“Madam Hooch,” Ernie said cheerfully. “She’d give him a good ride. Maybe they do it on a broomstick!”

There was laughter. “An interesting idea, but Potter said he was a nancy,” Draco drawled.

*So’s your bloody father*, Harry thought angrily. *And you know Severus is!*

As if realising this at the same time, Draco turned round, an apology on his face, but Severus just gave an infinitesimal shake of his head. His sexual preference might be known to the son of his old lover, but he had no intention of being classroom gossip.

“I think this conversation is rather pointless,” he said, in best teacher voice. “I have not the slightest interest in Mr Potter’s love life, apart from the wish to make him incapable of it for the next 50 years or so.”

Amidst the laughter, Harry hoped very much that that was a wish that wouldn’t come true.

“Let us look at this door now that we can see it properly.”

After an hour, no progress had been made. Tummies were rumbling noisily.

Neville had spent the last five minutes in the corner.

“Nev, what are you doing?” Padma asked. “Aren’t you interested in getting out?”

The comment turned all eyes to him, as a relief from staring and spell-casting at the immovable door.

Neville did a last couple of waves of his hand, muttering a few words.

“There are mushroom spores over here,” he said. “Thought I’d see if I could speed up the growth so we can have some breakfast.”
Draco opened his mouth to mock and snapped it shut again. He was starving.

“I know they’re not that nutritious but they’ll take the edge off,” Neville explained apologetically.

“Neville, I think you’re brilliant!” Eloise smiled. “Are you sure they’re not poisonous?” she added.

Neville laughed. “No, I know my mushrooms,” he grinned.

The whole group stood and watched as the mushrooms bloomed to life at their feet. Soon, they were all munching their way through a handful each, and afterwards, their spirits had lifted considerably.

Neville himself bloomed under the thanks.

They went back to the door.

“The spells on it are weird, aren’t they?” Padma said.

Snape looked at her.

“In what way ‘weird’? How do you know? Do you see them, or -?” Snape invited Padma to explain.

“Oh, I can see them, when I concentrate,” she said. “Can’t everyone?”

There was a silence.

“No, Padma,” Ernie said.

“I think you’ve found your talent,” Snape said quietly.

“But I’ve always been able to see spells,” Padma argued.

“It’s really uncommon,” Eloise offered. “Can you use it to help us get out?”

Padma studied the door. “Frankly,” she said at last, “it’s so heavily guarded it would be easier to blast through the wall.”

They all looked at each other.

“Well done, Padma! Some innovative thinking at last!” Neville said.

“What? I was joking!”

“Well, it’s the best idea so far. What spell shall we use?” he said, looking round.

“Everta?” Draco said, looking at Severus.

The older man nodded.

“Okay. Everyone, let’s concentrate the spell in one area so we can make sure we achieve something,” Draco said, pointing at a spot on the wall. “Once we break through we can do the spell again or physically knock it out.”

Two minutes later, they were wiping the dust from their eyes; Harry grinned. Desperation had worked: there was the most enormous hole in the wall.
“Well shit!” Ernie said. “We could have done that last night!”

“It’s a good lesson not to look for the obvious in this place,” Draco said seriously. “Shall I go first? I’d offer the ladies, but it might be dangerous…”

“I’d say that was sexist, but I’m very happy to follow you,” Eloise grinned.

Draco hauled himself up and climbed over the mound of fallen rubble, gripping on as stones shifted underfoot.

“Oh fuck!”

“Is it safe?”

“As far as I can see. Come through.”

“Bugger!” Ernie said, moments later.

Through the haze of stone dust, they stared up and down a corridor. Dark wood doors lined both sides, and cut off each end.

“Why am I getting a bad feeling about this?” Ernie said.

“Cos your instincts are good?” Neville responded, shoving his hands into his trouser pockets.

“Do we go all together or split up?” Eloise asked.

“I suggest sticking together,” Snape said calmly. “At least until we get some idea of what is behind those doors.”

“Does anyone recognise this place?” Ernie asked.

“It reminds me of the Ministry of Magic,” Neville said.

“You’ve been to the Ministry of Magic?” Padma asked.

“In fifth year. Harry was there,” Neville answered.

Draco looked at him sharply. “Do you think this is another construct? No, it couldn’t be! It’s been hours – we’re all experiencing it –“

“Look for anything odd. Don’t open the doors yet,” Neville said firmly.

They walked up and down the corridor, feeling, looking, touching.

“It feels real enough,” Padma said finally.

“So did the forest,” Eloise replied.

“Does it make a difference even if it is a construct?” Draco said slowly.

“What do you mean?” Eloise asked.

“Even if it is, it didn’t just break when we mentioned it. So if it is, Potter wants us to be here. He’s not letting us out until we’ve done whatever it is he wants of us.”

“We could try apparating out,” Neville suggested.
“I haven’t taken my licence yet,” Padma shook her head

“Nor me or any of us except Severus, I expect, “ Draco commented. “That wasn’t the question. Can you do it?”

Ernie, Padma and Eloise shook their heads.

“We could take them, side-along.” Neville offered, looking at Draco and Snape.

Draco sneered. “Yeah right! Like you’ve the practice to do that!”

“I could take one,” Neville said firmly.

“Without your sodding wand? Are you mad?”

“I’m pretty confident I could,” Neville said calmly, “but if we all can’t, and I don’t know how to get back, then let’s give it a miss for now. Freedom might be behind one of these doors for all we know.”

Draco stared at Neville as if seeing him for the first time. Gone was the trembling tubby teenager of the past. Here stood a calm, cool young man. Built, thought Draco, remembering the disconcerting feel of Neville’s muscular back against his chest and belly. He was not particularly good looking, but his eyes were – strong – Draco thought in surprise.

“Lets do it,” he said. “Ends first?”

They all followed him as he strode to the nearest end door, and flung it open.

There was an empty room.

Dusty floorboards, no window, no furniture, no fireplace.

They crowded in.

“Don’t let the door shut!” Draco commanded.

They felt over the walls, but there appeared to be no hidden panels.

“Let’s try another,” Eloise suggested.

They filed out.

Snape pulled a piece of chalk from his robe and marked a large cross on the door.

They moved to the next.

Another empty room, just like the first.

The next was the same.

And the next.

Snape marked them all.

Ernie flung open the next door.

And yelled, stumbling back.
He fell on his arse on the floor, as the air swarmed with black creatures. Hundreds, thousands of them.

“Bats!” Neville exclaimed.

Padma was screeching, Ernie was cowering on the floor, and the others were trying to fend them off. The creatures had nowhere to go in the corridor, and were whirling and zooming around, getting more and more agitated.

“Sopor!” Eloise shouted. The bats crashed to the floor, soft thuds sounding as they hit the wood.

“Merlin! Well done!” Neville hugged Eloise briefly around the shoulders.

“Ernie?” she asked.

Ernie peeked out of his huddled form.

He stood up cautiously, shoving a clump of bats to the side with his foot and shuddering.

“Sorry,” he whispered, looking away. “I’ve got a thing about bats.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Neville said.

“Great spell; how long do you think it will last?” Padma asked, stepping carefully into the spaces between the bodies.

Ernie’s head whipped back. “Oh god!”

Snape took a handkerchief out of his pocket, and turned it into a large crate. He pointed at the nearest clump of bats, which rose up and plopped into the box. The others watched.

“Some assistance would speed things along,” he said, the snark back in his voice.

The others hurried to help. Even Ernie.

Harry was delighted to see that they were all able to shift at least several bats at a time. Yesterday they had not been able to lift a key.

Snape closed the lid.

“Let’s take a look in that room. They must have some way of getting in.”

It was true, but unfortunately it appeared to be merely a missing brick high up on the wall.

“Who’s opening the next door?” Ernie said nervously.

“Me,” Draco said, moving to the next door. He waited till the others were behind him, and opened it.

“Blank,” he said, stepping into the room. Then, urgently, “Run!”

There was a growl, a flurry of movement and colour. Draco was trying to pull the door shut. The paw of a tiger raked around the edge, the claws slicing down his hand.

“Shit!” He let go of the door. “Oh shit!”

The others were in the corridor trying to get into the marked rooms.
The doors wouldn’t open. They all turned round, backed against the wall. The tiger was prowling across the floor at the far end, never taking his eyes from them, wending closer with each move.

“Sopor!” Eloise shouted again. The tiger shook his head, as if a fly had bothered him.

“All together!” she whispered urgently.

The tiger stumbled, and began to sink to its knees.

“It’s working!”

“Oh hell!” Ernie gasped, as another tiger stepped around the door.

Neville reached into his pocket, and threw a handful of seeds across the floor ahead of them.

“Tigers don’t eat sodding grain!” Draco hissed.

But Neville was on his knees, his arms outstretched.

“Holy shit!” Ernie whispered.

Already, the seeds had germinated. They could see them sinking their roots into the wooden floor. Shoots and leaves were appearing.

The tigers prowled towards them. A third had appeared.

“Hold the tigers!” Draco shouted, “keep going with Sopor!”

The tigers looked dazed, stumbling around.

The bamboo was growing and growing. Soon it hit the ceiling, and kept going, pushing through the plaster. It was so dense that it wasn’t possible to see the tigers any more; the stems were thicker than a fist.

Neville suddenly collapsed, falling forward onto his face.

Draco dropped the spell and knelt beside him, turning him over.

Neville’s face was white, his eyes rolled up.

Snape knelt on the other side, and dropped his head to Neville’s chest.

“His heart sounds alright,” he said a moment later.

“What is it?” Eloise whispered.

Draco acted on instinct. He opened Neville’s shirt and put his hand on his chest, shut his eyes, and felt.

He didn’t know what he was feeling for, only that he needed to do this.

He let his mind sink – that’s what it felt like – as if his mind had sunk into Neville’s body. He could feel the blood pumping; and he could feel a sort of groaning. He concentrated on it, then knew what it was. With barely a moment’s hesitation, he acted.

Moments later, he withdrew his hand; his head dropped forward, his hands on his thighs, his breath coming in deep pants.
“He’s coming round,” Snape said quietly to Draco.

Draco looked up at Snape, then down at Neville. The sooty eyelashes fluttered.

Neville’s eyes opened. He looked at Snape, and then across to Draco. His eyes widened.

“You’re a Healer?” he whispered.

Draco heard the gasps behind him.

“I’ve had a Healer before. Tried to mend my brain. Thought it was fried the night my parents –” he halted, then restarted. “She didn’t do any good, but I know how it feels. I could feel that, Draco. Congratulations,” he smiled shyly. “And - thanks.”

The others offered congratulations too. Draco blushed, a thing he was sure he had never done before. But true healing was a very rare talent. He knew without a doubt that he had it, from the moment he had sunk into Neville’s chest. He had even voluntarily given Neville some of his own magic, as Neville had used a huge amount creating the bamboo barrier so quickly.

“That’s it!” Eloise said. “I have had enough of this! Draco, your own hand is still bleeding,” she added.

Neville sat up, taking hold of Draco’s hand.

“Lie still,” Draco admonished him. “Do you know how dangerous it was to use so much magic all at once?” He ignored the feeling in his stomach as Neville turned his hand to look at the wound. He did not fancy Neville Longbottom! He did not fancy men! His magical change was upsetting his internal balance, that was all. Perhaps healing required an equal empathy with both sexes. He needed to research.

Eloise, meanwhile, stood between the two doors on the right that were behind the bamboo and that weren’t marked with chalk.

“Harry Potter!” she called out. “If the exit is not behind one of these doors I am personally going to castrate you! Now open the fucking door!”

Several moments passed.

And then the lock on the left hand door clicked.

Snape strode forward and pushed the door open cautiously.

Harry Potter sat at a table resplendent with food. It was set up in their normal classroom.

“Brunch,” he invited.

Draco helped Neville up, and the group crowded in.

Ernie strode up to Harry.

And punched him in the face.

Harry fell off the chair.

“You utter bastard!” Ernie hissed.
Harry stood up, rubbing his cheek.

“What in particular has got your goat, Ernie?” he asked, setting the chair straight and standing beside it.

“What in particular...? How about – look at the state of Neville? And Draco’s hand? And leaving us in a dungeon overnight without food or water? Or not bothering to respond to your monitoring charms! Did you even bother to set one? You utter prick! I quit!”

Harry looked at him, and the rest of the group.

“Sit. Eat. You won’t be going anywhere until you do. I’ll answer then.”

The food smelled incredible.

“Is this another trick?” Padma said quietly.

“No tricks,” Harry shook his head. “The session is over. This is just the debrief, and then you can go back and sleep.”

Quietly, the atmosphere charged, they sat down.

Once Harry was sure they had all had something to eat and drink, he spoke. “I appreciate your anger.”

Draco snorted.

“I had hoped we wouldn’t have to resort to this. But it’s been nearly a term and I promised you wandless magic. In the last 18 hours, you’ve all achieved that,” he looked around at them all. “Some of you with more strength than others: that doesn’t matter. Now you’ve got it, you can build on it. You’ll never need to feel helpless again,” he added.

It was true. They had somehow taken the enormity of this achievement for granted in the pursuit of freedom.

“On top of that, we’ve achieved much more than I expected. Severus and Neville, I believe, have gained enormous power in their magic.”

“I wasn’t able to stave off the tigers,” Severus interjected.

“I’d made them almost impervious. I assure you, you did well. A normal creature would have been out for the count.”

He looked around the table, seeing the slow pleasure of this realisation sinking in.

“Padma, you discovered that you’ve had a gift for ages without even realising it; you need to work on that now. Draco. A Healer! Congratulations!”

“And me?” Ernie said belligerently. “And Eli?”

Harry looked at them. “I believe your outcome was entirely unexpected,” he said quietly. “Do you regret what has happened in your life since yesterday?”

Ernie and Eloise looked at each other. Ernie reached his hand tentatively across the table.

“I don’t,” Eloise said quietly, “though I did not appreciate wetting myself in public.” She turned
stern eyes on Harry.

“I’m sorry for that,” Harry nodded, “but it was actually that that led everyone to work together and helped you all gain wandless. Sometimes the most horrible things have valuable outcomes.”

Draco looked at him carefully. “The same thing might be said of the Dark Lord.”

Harry remembered Severus’ conversation with Draco in the middle of the night, and cursed his choice of words.

“There are differences,” he said quietly. “Firstly, I hadn’t planned it with the intent of humiliating anyone. Secondly, the outcome is to your own personal benefit, rather than to anyone else.”

“But you admit that you want us to fight on your side.”

“I’d be honoured to have any of you on my side,” Harry said quietly, “but the decision must be yours.”

“You’re such a bastard! You left us to it! How can you expect us to fight with you if you lie to us, let us down?” Ernie attacked.

“He didn’t,” Neville said quietly.

“What?”

“He didn’t leave us to it; or lie, or let us down.”

“He didn’t sodding come even when Padma called!” Ernie almost shouted.

“He was there. All the time,” Neville said.

“What?”

Faces moved from Neville’s to Harry’s and back again, like a tennis match.

“He told you he was there and you believed him?”

“He didn’t say anything. I could feel his magical signature.”

“You could feel me?” Harry said, truly shocked.

Neville nodded.

“I have never heard of anyone having such a skill before,” Snape said, looking with interest at Neville.

“You knew he was there and never said anything?” Padma turned on Neville.

“If he’d wanted us to know he would have said. I accidentally knew. It might have spoiled his plans to say so.”

“Damn. You’re both bastards,” Ernie said, but his tone was a lot less aggressive and more accepting.

Severus stood up. “Mr Potter, if the debrief is over I have other places to be.”

Harry stood too and fished out all their wands from his pocket, and handed Severus’ over, passing
the others around, before walking to the door with him, moving out into the corridor.

Severus looked around, affirming that he was indeed in the castle.

“Severus,” Harry said quietly. “Now that you have come fully into your powers, the Dark Lord may sense it. I’m loathe for him to have access to it. We need to find a way to block the connection, if you will allow it.”

Severus nodded. “There is one – I looked it up many years back. It requires a wizard of great power. I would be grateful for your assistance.”

Relieved, Harry nodded. “We should both be rested by Monday. May I visit you in the evening?”

“It will be safest if you flooed directly into my chambers. I will send you the direction. I change the code daily,” Severus explained, then inclined his head and swept away.

Harry watched him go, his heart delighted for the man.

Back at the table, the hostility seemed to have dissipated, and an argument was going on about whether the experience had been a construct, whether they had apparated, been portkeyed or what.

“Well?” Draco asked.

“You’ve been here the whole time,” Harry answered, pouring himself a fresh cup of tea.

“In the castle?” Padma queried. “How come Severus didn’t recognise the dungeon?”

“In this room,” Harry corrected. “Though I did apparate you six inches or so just to confuse things a bit.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Draco whispered. “We could barely light a candle. Mostly couldn’t. It’s not possible to hold a construct for all that time.”

Harry helped himself to buttered toast, and spread it thickly with marmalade.

“Even a mage couldn’t do that!” Ernie laughed.

Harry munched.

“Oh my god,” Draco whispered.

“What?” Eloise looked at Draco, who was as white as a sheet. “Are you ill, Draco?” she asked anxiously.

“You are, aren’t you?” Draco whispered.

“What?” Harry said.

“A mage.”

“Yes,” Harry said, and took another mouthful of tea.

“There hasn’t been a mage in centuries,” Ernie gasped.

Neville slipped out of his chair onto his knee, crossing his hands. Padma and Draco followed.

“No!” Harry bellowed. “No,” he said more quietly.
All three stayed there. Ernie and Eloise looked on with their mouths open.

“Look,” Harry said firmly. “I know this is tradition. I’m not a very traditional person. However, if you want to offer me allegiance, or to show your respect, I will accept it. But not as a duty. Not as something just done. If you mean it, come to me in your own time. Not now, not in front of others, not when it creates a pressure to conform. Please get up.”

They did, but stood there, staring at him, shuffling awkwardly.

“Thank you,” Harry said quietly. “Now, I suggest you all get some sleep. You’ve all been let off homework for the weekend, if you want to avoid it. You’ll probably find you’re really tired: I was when I first started using wandless. It uses your own energy, so sleep and eat, okay?”

Ernie and Eloise stood up too.

“Why haven’t you told people?” Draco asked.

“Why would I?”

“Because they’d follow you!”

“Draco, people need to follow me because they think what I’m doing is right, not because I’m powerful. I don’t want anyone informed,” he said firmly.

Draco shook his head, as if shaking the disbelief out of it.

Harry smiled, said well done to them all, and apparated to his cottage.
Allegiances

Harry floo-called Dumbledore to let him know that the students were fine and back in their dorms, probably, and that the session had been successful. He promised to give Dumbledore a fuller report the next day, but needed to sleep.

Harry was shaking with exhaustion, and drank another cup of tea and ate some chocolate before climbing into the shower. The hot water soothed the aches in his muscles and loosened the tension that he hadn’t realised had been knotting him up. He had barely got out of the shower before the door-bell rang.

Wrapping a towel around his waist, he flicked his glamour into place and opened the door to a harassed looking Severus.

Harry noticed that Severus couldn’t stop his eyes doing a once over down his naked and dripping chest before he stepped into the cottage.

“I’m so sorry I didn’t turn up last night –”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t in –”

They both stopped, and then slowly grinned.

Severus leant forward, his head on Harry’s shoulder. Harry held him.

Severus licked up a drop of water, sending shivers down Harry’s spine.

“You need to get dry,” Severus whispered, his nose nuzzling into Harry’s neck. Harry loved it, but his body was exhausted.

“I’ve just got back. Had to work extra. I’m so knackered,” he responded, rubbing his cheek against Severus’ head. He didn’t know how Severus was still standing. He had been out for the count for nearly 24 hours after the first time he had really had a go with wandless magic.

Severus stood back and looked at him. “I’m tired myself. I just wanted you to know that I would have come if I could. I’ll let you get some sleep.”

Harry could hear that Severus had mistaken his meaning. He thought he was being dismissed.

Harry slid his hand down his lover’s cheek. “I do need to sleep. Want to join me?” he asked.

Severus’ eyes warmed. “Sure?”

“Definitely. I’d better warn you that I’m going to be out for the count in about 5 seconds flat, though.”

Severus smiled. “Suits me.”

Severus helped dry Harry, and within minutes, they were in bed, Severus’ arms wrapped around Harry, Harry with his back to Severus’ chest.

“So good,” Harry whispered, as he began to drift off.

Severus’ arms tightened.
They slept.

Draco woke late the next morning, having been dead to the world for nearly 18 hours solid. He lay on his back, looking up at the carved canopy of his four poster. There were satyrs and nymphs running riot over it. Really, it was a rather outrageous bed for a school, he thought.

He knew without a doubt that his life had changed completely in one weekend.

He was a Healer! He, Draco Malfoy, was a Healer, one of the rarest sorts of wizards in existence. He couldn’t believe it! Yet he knew, deep within him, that it was true. He could feel it. He remembered the feeling of sinking into Neville’s body, feeling what was happening in it, understanding it, his whole person awash with this other life. Neville was throbbing with magic. Even though he had dissipated his reserves, , Draco could feel the hole the working had left behind in the creative power coursing through Neville. Neville’s magic was all about creating, developing, enhancing. He wondered how other people felt. He would have to apprentice to someone. There were few true Healers, so that accepting a gifted person as an apprentice was almost a duty. He had never met a Healer himself – never been that ill, or known anyone that was.

What would his parents think? He would be revered in society – his parents would like that. His mother would be delighted. His father? Lucius would like the rank. But he was, Draco had to admit, a terrible snob. How would he feel about Draco working with all and any sort of wizard, as would be his duty. Even Mudbloods. How did Draco feel?

He folded his arms behind his head and snuggled back into his pillows and thought about it. It would be interesting, at least, to see if their magic felt different to that of purebloods. He was surprised to find that he did not find the idea repulsive. Harry Potter, after all, was not a pure blood – though of course both his parents had magic.

Harry bloody Potter.

Harry amazing Potter.

Harry sodding Potter who had led him to his magic. Who had generously and without prejudice helped Draco Malfoy, who had been a bastard to him for years, to not only achieve wandless magic but to find he was a Healer.

Harry damn Potter who had told him he was powerful.

He hadn’t believed him.

What else was Potter right about?

Harry Mage Potter.

Who unbelievably had not told a soul, had not sought the recognition and honour that was his due.

Harry Potter who had instead chosen to help others find their magic. Had not bullied them into it by telling them he was a mage. Had just encouraged. And then resorted to extremely underhand means.

Unbelievable!
Draco laughed aloud.

Harry Gryffindor Potter locking them up in a dungeon.

Starving them.

Setting wild beasts on them.

He could like a man like that.

So, Potter had said when they had their power it was up to them whether they gave it to the Dark Lord. Severus had confirmed that the Dark Lord was siphoning off his power.

Was he willing to give up his? For what? To please his father? Severus? Severus certainly wasn’t pushing him to make a choice, but then maybe he was being particularly Slytherin about it. Did he believe in what the Dark Lord said? That purebloods were better than Mudbloods? Harry Potter was a bloody mage! That turned the notion of pureblood supremacy on its head. Granger was the cleverest witch in school, and she had no magical ancestry whatsoever. If rumour were true, Voldemort was a Mudblood, which made a nonsense of his position.

And as for Muggles: well, wizards and witches were clearly superior. But then nobody in society denied that! It was what to do about them wherein the difference lay. And frankly, there were millions of them and they bred like rodents. An eradication programme really seemed pointless. They would always come back. And so what if they did? They had never prevented Draco from doing anything he wanted.

So. Was he willing to give his power to the Dark Lord?

No fucking way!

Harry sat, naked, straddling Severus’ lap, on a chair in the kitchen. The late morning sunlight was pouring through the window, gilding his flesh.

“God!” he groaned.

Severus, shirtless, his trousers open, his hand encasing both their cocks, was firmly and slowly pumping them both.

Harry shifted his arse closer, stretching his chest, inviting Severus’ touch.

The older man chuckled, and leant forward to swipe his tongue over Harry’s nipples. They were incredibly sensitive. They had already made love twice, having woken the previous evening to snack and touch, and Severus had woken him that morning with his mouth around his cock and his nipples being harshly pinched – just the way he loved.

Harry had showered and come into the kitchen to the smell of Severus frying bacon and mushrooms. They had eaten the food packed into fresh bread, drunk more tea, and then, the next minute, Severus had magicked off his clothes – using his wand, Harry noticed – and had him hard and horny in seconds.

Harry felt the disturbance in his wards but somehow the idea never reached his brain.

The next minute Neville popped his head around the door.
"Morning, Alex! I just – oh shit! Sorry!"

The door slammed shut.

"Longbottom," Severus ground out, not stopping.

"Probably come to do my garden," Harry hissed. He was so close.

"Come," Snape whispered into his neck, biting the tendon.

Harry moaned, and did.

Snape too.

Catching their breaths moments later, Harry said, “Oh shit. Neville just got an eyeful.” He looked hard at Snape. “I’m so sorry –"

“Your wards allow him in?”

“Yes, he comes whenever he can get the odd moment to look over the plants he’s put in, as well as his regular hours.”

“You allow him access into the house?”

“Downstairs, and up to the loo. So he can get himself a drink and a biscuit, wash up when he’s muddy.”

“Unfortunate.”

“I’m really sorry – "

“He already knew we were in a relationship. So it is just the visuals that one must regret.”

Harry nodded. “He’s growing some plants for you.”

“Here?” Severus asked in surprise, cleaning them up with a wave of his wand.

“Mmmn. I asked him to put in some standard potions’ herbs and anything rarer he thought you might be interested in.”

“I must go and see,” Severus said, lifting Harry from his lap.

“Do you want me to speak to him first?” Harry suggested. “He’s my employee. He’s probably more embarrassed than you.”

“No. I’m his professor, and that’s where the embarrassment lies. I’ll head out. Make us some tea.”

Harry dressed while the kettle boiled, made three cups of tea and took them outside. Severus and Neville were crouched over Neville’s special herb area.

“Alex! Can you believe Mr Longbottom is cultivating a fibrium nervatosina? In your garden? I didn’t believe they grew outside of China! And there’s a spindificus aroratea under your kitchen window. I thought I must be seeing things!”

Severus’ delight was palpable. He chatted on, quizzing Neville.

“Where on earth did you get the spindificus?” he asked.
“Oh, a friend of my uncle’s knew someone in China,” Neville said calmly.

“And he just sent it to you?”

“No, I went to talk to him about it, and he was really helpful.”

Severus paused, looked hard at Neville, and then obviously decided to terminate the conversation.

“I’d better go and shower; I should be getting back to school. Please accept my apologies once again, Mr Longbottom.”

“No worries,” Neville said, fishing his clippers out and removing a couple of strategic shoots.

Severus gave Harry a peck on the cheek, and walked back up the path into the house.

“I’m sorry you had to see that,” Harry said quietly.

“He doesn’t know, does he?” Neville said, his voice harsh.

“What?”

“You haven’t told him who you are, Harry. How could you do that to him?”

Harry’s mouth opened and shut like a fish.

“You know?”

“Of course I know. I’ve always known. I assumed you had a reason for not telling me, but how you can have the nerve to string Professor Snape along -! He’s going to kill you! Why, Harry?”

Harry sighed. “We met just before term started. I’d been like this all summer – in this face. And it was incredible. He was funny. And so hot,” Harry blushed.

Neville blushed too. “Yeah, but to start a relationship without telling him –”

“We started it that night,” Harry admitted.

“Whoa! Man whore!” Neville teased.

“Yeah, yeah,” Harry’s face was even redder. “The thing is, it was great, Nev. Wonderful. I didn’t really think before that first night. And afterwards, I didn’t want to give it up.”

“But if he’d known – the mage thing – maybe –”

Harry shook his head. “I know he’s always despised Harry Potter, though it has got better, in the classes, hasn’t it?” he asked, wondering if Neville felt so too.

“Sure, so why - ?”

“Because at the beginning, I didn’t know that. And Harry Potter had to make sure Professor Snape got his full magic. I couldn’t risk that. And if he’d known I’d - I’d tricked him – he would’ve just walked out. Wouldn’t he?”

Neville rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re right, of course. But – hell, Harry, you are so deep in the shit right now!”

“Yeah, I know.”
“You have to tell him now, right? He’s got his magic.”

“I’m going to cut off Voldemort’s access through the mark on Monday – tomorrow,” he corrected, realising that the rest of Saturday had disappeared in sleep. “I need to do that first.”

Neville nodded. “I can’t imagine how you’re going to tell him,” he stared at Harry.

“Neither can I,” Harry said glumly. He had been putting off thinking about it – cut it out entirely from his mind. But by this time next week Snape would know. He had to have told him. How was Snape going to react? Well, that was pretty obvious, he thought. More to the point, how could he make it alright? Lessen the damage?

“Alex?”

Snape was at the back door.

“I’m afraid I’d better get back.”

Harry walked up the path, slipped in past Snape, pulling him with him, and shut the door. Then he took the man into his arms and kissed him for all he was worth, as if he could imprint all his care, his feelings, in that kiss.

“Mmmm,” Snape whispered as they came up for air. “What did I do to deserve that?”

Harry shook his head, and buried his face in Snape’s neck, inhaling his scent. “Just going to miss you,” Harry said, holding him tight.

“I’ll see you Wednesday?” Snape asked.

“Next weekend,” Harry said. “I can’t make Wednesday.” He needed to be sure that they had controlled the link. He couldn’t face seeing Snape again until he could tell him. He had no excuse now.

Snape kissed him slowly, sweetly. “I’ll be here.”

Harry nodded, and let him go.

The next morning, Harry was just about to leave his chamber at Hogwarts when there was a knock. Tying his tie, he opened the door to find Neville outside.

“Got a tie, Harry?”

“Sure. Come in,” Harry asked, wondering what was up.

“I hope you had no doubts I wanted to do this properly on Saturday,” Neville said, dropping to his knees.

Harry blanched.

“Neville –”

“You promised. Gran would be proud to know I had done this properly. She’ll ask when it comes out, Harry, and it will.”
Harry took a deep breath and nodded.

The door burst open, and Ron stuck his head round.

“You ready, Harry? Neville? What the hell are you doing? Not giving Harry a blow job, are you?” he asked in sudden horror.

Neville gave him a look and then turned back. He looked up at Harry. Ron should know. Harry understood the silent communication, and nodded.

Neville crossed his hands over his chest. “Mage, it is my honour to seek your wisdom, to shelter in your care, to –”

“What the hell? That isn’t funny, Neville!” Ron said angrily.

Both Harry and Neville just looked at him.

“Oh, holy cowbells! You are?” he breathed, his eyes going round as his brows shot up.

Harry nodded.

“Bastard. You didn’t tell me?” he asked, but his voice wasn’t angry, Harry thought with relief. Ron dropped onto his knees beside Neville. “You’re not stopping me doing this for all the brooms in Quality Quidditch Supplies!” he warned.

Harry smiled, and put his hand on Ron’s shoulder, then put the other on Neville’s.

They both crossed their hands over their chests and started again.

“Mage, it is my honour to seek your wisdom, to shelter in your care, to offer you my allegiance, and to do your bidding,” they both said together, Ron looking to Neville to remind him of the words most purebloods learnt through the tale of Arafin the Mage, a popular childhood story.

Harry said, "I know that’s the tradition, but I’d like you to take note of the first part, and therefore agree to amend the end."

They looked at him, their mind’s going over the first bit. “What’s that, then, Harry?” Ron asked quietly.

“Not to do my bidding, but to ‘consider doing my bidding if I think it right and just’,” Harry said. “The other is just ridiculous. No man nor mage should expect blind obedience, nor offer it either. Please?”

“Mage, it is my honour to seek your wisdom, to shelter in your care, to offer you my allegiance, and to consider doing your bidding if I think it right and just,” they both intoned together, voices sturdier this time.

Harry felt very relieved. “Thank you both,” he grinned.

They were both getting up when the door opened again. Hermione stuck her head round this time. She quickly assessed that something odd was happening.

“What’s going on?”

“Harry’s a mage!” Ron chirped, a smile from ear to ear.
“And it’s a secret,” Harry said. “Not from you, of course, ‘Mione,” he added.


“Sorry, Ron. I can’t risk it getting out. Secret weapon against Voldie.”

“‘Bloody hell, it is!’ Ron beamed. “He is so dead! Shit, I can’t believe this and I can! Why didn’t you say? Where’s your other wand, then?”

“Too many questions, too much hunger. Can we do this later? Only I’m starving,” Harry said, “and breakfast is nearly over.”

“Anything else we should know? So we don’t say anything we shouldn’t?” Hermione asked.

“Does anyone else know?”

“Dumbledore. Madam Pomfrey. And the class – I suppose I’d better tell you who they are, though I’ll need to impose the secrecy spell on you?”

Both nodded, and Harry popped the spell in place.

“There’s Nev, Padma, Ernie, Eloise Midgin, Draco Malfoy – but Severus – Professor Snape - doesn’t know yet. He was out of the room. The others can’t tell secrets from the class anyway, but it probably helps if you know they know.”

“Draco Malfoy? You told Draco Malfoy before me?” Ron said, his expression gutted.

Neville was jerking his head, but didn’t appear able to speak.

Harry realised the problem, and the next moment, Neville could speak.

“Thanks,” he grinned at Harry. At the curiosity on the other two’s faces, he added, “As Harry just said, he made it so none of us could say anything that happened in that classroom, to protect each other. Right, now you’ve taken it off, I can say a bit more?” he asked Harry.

“Only if you’re quick,” Harry rubbed his growling stomach, “wandless uses loads of energy and I’m still filling up.”

“Okay, Harry did a big – huge, really, mega – magic working at the weekend. And at the end, Draco guessed that Harry was a mage. He’s never said, even though he’s shown us amazing stuff before, but he didn’t deny it. Like I say, no one can tell from the class, so the info’s safe.”

“And please can we eat now?” Harry groaned.

They were already heading to the door and down the stairs.

“I have so much to ask you, mate,” Ron said.

“I’m making a list. In my head,” Hermione hastened to add.

“We’ll talk later, yeah?” Harry offered as they made their way down the stairs and into the Great Hall.

“Oh yeah,” Ron agreed.
Harry had a busy day.

He coasted through lessons. Usually, he tried to look at the magic being taught and see the shape of it. Then he tried to assess the core idea behind the individual spell. Then he tried to come up with at least three other ways of teaching it – he had fast learnt that just one alternative was never enough. Today, however, he was tired. His mind was on what he needed to do for Severus. He wished he had already seen the spell. He might have to look at it tonight and delay the actual working till he felt he really understood it, and had all his strength about him. He tried to tell himself that he wasn’t just putting it off. He didn’t want to put it off, even though he didn’t want to tell Severus who he was. Severus’ magic needed withdrawing from Voldemort, and fast.

At morning break, he was approached by Padma, asking for a private word. Padma gave him her allegiance.

At lunch, Eloise and Ernie appeared, and did the same.

Just after supper, Draco cornered him outside the Great Hall. He was just about to go off and talk to Ron and Hermione, before seeing Snape, but he looked at Draco’s serious face, and turned to his friends.

“I’ll catch up with you both later. I’ve got somewhere else to be this evening too, so I’ll see you in the common room latish, ok? Rustle up some grub from the kitchen if you can, Ron. I’m still starving,” he grinned.

“Sure thing, mate,” Ron nodded, looking intently at Draco.

Draco nodded slightly to both Ron and Hermione, acknowledging them without a rude word for the first time ever.

Ron gasped audibly, but Hermione just said, “Night, Malfoy,” inclined her head too, and walked away, grabbing Ron’s hand and pulling him with her.

“Let’s go to the classroom,” Harry said, suppressing a surprised grin.

They walked in silence, but when they entered the class, Draco shut the door and leant back on it.

“You know what this is about,” he said quietly.

“I know what I hope it is about, but you’re a man of surprises, Draco. Sit down and tell me,” he invited, waving a hand over a couple of the desks and turning them into easy chairs.

Draco shook his head. “Let me do the business bit first,” he said, and dropped to his knees.

Harry walked in front of him, and stood looking down.

Draco began to say the familiar words.

“Draco,“ Harry interrupted him. “I don’t mean to insult your intelligence – quite the opposite – you’ve thought about this? The implications?”

“I hope you have some positives in there to counter that list,” Harry said, fully realising what it would mean for Draco.

“You’ve given me something – several things – I never thought I’d have. Though I’ve been your enemy. Though I could continue to be. You were right when I thought you must be wrong. In the face of this, how can I not bow to your wisdom?”

“I’ve changed the last line of the phrasing,” Harry said gently. “I don’t, and never will, ask for blind obedience. You are your own man, Draco. But I should be very happy indeed if you chose to stand alongside me against Voldemort. And I should be happy for your company - in small doses –” he grinned, “on happier occasions.”

“You are very generous,” Draco said, swallowing.

“No. I am very lucky to hope that we might develop an understanding, Draco. If you wish to say it, these are the amended words.”

And he told Draco, and Draco made his vow.

Afterwards, Harry summoned some hot chocolate and cakes.

“How are you feeling? If you’re anything like me, still starving?” he grinned, around a cake.

“Never felt so hungry in my life,” Draco nodded. “That’s using the wandless, you said?”

“Yes, and your healing must use a load too, I would have thought. Are you pleased about that?”

Draco nodded. “Absolutely. My father won’t be overjoyed –”

“Really? I thought Healers were so rare they had really high status? Not that I know much,” Harry added.

“They do. They are also expected to treat any magical condition, any injury to anyone with magic.”

“Ah.” Harry said, understanding what Draco was not saying. “Forget your father. How do you feel about it?”

“Surprisingly curious,” Draco said honestly. “I’m interested to see how different people’s magic feels – whether there is any correlation with background, or skills, or whatever.”

“That could be interesting,” Harry nodded. “Hermione might like to help you with that.”

“We’re not exactly chums, Potter,” Draco couldn’t prevent himself sneering.

“I know, but if you’re willing to change your attitude, and you’re going to need to if you really want to do this, Hermione is a forgiving sort. And also the most knowledge-seeking person in the world,” he added. “Actually, I’d like you to work on another project with Hermione, if you will. It’s a potions project.”

“Why not ask Severus? Oh.”

Harry looked at him.
“You’re worried about how your House will react to your changed loyalties? And your Head of House?”

Draco looked away. “You must know he has the Mark,” Draco said quietly.

“Yes.” Harry looked at him, a sudden thought coming into his mind.

“Draco. Would you wait here a moment? I need to speak to Professor Dumbledore.”

“Sure.”

Draco blinked as Harry apparated out of the room. Wondering if he could now do the same, he tried apparating across the room. Nothing happened.

“Show off,” he mumbled.

Harry appeared on the staircase outside the Headmaster’s office, and knocked on the door.

“Harry! What can I do for you?” Dumbledore welcomed him.

“Draco has sworn allegiance,” Harry said, not beating about the bush. “And as he’s a Healer, I’m wondering about asking his help to remove Severus’ Dark Mark.”

“Sworn allegiance to you as a Mage? Or to the Light?”

“To me as a Mage, but as he specifically said he’d make a stand against Voldemort, and accept my wisdom....”

“Yes, I see. You told him your were a Mage?” Dumbledore asked curiously.

Harry shook his head. “They worked it out. At the weekend. Obviously, it’s a mighty decision for him. He knows he’s going to be isolated from his House, and he thinks Severus too. He warned me that Severus had the Dark Mark,” Harry grinned.

“So you wish him to know Severus is with us. You trust him?”

“Yes. I don’t think he’s taken the decision lightly.”

“Harry, I know you want to give people the benefit of the doubt. But the bottom line is, do you trust him with Severus’ life?”

Harry took a deep breath. What if he were wrong? What if Draco betrayed Severus?

“I think we need to get Severus,” Dumbledore said, and floo-called the potions master.

“Albus?” Severus’ head appeared in the fire.

“Severus, I have Harry with me, with some urgent business. Could you step through?”

The next moment, the lanky frame stepped elegantly into the room, a pale hand brushing down his robes. Severus nodded to Harry.

“What can I do for you, Headmaster?”
“It is more a case of what Harry hopes to do for you. He has a suggestion.”

“I was talking to the Headmaster about removing your Dark Mark,” Harry began.

Severus’ brow twitched. “We did not discuss removing it. That would prevent me continuing my role as spy,” Severus said solidly. “The plan, I understood, was to control the power drain.”

Harry looked at Severus, and Dumbledore. “Yes, you’re right. The spell you mentioned can do that? Essentially, we’re wanting Voldemort to be able to contact you but not to drain your power, yes?”

“It would be most sensible to leave a small drain in place, I would think. To prevent suspicion.”

“Yes, that would seem sensible,” Dumbledore agreed. “Do you think there has been any change to the actual form of your magic? Could Voldemort detect that?”

“It doesn’t feel essentially different,” Snape said slowly.

“Neville could help with that, I think,” Harry said, thinking fast.

The two older men looked at him.

“He can see personal signatures. Through glamours. So maybe he can see if there have been any noticeable changes.”

“That is a very useful skill,” Dumbledore said.

“It was a useful weekend,” Harry nodded. “That brings us onto Draco. As he is a Healer, it could be useful to have him with us when we close down the power drain.”

Severus looked at Harry as if he were mad.

“Why bother shutting down the connection, Mr Potter? You could just ask Mr Malfoy to inform his father that I am in league with the enemy and be done with it,” Snape said sarcastically.

“He has sworn allegiance, Severus,” Dumbledore said gently.

“To the side of Light? You believed him? You have taken him into your confidence? When did this happy event take place?” he growled.

Harry wanted to smack his head at his own stupidity. Severus hadn’t been in the room when the others realised he was a mage. He had to go back a whole step here. God, he was an idiot! How was Snape going to take the news?

“Harry?”

“Could you wait a moment? I’ve left Draco in the class but this is going to be longer than I thought.”

“Take a seat, Severus,” Dumbledore invited.

“Dobby?” Harry called softly, as the other men seated themselves.

The elf popped into view.

“Harry Potter, Sir!” he beamed, bowing low. “Headmaster! Professor Snape!”
The others nodded in greeting, but Dumbledore resisted the urge to engage the elf in talk.

“Dobby, would you do me a favour?”

“Harry Potter, Sir, anything, you knows that!”

“Thank you. I know he probably brings bad memories, but would you please take a message to Draco Malfoy for me? He’s waiting in my classroom. I’m going to be a little longer than I thought. Can you tell him that, ask him to wait, take him a small steak and some green vegetables – yes, I know he’s had supper, but it’ll do him good – and ask if you can get him a book or anything? If you’d prefer to send one of the other elves that would be fine, Dobby.”

Dobby drew himself up. “Dobby will take care of it! Harry Potter can rely on Dobby, Sir!”

“Thank you, Dobby. It’s a great help to know I can call on you. I really appreciate it.”

Great tears pooled in Dobby’s huge eyes. “So gracious! So –”

Harry leant forward, and gently touched the elf. “Thank you, Dobby. And Dobby – Draco has found out he is a Healer –” the elf’s eyes grew even bigger – “if there are any books that you think –”

“Dobby is seeing! Harry Potter is helping Master Draco! And trusting Dobby to find – oh, yes sir! Thank you, Harry Potter, Sir!” And he was gone.

Harry sat down with a sigh.

Severus smirked.

“Taking advantage of your adoring public, Potter?” he said, but as Harry bristled he noted the lack of serious nastiness in his tone.

He settled back. “Don’t start,” he said wearily, his lack of ire taking Severus by surprise.

“Dobby’s – well – Dobby. But he’s a good elf – a good friend to me, really. I have a lot of trust in him.”

Severus’ eyebrows were rising to his hairline. “You regard an elf as a friend?”

“Why not?” Harry snapped.

“Did I detect a hint of caution there, Harry?” Dumbledore intervened.

Harry loosened up and grinned. “I’d say I trusted him entirely, but the thing is, house elves seem to think so differently from us that sometimes they act in ways that are not what you intended at all. Let’s face it, Dobby’s way of trying to save my life when I first met him was to get me into so much trouble that I wouldn’t be allowed back to school, stopped me getting the train, set a bludger onto me.....”

Snape’s lips were curling.

“Ah! So inventive,” Dumbledore murmured.

“Thanks,” Harry said sourly, and Snape chuckled. Harry couldn’t resist flashing a smile at him. Snape’s eyes seemed to freeze.
Harry felt like a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him. This was Severus’ reaction to Harry Potter. He had slipped into the easy intimacy Alex had with Severus. It was not something that Snape was going to share with Harry Potter. Harry pushed the crowding anxieties away. Deal with the matter in hand.

“Right,” he said, leaning forward, his forearms along his thighs. “Draco. After you left on Saturday, Professor Snape, the others stayed talking for a few minutes. They were wondering about the scenario that had taken place – real, construct, use of apparition, etc.”

Severus nodded. “Sensible questions,” he said. “You have achieved at least making people think.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, almost glowing. Harry Potter getting praise from Severus? Was there hope?

“Severus!” Dumbledore admonished. “I haven’t had the full breakdown yet, but my understanding is that Harry achieved far more than that!”

Severus looked at the Headmaster. “I quite value thinking,” he replied solidly.

“However, you are correct. The methods were rather surprising – for our Golden Gryffindor – but remarkably effective. I have yet to thank you,” he turned to Harry.

Harry shook his head, blushing. “I was frustrated that it took this long for you all. I could feel the power. I felt very guilty that I hadn’t helped it out of you all earlier, and even more so that I had to resort to the methods that I did.”

“You didn’t explain what you were going to do,” Dumbledore said, “should I have enquired further?” His tone had hardened.

Harry and Snape exchanged a glance.

“Nothing untoward, Headmaster,” Snape said smoothly.

Harry could feel that Dumbledore was not happy at the evasion.

“I’ll explain in full later, Sir,” Harry said.

“Very well. Continue, Harry.”

Here was the tricky bit. Harry took a breath. “Ernie made a joke. Draco realised he was right. He asked me outright. I admitted it.”

Silence.

“Do you intend to expand on that garbled bit of nonsense, Mr Potter?” Snape said silkily.

Harry thought about asking Snape how he thought things had been achieved, but Draco was waiting, and he was prevaricating.

“I am a mage.”

Silence.

Snape sat in his chair, his body as still as if he had been petrified.

Suddenly, in a flurry of robes, he stood up. Harry had a horrible moment when he thought Snape
was going to give his allegiance. He had never thought about it. But instantly, irrevocably, Harry knew he did not want that. He could not bear to have Snape making those vows to him, even though Dumbledore himself had insisted on going on his knees. There was only one way Harry wanted Snape on his knees in front of him, and that was for their mutual pleasure. And however crude that thought was at this moment, it went to the heart of the matter. Snape was his lover. What they had was shared, mutual. There was no inequality, no power ratio. And that was the way he wanted it.

Fortunately, Snape whirled away, and stood leaning, back to them, on the mantle. The fire burnt merrily in front of him, the crackling suddenly sounding loud in the room.

“Of course you are,” he said at last.

Harry couldn’t make out what he meant from the tone, what he felt.

“Severus,” Dumbledore began.

The dark head shot up.

Briskly, Snape came back and sat down again.

“Draco gave you formal allegiance,” he confirmed.

“I refused it on Saturday. I told them to go away and think, to truly mean it. He came to me tonight. I’ve changed the last words. I won’t accept blind obedience.”

“But you believe he means it.”

“I do. But Professor Dumbledore asked if I believed it so entirely as to trust your life with it. That puts things in perspective.”

“I’m sure it does. You took him into your confidence at once, I take it?”

That hurt. “I would rather die myself than have you hurt, Professor Snape,” Harry said quietly, and he meant it. He meant it. The thought of Snape dead – of living without him – of Snape injured because of him – a huge fearful thing was rearing its head in front of Harry, but he couldn’t think of what it meant now. He gulped, ignored the disbelief in Snape’s eye and the twinkle in Dumbledore’s, and hurried on. “Unfortunately, our choices are never so clear cut. We have to decide what to do. You know him best, Professor, and it is your life on the line. It’s your decision. We don’t have to tell him anything about you. We can see how he progresses over time. But he is feeling very cut off. He thinks you are an active Death Eater; he reminded me you had the Dark Mark –”

“He did?”

Harry nodded, hating the feeling that that must make Severus feel so betrayed.

“That is a good sign then,” Snape said, to Harry’s surprise.

“It is?”

“I believe so. He has put his allegiance to you – and maybe to the Light – above his loyalty to his House, or even to a family friend. I don’t believe he would do that lightly.”

“I think he is terrified, to be honest,” Harry said. “Not that it shows with Malfoy. But he certainly
feels himself cut off from his House, and most definitely from his relationship with you, both as Head of House and whatever else your relationship entails. It must be terrifying.”

Snape nodded. “Not all my Slytherins are Voldemort sympathisers, you know.”

“I’m sure you’re right,” Harry nodded, “but I expect people don’t go spouting about their loyalties any more than anyone in Gryffindor would say they believe Voldemort’s a good chap with the right ideas, though I’m sure some must think so.”

Snape looked at him. “Did the arrival of your powers deliver a functioning brain with it?” he said acerbically.

Harry laughed.

Snape regarded him. Harry Potter a mage! He was sitting laughing with a mage. A man – boy – he had hated most of his life. A man who had chosen to teach him, to give him a huge gift despite his harshness over the years. He watched Potter cross his legs and couldn’t help his eyes sliding down the slender thigh. And back up again. Was he attracted to power? Was that why he had joined Voldemort? Revered Dumbledore, who had to be one of the most annoying men on the planet? Felt attracted, despite his will, to this man in front of him? He acknowledged the frequent spark of interest the young wizard – blasted mage! – had provoked in him all term, how his eyes had been drawn to the odd movement, the spiky hair, the petite physique. He had thought his unwelcome arousal was a result of the active sex-life he shared with Alex – that regular sex just led to craving for more, and made him more aware of other men than before. But he had never lusted after a pupil before. Noticed if they were fit, of course. Felt any compulsion to act on it? Never. His dislike of Potter had been a relief, in a way: he would never consider acting on his urges with James Potter’s son. Ever. And despite this absurd interest his body would not ignore, he liked Alex. He had never felt so relaxed with anyone, or laughed so much. Their sex-life was great. He would go so far as to say he had become fond of the man. He wondered what Alex was doing over the holidays. Perhaps he could spend the break at the cottage. Realising that his thoughts were rambling, he looked up, to see Potter watching him intently. Those green eyes were really ridiculously startling on a man.

“What do you think?” Harry prompted. Snape had looked miles away. He was sure he had checked out his legs. Harry had clenched his thighs together, feeling the stir of arousal.

“Mmmm?”

“About Draco. As I said, we could bide our time. Alternatively, we could ask him to assist when we tighten down the conduit of the Dark Mark. I know he has no training, but he was right in there with Neville. I think it must be instinctive. And if he knows he has you to rely on, it will really help him – and the fact that we’ve trusted him should help tie him to us.”

Snape stood up again. “Very well.”

“Are you sure?” Harry asked, standing too.

“Yes.”

“The spell – is it complicated? Can we do it tonight, or should we wait until we’re both more rested?”

“Why don’t I fetch the book, and you may consider yourself?” There was no parade or trumpeting, but the suggestion was undoubtedly an acknowledgement that Harry was a mage. Harry felt absolutely delighted, and nodded his head: there were no words.
“Harry, why don’t you bring Draco to me?” Dumbledore suggested. “Severus, fetch the book. Harry can read through whilst I talk to Draco, and then, if Harry thinks we should go ahead, we can do it tonight. I can add my power too if that will help. Can I suggest you wait in your chambers until we call you?”

Draco was sitting back in the comfortable chair reading when Harry arrived, an empty plate with gravy remains beside him.

He looked up. “Thanks for the steak, Mage Potter. And the book,” he added, standing up quickly.

“Right, let’s sort this at once,” Harry said. “Call me Harry. I’m not one for titles.”

“But you’re entitled –”

“One, you might slip and say it in public. I don’t want it known at the moment. Two, it sounds stupid and feels silly. Three, I prefer Harry.”

Draco looked at him assessingly. “And what shall I call you in public?”

“Harry, I think. Can you stand it? People will be surprised at first, but I think we’re going to have to show that we’re developing a friendship. Let’s see how your house reacts. We have things in common. People are likely to just think we’ve grown up and seen that.”

“They might think you fancy me, if you’re suddenly all friendly,” Draco said, his cheeks reddening.

“That bothers you? It might make a rational explanation to most people, hormones being what they are.”

“I like women!”

Harry looked at him. “No problem. You’re not my cup of tea, as I’ve said before.”

“I can go with the friendship line,” Draco said slowly. “It’ll get back to my father,” he added.

“You’ll need protection and sanctuary,” Harry said gently. “I’m sorry I was so long, I’ve just been seeing Dumbledore. Would you come and see him with me?” and he held out his hand.

“Are you really going to apparate us this time, or will he be a construct?”

Harry laughed, and whisked them both into the Headmaster’s office.

“Mr Malfoy! Welcome. Harry tells me you’ve decided to ally yourself with us against Voldemort. Do take a seat. Tea? Hot chocolate? Harry, that book we discussed is on the table. The page is marked. Do read it over whilst I have a little chat with Mr Malfoy.”

Harry grinned at Draco as the slender blonde almost wilted under the barrage of Dumbledore’s stream of consciousness approach.

Draco sat across from Dumbledore, and Harry moved to the other side of the room and picked up the book. The pages were old and crumbling, but the ink was still clear and the spell remarkably straight-forward. The spell had been designed to allow bonded servants some autonomy, either as a reward, or if their master wished them to go off and conduct business on his behalf. It seemed exactly the thing. It was created for a master to use over his own spell, so did indeed require a
wizard of equal capacity. Voldemort had in fact been thought to be overwhelmingly powerful, but Harry knew this wasn’t the case: he used the power of his followers, but his own core was nothing to write home about. This spell could have been done for Severus long ago. On the other hand, they were not the owners of the constraint on Severus. They would not know if they could do the spell until they tried. Harry suspected that his own connection to Voldemort might swing it in their favour. Should he try it alone, without Dumbledore? He didn’t want Voldemort to feel what was happening. Was that possible? At the moment, Voldemort did not know about the extra power at Snape’s fingertips. What they really needed was to keep the flow exactly what it was now, or perhaps set it up to diminish microscopically day by day, till only a fraction of Severus’ power was going to the bastard. Harry begrudged any of Snape’s essence to that murderer.

He knew suddenly that Draco was essential to this.

He walked across and interrupted the conversation between the Headmaster and the young man. They both looked up at him, curious.

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” he began.

“No problem, we were just chatting,” Dumbledore said amiably.

Harry squatted beside Draco. “Draco, when you went into Neville, could you feel everything? How his magic worked? Do you think you can control any of it?”

“I could feel how his magic worked, that sort of jumps out at you. I suppose I could control it – Healers must do that. I’m not sure how –”

“Can you do legilimency?”

Draco glanced hastily at Dumbledore, and then nodded.

“Good,” Harry said.

“What?”

“I’ve a task you could help with. We might need to link minds. Would you be willing to try?”

“Po – Harry, I’m not trained or anything –”

“I’ve got a gut feeling on this. I think you’re the one.” Harry looked up at Dumbledore. “He knows him. It’ll make a difference, I can feel it.”

Dumbledore nodded. “You’d better floo him then.”

Draco looked worried.

Harry put a hand on his knee, but removed it swiftly as he felt Draco tense. Damn. Just because he was gay didn’t mean every touch was a sexual advance!

“I’m going to make a suggestion to you. You can refuse. Hear it out, and see what you think. You are not being coerced. If you have any doubts about it, that’s fine. You say no, and your part is over. Do you understand, Draco? I mean it.”

“I don’t know what you’re going on about, Harry, but ok.”

Harry nodded, and went to the fire.
Seconds later, Severus walked through.

“P—professor!” Draco rose hastily to his feet, for once lacking his usual grace.


“No. I wanted you here. I think the spell is possible and that Draco is instrumental to it.”

“Have you told him?” he asked Harry.

“I see.”

Severus regarded Draco, who sat, pale and flustered, but with his chin thrust out aggressively.

Severus stood up, and methodically started undoing the myriad buttons holding his robe closed.

Harry felt his cock twitch inappropriately at the impromptu striptease.

The robe was draped over the back of the chair. The silence was palpable, only the rustle of cloth breaking it. Harry admired the long legs, the narrow hips, the grace of the man.

Severus sat down again, and freed his cufflink, then rolled up his sleeve.

He held out the Dark Mark.

“I was foolish enough to accept this many years ago,” he spoke directly to Draco. “And have regretted it for nearly as many years.”

Draco’s eyes shot from the Mark to Severus’ face to the Mark again. His hands were clenched tight on his thighs.

“Severus has been spying for us for all of your life-time, Mr Malfoy,” Dumbledore said calmly.

Draco just stared at Severus. “Is that why he tortured you?” he asked at last.

Severus shook his head. “I have not been under suspicion—no more than anyone else, anyway.”

“Your friendship with my father?”

Harry’s eyes shot up to Snape, but the man was looking only at Draco.

“Your father and I were friends long before I became a spy,” he said gently.

Well, there was an understatement, thought Harry.

Draco was silent. “But you’ve used information you’ve learnt from him?”

“Yes.”

No qualification, no explanation, just the truth.

Harry’s heart went out to Severus.

Surprisingly, Draco nodded. “You’d be a fool not to. He’s not a spy too?” he added, half hopefully.

“I wish he was on our side,” Severus said. “He is a formidable adversary.”

Draco nodded at the compliment, but then threaded a shaking hand through his hair.
“We’ll win. With Potter, now, we’ll win. He’ll die, or get kissed,” he said quietly.

We. He had said we.

“Draco,” Severus said calmly, “you cannot be responsible for him. He is a man. He has made his own decisions.”

“If he knew Potter was a mage he might change sides. Probably would. He’s a realist. An opportunist,” he said hopefully.

“I can’t take that risk at the moment, Draco. Too many lives are at stake. I’m sorry,” Harry offered. Sorry for Draco’s hurt, at least.

Draco looked at Harry and nodded. He seemed to pull himself together. “You wanted to ask something of me?”

“There is a spell to stop Voldemort draining power from Severus. Actually, what I want to do is to cut it off so he can’t take any more, so that he doesn’t know what has happened to Severus, and then to slowly reduce it so that eventually the drain is infinitesimal – only enough so that he doesn’t become aware of the change. I suspect you could help me with that. If we lock minds, and you take me into Severus’ body with you, I could provide the power while you direct and control. Do you think that is possible?”

Draco’s eyes were wide.

“You don’t do things by halves, do you, Pot – Harry?” he gasped a laugh.

“I won’t let Voldemort have at Severus’ power.”

Draco sat there thinking.

They waited.

Draco looked up anxiously. “I think you’re right, it’s possible. But – can we do it tomorrow? I’m still tired, and – frankly, I’ve got a lot to think about. I don’t want to make a mistake and hurt Professor Snape. Would that be alright? And – and you know that spell you did on us to stop us giving information from the classes? Can you extend that, or something? I don’t want to risk giving any information away about the professor to anyone.”

He did look pale and exhausted.

“That’s a very sensible suggestion,” Dumbledore agreed. “Harry, would you like to extend the spell, or shall I?”

Harry was pleased Draco had asked before he brought it up. He looked across at Draco, and did it.

“Done,” he said quietly.

“Just like that?”

Harry nodded. He suddenly slapped his forehead.

“You’re right, Draco, we are too tired.” He looked at Snape and Dumbledore. “We’d forgotten we were going to ask Neville to check over Snape’s signature first.” He looked back at the blond. “Draco, if tomorrow you don’t feel ready to go ahead, let me know. There are always other ways to do things, ok?”
“Thanks.” Draco stood up, his hands shaking as he wiped them over his thighs.

Severus stood up too. “Would you care for a nightcap with me, Draco? Or straight to sleep?”

“A – a nightcap sounds good. Thank you, Sir.”

They took their leave and left through the floo. Harry wished it was him having a nightcap with Severus, but knew the two Slytherins needed to talk.

“I think that went alright,” Harry turned to Dumbledore. “He’s going to be very good to have on our side.”

“Yes. It is going to be hard on him though. We’ll all need to keep an eye on how his fellow Slytherins treat him. I have wards set up in the castle that prevent serious injuries, but nevertheless...”

Harry nodded. “I want him to work on a project with Hermione. I think they could get on well if he can get over himself, which I think he might just be doing.”

“Well, that could prove interesting! Things are looking up! Do you have time to give me a report on your session now?”

Three quarters of an hour later Harry was on his bed with Ron, Mione and Neville all settled around and eating the feast Ron had rustled up.

“Tell us all about it, mate,” Ron said, round a mouthful of chocolate gateau. His teeth were caked with it and it looked disgusting.

“You are such a pig, Ron,” Harry grimaced.

“Yeah, but you love me anyway. In a purely platonic way,” he added quickly.

Harry grinned.

“What do you want to know?”

“Come on! When did you find out? How? What can you do? Where’s your mage wand?”

“How does it feel, Harry?” Hermione asked. “Do you feel different? Does your magic feel different?”

“Doesn’t feel different in style, but I can feel there’s more of it – or rather, that I can get at what I want. Nev,” he asked, “does my signature look any different to you? Did you notice any changes?”

“Nah, same old Harry,” Neville answered at once.

So, hopefully Voldemort would not have detected a difference in Snape. He’d ask Nev to check all the same.

Hermione looked from one to the other. “You can see magical signatures?” she asked Neville.

“Yeah,” Nev said shyly.

“Since when? Is that part of what Harry’s helped you with?”
Neville shook his head. “I’ve always seen them. Never knew there was anything odd about it,” he mumbled. “Not the sort of thing that comes up in conversation, is it?”


“I’m not much good at describing them. I can just sort of sense them. They’re not colourful or anything.”

“Boring!” Ron grinned. “Back to Harry, then. You always been a mage, Harry?”

“That’s quite a good question, Ron,” Hermione smiled at her boyfriend.

Ron grinned back, and pulled Hermione to sit between his legs against the headboard.

Now that he’d finished his cake, and had wiped his teeth over with his tongue, she moved happily into position.

“I don’t really know the answer,” Harry said. “Sorry, I’m going to give answers as unhelpful as Neville’s,” he flashed a smile at Neville to show that there was no sting in his words.

“Did it come on suddenly?” Hermione asked; “Was there a point when you felt you’d had a magic burst or something?”

“Not really. Like I said before, I always felt pretty useless at magic, like I was getting by on a wing and a prayer. Then I started thinking out other ways to do things. At the same time, I needed the glamour so that I could move out of the Dursley’s. And once I thought about my glamour persona making appearances in the wizarding world as well as the Muggle, I knew I needed a wand. And I got this urge to make my own. It was like a compulsion that wouldn’t go away. I made loads of attempts.”

“Where is it?” Ron asked.

“With my other life,” Harry grinned.

“But you don’t really need it?” Hermione asked.

“No. I prefer wandless, really. Makes me feel more in control.”

“You can do what you like wandless?” Ron asked curiously.

“I think so. I mean, you use a lot of energy, so probably if you were doing a big casting it would be better with a wand, especially if it involved natural elements, ’cos the magic uses the environment and adjusts to some extent for your lack of knowledge. I used my wand – this one – ” he held up his ordinary wand – “this weekend, for the working, which helped a bit. Made it more real.”

“Too bloody right!” Neville snorted.

“What? What did you do?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“I wanted to create a bit of desperation to help them find their wandless magic, that’s all,” Harry said meekly.

“Ha!” Neville said. “Chose a kinky way to do it though, didn’t you? Trapped us in a dungeon and pinned us to the wall in manacles!”

“You didn’t!” Ron’s eyes were round.
“Draco,” Hermione breathed. “You pinned Draco to the wall with manacles?”

“And Professor Snape,” Neville grinned.

“What? Wait! Professor Snape is actually in your class? Like a pupil? I thought you meant he was helping you out.” Ron’s eyes were bugging out of his head.

If he knew that Harry had had Snape’s cock in his mouth and fingers up his arse he’d probably have an aneurism, Harry thought.

“And he didn’t kill you?” Hermione exclaimed.

“It worked,” Harry said.

“Holy shit, you are the man!” Ron said. “Oh my god, I can’t believe you! How on earth did you have the nerve?”

“I didn’t hurt them –”

“How’s Draco’s hand?” Neville interjected.

“What? What?” Ron was all eager.

“Yeah, well, I was more worried about you. You were amazing, Neville.”

The other two turned and stared at the blushing Neville.

“He was,” Harry said. “We are so lucky to have Neville on our side. We’re really going to have to get going on things now. I can get you two involved, if you’re willing, now their magic is sorted. If you don’t mind coming to the classes and doing extra work.”

“Harry, classes where you manacle Snape to the wall sound just the thing for me,” Ron grinned.

“Unfortunately, you’d be manacled too,” Neville reminded him.

“Oh God!” Hermione was blushing.

They all looked at her. “What?”

“Nothing!”

“You can’t leave it at that? What are you thinking?”

“You don’t want to know. You really don’t!”

“Oh we do! Spill!” Harry urged. With Hermione that embarrassed it had to be good.

“Snape. In manacles.”

“Yes, we’ve been there,” Ron coaxed. “Lovely thought, but not tied up too.”

“Yeah, exactly. Snape in manacles, at your mercy, that’s what I was thinking.” Hermione was bright red.

“That’s vindictive for you,” Harry said in surprise, a sinking feeling in his stomach. “I thought you thought Snape was ok? Snarky, but ok?”
“Way to go with the torture for me!” Ron grinned.

Hermione had her face buried in her hands in her lap. “I so wish we hadn’t gone here,” she moaned.

“Don’t like us knowing about your sadistic streak?” Harry asked.

“Not torture, you twit!” She gasped. “Just the mental idea, the picture. Snape at your mercy. All strung out against the wall. It’s damn hot, isn’t it?”

You could have heard a mouse passing a dropping, let alone a pin falling.

“You fancy Snape?” Ron gagged.

Neville’s eyes met Harry over their heads, and Harry could see the laughter his friend was fighting to hold in.

“I like tall thin men!” Hermione protested, taking Ron’s hand and kissing it.

Ron was slightly mollified. “I hope you don’t compare me to that prick,” Ron said angrily.

Hermione shifted round and nibbled his ear: it always turned Ron to mush. “Don’t tell me you don’t fancy other people,” she said. “I’ve seen you looking at Lisa Turpin.”

“I don’t!”

“Harry, he does, doesn’t he?” Hermione turned to her friend.

“Whoa, don’t involve me!”

“Well, you do,” Hermione said. “And that’s fine. She’s really pretty and nice. And she fancies you.”

“She does?”

“Yeah, she checked out whether I was going out with you.”

“What! When?”

“See! I told you you were interested.”

“Hey! How did you get to that?”

“Give in, Ron,” Neville laughed, “she’s got you by the - yeah, you know,” Neville blushed. Though he joined in with the salacious humour of the seventh year boys, Neville was still inclined to be very proper in front of females. It was pretty clear that his Gran had drummed the word ‘respect’ into him.

“Well,” Ron huffed, “You’re my girl.”

“And you’re my man,” Hermione smiled at him, and kissed his cheek.

“Wand, tell us about your bloody wand,” Ron turned to Harry, trying to get back on tack. He got aroused very easily, and had no intention of sitting there with a woody with Nev and Harry there. Hermione had one hand resting high on his thigh and he was torn between pushing himself up against it and moving it a little further away.
“Are we changing the subject or are we still on sex appeal?” Harry quipped.

Ron flicked the pillow at him, groaning, whilst the others laughed.

“Your mage wand. You really made it?”

Harry nodded.

And remembered the day he had gone to Ollivander’s.
Harry had been so frustrated with his wand-making attempts. He had tried working on several woods, but from the first time he had sauntered down to the bottom of the garden of his cottage, he had been attracted to the gnarly apple tree. Unfortunately, his initial trials had been disappointing – better, but not right.

He had actually asked Fawkes for a feather, and had been given it. He had carefully chosen wood, and shaped and sanded and carefully, with a tiny blade tied to a stick, hollowed out the centre and threaded the feather in. He had carved tiny stoppers from the wood to plug the end, sealed them into place, polished and cherished the wands.

And they had worked.

They sort of rattled, the infinitesimal weight of the feather shifting within the wand, but he could work spells. Something felt off, but the spells worked. It was only by accident that he realised that actually, it wasn’t the wand working: he had been dozing on the sofa at the flat in Brighton and stretching over the side without his glasses on, and had picked up his most recent wand and sleepily summoned a blanket.

He woke up cosy and comfortable an hour later – and realised that he was still clutching - not a wand, but a chopstick. A chopstick that had been coated with sweet and sour sauce, which orange gloop was now smeared down his favourite tee-shirt.

After that, Harry had worked hard on the wandless magic that had first come to him when he was locked in his room at the Dursley’s, waking up outrageously thirsty and without the chance to get at any water. His window had been sealed shut and there was a heatwave. He had worked all day in the garden and had been seen into his room by Vernon before he left with Petunia to go out to the cinema and dinner. They didn’t trust him to have the run of the house in their absence.

Harry had taken a nap, but his thirst on waking was so great that when he heard the key in the front door and Dudley’s footsteps, he had called out.

Big mistake.

Dudley had Piers Polkiss and another friend with him, and they had been doing drugs.

Dudley had opened the locks on his bedroom door, and all three boys had barged in, shutting the door behind them. When Harry had asked for water, one of them had handed him a bottle of vodka. He was so thirsty he took a swig.

Dudley made himself comfortable against Harry’s pillow, whilst the boy called Eric lounged at the foot of his bed; Piers had sunk down against the door, cutting off Harry’s exit. Harry hovered over by his desk. Fear was pumping adrenalin through his veins, but his mouth still felt dry as a bone and the vodka had only made things worse. His head felt muzzy.

Piers drew up lines of white powder, and after the others had all indulged, Harry was forced to snort a line too, his head held down by Eric. Harry soon felt even worse. He had a bad feeling that drugs and magic didn’t mix.

Eric started calling Harry a girl. They were all laughing. And they were all about twice his weight at the very minimum. Piers jeered that he was a fag, not a girl. Harry, who had only recently come to the realisation that he was indeed 'a fag', felt terror like he’d never known before.
Nothing good was going to come out of this.

Piers told him he could suck his dick.

Harry declined.

The laughter turned to aggression. Piers got up, yanked Harry’s belt out of his trousers, and shoved him into the desk, tying his hands behind his back. His baggy trousers came down with a yank. Eric was cheering Piers on. Harry managed to turn to Dudley, who, he noted, was an ugly shade of puce.

He actually begged Dudley to help him.

Dudley got up, and Harry hoped that his cousin was going to come alright at last.

Dudley rolled to the door.

“Where you going, mate?” Piers shouted. “Don’t you want a turn with the pansy?”

Dudley turned round. “Sick,” he mumbled, and lumbered out of the room.

“Fucking idiot,” Piers muttered.

He turned Harry round, his hand around his neck, squeezing hard. “Gonna suck my cock now, pansy boy, or am I gonna shove it up your scrawny arse?”

As the hand tightened and Piers began to force him down, something snapped in Harry.

The next moment, both boys had gone. Disappeared. Harry hoisted up his trousers and stumbled out of the door, his hand on his throat, gasping. Dudley was throwing up into the toilet. Harry staggered to the sink and drank straight from the tap, mouthful after mouthful. Then he threw up.

He was scared to leave the house in the state he was in, and scared to stay in it.

He looked at Dudley, crouched over the toilet with his stomach wobbling as waves of nausea caused him to retch again and again.

“I’m going back into my room,” he said, once there was a break in proceedings. “I’ve got rid of your pals. If you fucking come near me I’ll kill you.”

Dudley nodded, and threw up again.

Harry went back into the room, shoved the desk and chest of drawers against the door, and collapsed on the bed.

The incident was never mentioned. Petunia had reported a couple of days later how shocked Piers’ mum had been to find that he was so drunk he had turned up in Exeter not knowing how he had got there. Dudley said not a word. He avoided Harry like the plague. No insults, no nothing. Harry found a water bottle in his room two days later. He sniffed it, wondering what was in it, but it was water. Maybe Dudley had a conscience after all.

By the following year, Dudley had acquired a different set of friends. Petunia had written of it to Harry. He had taken up sports as well as boxing and had lost a lot of weight. She was sorry that he didn’t keep up with his old friends, but maybe it was for the best as Piers had been done for GBH whilst under the influence of drugs.
Harry had never mentioned the incident to anyone.

Not to Ron nor Hermione, nor Derek nor Andy, his first lovers and flatmates from Brighton.

He had started getting fit, and working on his magic.

He had no intention of being in that position again.

His thoughts turned back to his wand-making efforts. Having concentrated over the winter break on his wandless magic, he had again been drawn to the apple tree. The spring growth on it had been whippy and bursting with life. This was it. This was what he needed. Harry could feel it. He cut a shoot that felt right, and went to Ollivanders.

He breezed into the shop in his Alex persona.

The silent weight of magic hung heavily in the air, dust motes dancing in the fraying light forcing itself through the windows.

Enjoying the silence, Harry jumped when Mr Ollivander appeared.

“Mr Potter! Well, well! Yes, yes. Growing up now, I see. Time for another wand, is it?”

“Yes, Sir,” Harry started, stunned that the elderly man could see through his glamour, but the wizard had already turned away to look at boxes, and was muttering to himself. “Now then, what about – no, no, I don’t think –“

Harry coughed loudly, and when he was ignored, coughed again.

“It’s the dust,” said Mr Ollivander, turning round, “breathe through your nose, dear boy, that’s what all those fine hairs are for, after all.”

“Oh, it’s not that, Sir,” Harry blinked. He took the feather and the twig from his bag and laid them on the rostrum that served as Mr Ollivander’s counter.

The wizard looked at them and looked up sharply at Harry.

“I’ve been trying to make my own, Sir, but it’s not working very well. And now, I’ve found this –“ he held up the twig, hoping Ollivander wouldn’t think he was mad – “and – well, it’s right, Sir, and I don’t want to mess it up. And it seems to me, you’re the expert, so I wondered if you could help me. I’ll pay, of course,” he added, hoping his request wasn’t way off the acceptable. He really didn’t know anywhere near enough about wizarding etiquette.

“Make your own, eh? Why’s that, young man?” Ollivander’s beady eyes looked at him over the rim of his half moon specs.

“I’ve just had the urge,” Harry said, feeling foolish, “but I think there must be a spell to weld the core in, because it sort of rattles otherwise, and I hoped you’d be able to teach me.”

“Mmm. And have they worked at all?”

Harry blushed. “Well, I thought they were,” he admitted, “but it turned out I was doing, “ he paused, and lowered his voice, ”er, wandless, without realising it.” It was a bit embarrassing,
asking a wand-maker for advice whilst admitting to not needing the goods.

“Oh yes? Wandless, eh? What can you do, then, young man? Let’s see now!”

“Oh, what would you like me to do?” Harry asked, bemused.

The beady eyes regarded him again.

“There’s a wand in here made of unicorn hair and lime wood. Can you summon it?”

It was a weird request, but then again, it was a wand shop. Harry let himself feel the shop. He tried to feel the individual elements. He was looking for wood. The floor and the counter almost shouted their presence at him. Stupid! Well, the unicorn hair would be rare, and therefore easier to differentiate. He thought of unicorn hair, and summoned. Nine boxes came shooting out and landed on the rostrum in a stack.

Ollivander gave them a glance and regarded him.

“First sort,” Harry said.

He looked at the boxes, thought of lime trees, felt the stickiness in his mind, and put his hand forward and touched a box. “This one,” he said firmly.

Ollivander opened the box and withdrew the wand. “Yes, good, good. Not many people able to do that. Very few suited to a career in wand making and selling,” he muttered.

"It must be very interesting,” Harry commented.

"Mmmn. Well then, come through, young man, come through! No time to dawdle!”

And he took Harry through a door into the back of the shop.

Which was a surprisingly light room with a central table, at which sat three people, a young woman, a middle aged man, and a woman whose wrinkles drooped in waves from her cheeks.

Harry gave a slight bow as the people looked up. They were all working on wands.

“Jemima, dear, would you go and mind the shop? And Lottie, Alfric, have the afternoon off! No interruptions, Jemima, if you please! I trust your judgement! Don’t let anyone bully you! “

“Yes uncle, of course.” She bustled up, looking at Harry curiously. She bobbed a hint of a curtsey as she passed.

The old lady heaved herself up and carefully folded the wand she was working on into lambswool, then popped it into a standard Ollivander box and slipped it into a cupboard behind her. She turned and looked at Harry, eyes sharp in their pouched sockets.

She looked at Ollivander and gave a little nod. “I’ll make a nice stew for later. It’ll keep in the oven,” she said, then smiled at Harry, bobbed too, and left, her movements surprisingly nimble given her age and ample size.

The man had also cleared away his work, straightened his waistcoat, nodded at them and left.

“Well then, well then! Some peace and quiet! Splendid!” As if the three normally created a riot of noise.
“I’m awfully sorry if I’ve disrupted your business –“

“Good lord, lad, they’ve been moaning that I never give them time off for fifty years! And Jemima – she’s my great great great great niece, you know, loves looking after the shop. Wants to inherit when I finally pop my clogs, so’s to speak. I think she’ll do, too,” he added. “What do you think?” And he looked at Harry with all seriousness.

“Well sir, I’ve no idea how good she is with wands, but she seems pleasant, and that must always be a good thing, mustn’t it?”

“Cautious answer, I like that. Well said, well said! Well then, on the table with them! Let’s have a look!”

Harry laid the glorious feather and the slim piece of wood side by side, on the huge white table.

“Fawkes give you the feather?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Albus know?”

“Er, no, Sir.”

“Don’t worry about that, dear boy, Fawkes makes up his own mind on these things. Did you ask or did he suggest it?”

“I asked,” Harry said, hoping that was alright.

“Yes, yes, don’t worry on that score. Knew what you wanted, very good. Been using the same one in your attempts?”

“Yes, it comes out battered but seems to fluff up again every time,” Harry admitted, looking at the beautiful feather. He reached out and stroked it between his fingers. Little magic sparks erupted along it.

“Oh, very good! Old growth, to balance the new wood. Wonderful, wonderful!”

Harry was bemused. He had obviously inadvertently made good choices, though didn’t feel he deserved the praise being heaped on him. And Ollivander, excited, seemed to repeat everything and talk in exclamations. It was somehow quite soothing, yet contagiously joyful.

Well, let’s see the wand in your hand. Give it a flick now! Yes, that’s it! Only an infinitesimal fraction too long. You’re nearly done growing then.”

“Really?” Harry said. “I’d hoped I might have a late growth spurt.”

“’Fraid not, dear boy. Nothing wrong with being short, you know. Never hampered me. Use a step ladder for the shelves – what does it matter if I have to use it for one shelf lower than another man? Anyone would need it to reach the top! Nothing wrong with shortness, nothing at all.”

Harry grinned at him. Bizarre the man might be, but interesting – definitely.

“Well, tell me what you did previously, and we’ll see what we need to work on.”

Harry explained what he had been doing, while Ollivander exclaimed and tutted and nodded.
“Not a bad attempt, then, but the right equipment is the thing. Now, first we soak the wood.”

He took Harry into a little side room, where several small oblong vats seemed to house soaking wands.

Harry looked at his, and looked at the solution. He sniffed. And looked at the wand again.

“Pop it in, now. The wood’s young so a couple of hours should do it.”

“Er, I’m really sorry sir, but I’ve got a feeling,” Harry blushed.

“Yes? What is that, Mr Potter?”

“It doesn’t want to go in there,” Harry said, feeling incredibly stupid.

“No?”

“No. No additives at all. Can we still do it?” he asked. Here he was, asking for the man’s expertise, and them refusing to do what he was told. He fully expected to be thrown out on his ear at any moment.

“Really? Well, well. Purity added to the mix. Very interesting. Rare. Very difficult to work with, but if it expects it of you, then that is your task, Mr Potter.”

It was like having a conversation with a native speaker when you’d only had lessons for a year – the sound was familiar but understanding it was another matter. Harry breathed a sigh of relief, though, and Mr Ollivander’s attitude made him feel more confident in saying what he felt.

Mr Ollivander fiddled in one of the troughs and selected one piece of wood after another, humming to himself as he did so.

Harry waited patiently.

Finally, a choice selected, Mr Ollivander wiped off the wand and led Harry back into the other room.

“Very well, very well, Mr Potter. Now, first, we strip the bark. Like so,” he demonstrated, sitting down beside Harry and proceeding to work on the wand he had extracted from the vat. “Now, no need to hurry anything. Time is immaterial to a good wand. Some of them can be done in a day or two, and others can take months. Let the feel of it guide you, Mr Potter.”

Sometime later, the wand was bare. Harry’s was not quite straight, as a side shoot had been about to form in the wood. Harry liked the little nodule, which fitted just by his thumb. The pad of his thumb stroked over it as he held the wand.

“Leaving that, I see. Very unusual. Nothing wrong with that, of course,” Mr Ollivander added, smiling at Harry.

“It feels right,” Harry said, trying not to sound belligerent.

“Yes, yes, trust your instincts. Very good, my boy! Very hard to do at your age! Excellent!”

Harry was getting used to the overflow of commentary.

“What’s next, Sir?”
“Ah, the next bit is tricky! Have a drink first, my dear boy! Water? Tea? Once you start you can’t stop.”

Harry had a glass of water, and Mr Ollivander led him to a machine which was essentially a drill, with the tiniest drill bit Harry had ever seen. It was mounted on a stand at eye height.

“Now, you sit here,” Mr Ollivander said, popping Harry onto a stool with a hand to his shoulder. “You have to hold the wand. It can’t be put in a vice. You’re not looking for a straight line, you see? You have to find the core – the pathway it wants you to take. That nodule will give it a little hiccup, I expect. Don’t hurry! Certainly not. You have to feel what the wood wants of you, yes?”

Harry nodded, trying to take it in.

“Hold the wood in front of it and see how it feels. Have a good look before you start.”

Harry held his wand-to-be in front of the machine. It was quite a stretch on the arms.

“You can lean your elbows on the table. You’ll need to to keep it steady.”

Harry did so, and sighted down the drill as he imagined marksmen sighted down a rifle. He couldn’t quite get the feel of it.

Suddenly, he took off his glasses, and shutting one eye, tried again. That was it!

“Good. Well done, young man. Now, a practice go or two,” Ollivander said, placing a couple of prepared wands in front of him.

It was a sensible suggestion. He needed to get it right. Harry put down his wand and picked one up, then put it down and picked up the other.

He looked at Ollivander.

“Don’t worry about wasting them, my boy! It’s only wood and a little time!”

Harry held one of the pieces in his hand, put it down and picked up his own piece. “The thing is, Sir, this isn’t.”

“Mmmm? What’s that? Explain, dear fellow!”

“Well,” Harry said, stroking his apple wood, ”they are bits of wood. But this is a wand.”

Ollivander chuckled. “Well, well! What do you want to do, then? You tell me!”

“I’m really sorry, Sir, I know it makes sense to practice, but I don’t think it will make a difference. I can’t feel anything from those two. This,” he stroked the wand, “is practically screaming at me.”

“Ah well, that’s one thought ruled out,” Ollivander said mysteriously. “Go ahead, then! In your own time.”

“How do you control the drill, Sir?”

“Oh! Yes, yes, silly me. A foot pedal. See? Yes, that’s it. Give it a little press and get the feel. Oh yes, that’s it. Good, good.”

Harry felt Ollivander hovering as he aligned the drill and began, but soon, he was aware of nothing else but the drill and the wood and the ache in his arms.
Everything faded away but the sense of the path he was trying to follow, the tension he needed to maintain to get there, the steadiness of holding the wand exactly right.

When he had finished, his shoulders felt as if he had been hung in a torture chamber, his back was screaming, and his vision odd from focussing through one eye.

He put the wand down carefully, got up and stretched. He was shocked to see that it was dark outside and that he had been working by strong lamplight. He had not even been aware of the transition.

Mr Ollivander bustled back in. “All done? Excellent. You must be exhausted. No one realises how physical wand making is!”

“I’m really sorry, Sir, I’ve kept you so late – I had no idea of the time.”

“Late! Pshaw! When one is having such fun, what is late? But you must be starving. Come and have some of Lottie’s stew.”

“I really don’t want to inconvenience you, Sir. Could I come back tomorrow?”

“Come back tomorrow? No no! You can’t stop now! It needs to be finished! And you need to eat first, the next bit is hard. Come!”

Harry followed the man upstairs, and after a trip to the bathroom sat down at a scrubbed wood table in a very cosy kitchen, and tucked into a huge bowl of stew served with hunks of delicious bread.

Lottie had already eaten, but bustled about looking after them and finally settled at the table with a small glass of something purple and alcoholic to keep them company.

“Well, Mr Potter, still at school? What’s your favourite lesson?” she asked cheerily.

“Yes, Madam,” Harry said, because he wasn’t sure if she was Mrs Ollivander or not.

“Oh, no need to be formal! Call me Lottie! Everyone does,” she said encouragingly.

“Well, call me Harry, then, please. I’m not much good at wizarding etiquette,” Harry said in embarrassment, “I’m never quite sure what’s done or not,” he admitted.

“Nice manners don’t have to follow rules,” Lottie smiled at him, “and yours seem very pretty, Harry.”

Harry smiled back.

There was pudding too – fruit crumble and custard.

Harry licked the last fraction from his spoon and beamed at the cook. “That was absolutely delicious, Lottie! I tasted clove and cardamom, but there was something else?”

“Well! A young man who can cook? What a surprising person you are!” and they exchanged recipes for a minute or two.

“Well, work to be done, I’m afraid,” Mr Ollivander said, standing up.

“Shall I wash the dishes first?” Harry asked, standing quickly.
Lottie laughed. “Get on with you! I’ll finish up up here, you’ve more important things to be getting on with! I can see Barny champing at the bit.”

Harry grinned, and in a moment of impulse, leant over and pecked Lottie on the cheek. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Oh! You sweetheart! Off now, before Barny gets jealous!” she chuckled, but was obviously delighted.

Harry followed down the stairs and back into the workroom.

“We put the core in next, Mr Ollivander?” he asked.

“Oh ho! My wife’s Lottie and I’m Mr Ollivander?”

“I wouldn’t presume – “

“At this time of night we’ve had enough ceremony! Barny is my name, and a good name too!”

“Thank you – Barny,” Harry grinned.

“Well, well, Mr Potter –“

“Harry.”

“Delighted, my boy. Very well then, Harry. First the easy bit, and then the hard. Or maybe you won’t find it so. Anyway, here we go! Fawkes’ feather into the wand, Harry!”

Harry picked up the feather and gently eased it into the slot. He noticed that Mr Ollivander – Barney – had not touched either the feather or wand at any point, and realised that it was quite deliberate. It was going to be his wand, his work, or not at all. He was actually very happy about that.

“Good, simple that bit, eh? With a feather, anyway. Other cores take time to get in, you know. Not straightforward at all. Imagine mermaid’s scales. Very tricky. And as for – well, well! I digress. Now, you need to seal it.”

“That’s always where I come unstuck,” Harry said. “There must be a spell?”

“No, no spell.”

Harry’s face dropped.

“No words, anyway. But you can do wandless and wordless, I noticed, so you should be fine. Now. You have to regrow the wood a bit. Bring it back to life just enough so that inside, it grows up to every tiny hair on the feather, and no further. So that those little hairs are intact, but there isn’t a molecule of space between the two.”

Harry looked at the wand, and the task seemed enormous.

“How do I do that?” he asked.

“Hold the wand. Feel it. Shut your eyes. That’s all I can tell you, Harry.”

Harry did. He could feel the special something that he had always associated with this piece of wood. It felt different now, with the feather inside it. But he didn’t know what he was looking for.
He opened his eyes and looked at Ollivander, who just smiled back at him encouragingly.

Harry shut his eyes again.

What could he do to make this work? To control so explicitly the meeting of these two materials? He thought about wands. That they controlled external magic, earth magic, not his own. A channel. And not just earth. Fumbling, he stood up. He needed the elements.

“Do you have a garden?” he asked.

Ollivander smiled. “This way.”

He took Harry outside into the small garden behind the shop. Fumbling on instinct, Harry took his shoes off and stood in the soil of the flowerbed, feeling the damp shift of the earth under his toes. The air brushed coolly around him. He looked at Ollivander and blushed.

“Whatever you need to do, dear boy, whatever you need to do.”

Harry stepped onto the patch of grass again and stripped off his clothes. He felt ridiculous but excited at the same time. The air was chill against his skin, but that in itself felt right.

What else? Fire and water. He looked round. There was a water butt underneath the guttering.

“It’s all rain water?” Harry asked.

Ollivander nodded. Harry felt happier in his skin, as the old man seemed to take it in his stride.

So just the fire.

There was a brazier in the corner, and Harry summoned it. There was some brush and wood chippings already in it, under its lid. Harry looked up at Ollivander.

“Whatever you will,” the man encouraged.

Harry lit the fire. He could feel the flames against his skin, the flickering warmth, and the cold on his back.

He took the wand in his hand, and began to draw power.

And stopped.

It didn’t feel right.

What was missing? He had all the elements.

What was it? He shivered.

The fire crackled.

Ollivander’s face was cast in sharp planes by the shadows.

“I need the sun,” he said.

“Sun? Yes? Well, get dressed then, Harry, before you freeze,” Ollivander said pragmatically.

Harry pulled his clothes on, feeling disappointed but knowing that it was the right decision.
“Would you have any time for me to come back tomorrow?” Harry asked hopefully.

“Good heavens, dear boy, you can’t go home now! A bed! Sleep here! We can continue in the morning!”

“But your business – and I don’t want to put Lottie out.”

“Tush! We’ve always got a bed made up! Grandchildren, nephews and nieces – always coming to stay! Convenient for the Alley, you see!” He leant forward conspiratorially. “Lottie loves it! Can’t live on wand-making alone you know! Friends. Family. That’s what life is all about. Taking time to enjoy them. Each big picture is made up of small strokes, Harry.”

And so, after a firewhisky night cap, Harry found himself tucked up in bed under the eaves, tired, content and excited.

Barny Ollivander stood looking out of the landing window the following morning. The sun was only just peeking over the gables and chimney pots, gilding them with sharp spring light. It was going to be a pleasant day.

An interesting day, indeed.

Harry Potter was in his garden, naked as the day he was born, tracking the sun and finding the spot where it would first break past the shadows. Oh, very good! Such a delight to see such a natural grasp of things! Well, well! Lottie came to stand beside him, wrapping a shawl over her nightdress.

“Good lord,” she said. “He is, then?”

“Seems that way. What an honour, what an honour!” Their hands slipped into each others, the route familiar after more than a century, and they watched together.

The sun crested next door’s end wall and hit the young man standing waiting for it. Even behind the window they could feel the pull of power, familiar as they were with wand-making.

“The strength!” Lottie gasped.

“Indeed!”

It did not take long. There were no trumpets. Moments later, Harry Potter carefully waved the wand through the air, plunged it into the flames in the brazier, doused it in the water butt, and then poked it into the earth. Then he pulled it out, laid it on the grass in the sunshine, and calmly proceeded to dress.

“I’ll put the kettle on,” Lottie said. “Bring him up, dear, he’ll have an appetite on him!”

Ollivander skipped his usual routine and waved his wand over himself to dress, then slipped down the stairs and met Harry as he came in the back door.

“Barny?” he looked sheepish. “I needed to do it at first light—”

“Yes, yes, very good thinking too. Full of hope and freshness, that wand! Very imaginative. We witnessed from the window. Do come and eat, you’ll be hungry. Lottie has the breakfast on, I’m sure.”
Harry followed up the stairs, and ate every scrap of bacon, eggs, mushrooms, sausages and toast that were put before him.

“I must wash up this time,” he grinned at Lottie.

“Well dear, why don’t you do that whilst Barny talks to Jemima and Alfric? And I need to sort my hair.”

So Harry washed the dishes and pans, enjoying the mundane activity and the hot water. His body felt surprisingly energised, though he had expected to feel drained by the magic.

He made his way downstairs.

“Pop it on the table, Harry. I’ve sent Alfric off to get some more wood. Africa. He loves a hot climate.”

Harry placed the wand on the table, and Ollivander studied it as if it were an intricate antique.

“The balance?”

Harry lifted it and gave a quick flick. The shower of silver sparks circled, swooped down around Mr Ollivander, who chuckled gleefully, and disappeared with a musical harmony.

“Oh, lovely, lovely! Yes, yes!”

“And no rattle,” Harry grinned.


Harry looked at the wand. So many decisions! “Just a light polish – smooth but not slippery. No colour added.”

“Very well. Just a very light sanding, I think. It looks very smooth already.”

He bustled off and returned with a beige sheet of very fine sandpaper. Harry sat and gently rubbed the wand, and when he was happy with it, coated it with the silky polish Ollivander had laid out on the table.

“Mr Ollivander? Barny?” he began tentatively, when he felt that there was not a rub more needed.

Mr Ollivander, who was pootling with a box in the corner, turned to look at him.

“Thank you. I’ve really enjoyed doing this. Do you have vacancies for apprentices? I know I have business with Voldemort first, but if I live and –“

Ollivander hooted with laughter and came and sat next to Harry. He was wiping tears from his eyes.

“Dear boy! Do you know how long an apprenticeship takes?”

Harry shook his head.

“Alfric has been with me for sixty four years. He can’t make a wand on his own yet.”

“What? But –“
“He’s learning. Dear fellow. He’ll be competent. Jemima will be better, in the end. It’s an art, Harry.”

“But –“

“Yes, yes. I was very confused when you came in. Usually, it’s a staff first. The wand comes years later. Years, dear man! But – well, your request was unusual. And I felt – well, sometimes it’s all instinct, isn’t it? Wand-making is very instinctual, don’t you agree?”

“Yes, of course, “Harry nodded, bemused again, “but I’m not following you, Barny, I’m sorry –“

“Mages, dear boy. Usually a staff calls to them. Years later, they make their wand. But you are different, and why not?” he beamed.

“Mages?” Harry croaked.

“Nothing to worry about! Just very powerful wizards, Harry!”

“Like Albus Dumbledore? Voldemort?”

“No, no! Have you looked at Tom Riddle? Not powerful at all! Clever, though. Have a good look at him, do! See if it doesn’t scream at you. Albus – well, he’s very strong. But a mage – no, a mage is a bit different. You can’t learn it. It’s like being a squib or a wizard. There’s genes there, but – well!”

Harry laid his head on his hands on the table.

“Now then! What’s all this? Nothing to worry about, Harry! Good lord, no!”

Harry turned his face to look at the other man. “I think I’ve got a staff,” he mumbled.

“What? What’s that? Explain, do!”

“When I started getting a thing for the apple tree,” he blushed, “I pruned it a bit. The garden was overgrown. And there was a branch that seemed perfect for holding – and it felt good and – well, I’d had a bonfire with the rest but I couldn’t bring myself – I stuck it by the back door.”

“Yes? And then?”

Harry sat up, and leant his chin against his hand, elbow on the table as he spoke. “I – you probably don’t know – there’s a chamber under Hogwarts. I met a basilisk there in second year. Anyway, I went back, and got a tooth. It’s dead, of course,” – he interjected hastily. “Three, actually.”

“Basilisk tooth! Good heavens! Go on!” The man was almost jumping with excitement.

“Well, I pushed them into the wood. Through the end. Well, one at each end and one sideways through the middle. The point sticks out the other side. But it’s not venomous anymore,” Harry hastened to say.

“Indeed, ingenious! No need for the binding! The wood and teeth already right up to each other. Genius!”

Harry blushed. “Well, I could feel it was magical, and I used to hold it quite a lot – I expect that sounds stupid,” he groaned.

“Not at all! Outside? Connection to the earth?”
Harry nodded, relieved at the telling and the understanding. He had thought it was barmy at the time, that he felt he could think about magic better holding an apple branch shoved into the earth out in the open air.

“Well, it was really helpful, but not really practical, is it? So I got the urge to make a wand. And you know the rest.”

“Well, that’s a treat for a wand-maker to know, Harry. And now it’s time. You won’t mind if Lottie and Jemima join me, will you?”


“A mage is a very rare thing. For a wand–maker – well. I can only say that this honour will be the highlight of my working life.”

“The honour is mine,” Harry protested. “I couldn’t have done it without you – “

“Ah, but you did! Advice – yes. But everything else – all yours, Mage.”

Barny strode to the doorway. “Lottie! Come down, dear! Jemima! Any customers? No? Shut the shop for the moment. Yes, yes, put up the sign. That’s it. Good girl.”

The women bustled in, Lottie smiling and Jemima curious.

“Jemima dear, we have a profound honour today. You are luckier than I can say to witness this, so early in your life. Mr Potter has made his own wand.”

Jemima stared at the old man, at Harry, and back again. Barny was grinning from ear to ear, nodding his head repeatedly.

He looked up at Harry. “There’s a form, dear boy. A tradition. Just let it flow over you. You’ll know what to do.”

And suddenly, all three had sunk to their knees, crossed their fists, and said the words Harry had heard a number of times since.

Harry had felt embarrassed, pleased, awed. Contrary to Barny’s belief, he hadn’t known what to do. But these people were wand-makers.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “Would you like to see it?” he asked tentatively.

And that had been the right thing to say. Ollivander, who had not touched it up to that point, took the wand reverently in his hands.

There followed much technical muttering as it was passed round.

Finally, Jemima went back into the shop, as someone was banging hard on the door.

“Thank you so much,” Harry said to Barny and Lottie. “I’m awfully sorry if it’s rude to broach money, but what do I owe you? Your shop has been shut and your time and the food and bed –“ he gabbled in embarrassment.

“Nonsense!” Lottie’s cheeks wobbled as she spoke. “Even had you not succeeded, it was a pleasure to have you here. Bed and board indeed!” but she smiled to show she had neither taken nor meant offence.
“And for me – the thrill – payment enough, I assure you, Harry. Really. Though if you are passing .”

“Yes?” Harry encouraged.

“I would be intrigued – professional interest, you know – to see your staff.”

Harry looked from one to the other. “I’d be delighted if I could repay your kindness by asking you both to dinner. You could see the staff. And the tree,” Harry added.

And they had come. Several times. Harry regarded them as the grandparents he had never had.

A smile on his face, he turned to look at his friends.

“Miles away, there mate!” Ron grinned. “Wand. Wooden variety. Making it. Spill!”

Harry shook his head. “Professional secret. Can’t say. Sorry!”

Ron threw his other pillow at him.
The following evening, being Tuesday, Harry made his way to his classroom, this time accompanied by Ron and Hermione as well as Neville.

The class were already gathered, and conversation was blooming. Harry was thrilled at the ease settling amongst this diverse mix of people, drawn by chance from all the Houses. Faces looked up, brows furrowed, at the intruders.

“Hi all,” Harry greeted them.

There was a slight nod from all of them, apart from Severus, as if they wanted to bow but weren’t sure about Ron and Hermione.

Harry sat at the large table that was their usual start set up.

“I’ve brought Ron and Hermione. They’ll be bound by the same magic that prevents you talking about anyone else, and as you’ve all mastered the big number it’s time to expand our repertoire. Everyone ok with that?”

“No problem,” Ernie said. “Hi mate,” he grinned at Ron. They played chess occasionally.

“Right. I’m really delighted with you all,” Harry beamed, “and I hope you’re part way to forgiving me. I know it was hard and nasty.”

He heard the “Too bloody right,” but on the whole the reaction wasn’t too bad. They were all here, anyway.

“Now, I need to know, is everyone ok? Any odd side effects? Too tired? You can speak to me now or after, but if you are experiencing any problems it’s probably worth mentioning now, because someone else might feel the same and we can help each other out.”

Harry looked round carefully.

“No wonky magic?”

“My wand sort of feels alien,” Ernie ventured. There were other nods of agreement.

“Still works ok, though?” Harry asked.

“Oh yeah, everything feels really easy,” Ernie grinned.

“It’s because you’ve felt that other sort of magic,” Harry said. “It makes earth magic feel new again, somehow. Give it a few days and you’ll have adapted. Anything else?”

“I’ve been really tired,” Padma admitted.

“Have you been eating enough?” Harry asked. “Really, wandless burns up loads of calories. You’ll never need to diet or anything. Not that you need to anyway, Padma,” he added hastily.

“I have been eating because I’ve been hungry all the time, but I’m still tired.”

Harry was concerned. Food always did it for him. And it had been a couple of days already.
“Maybe you’ve been practicing it on your own too much?”

Padma shook her head.

“Maybe you should go to Madam Pomfrey,” Harry said worriedly.

“I suggest asking the house elves for liver or steak for supper,” Severus intoned in his deep voice.

They all looked at him. Harry had made sure he’d had meat, but his immediate need had always been for carbohydrates.

“I don’t wish to embarrass you, but we could discuss this forever. I believe your exhaustion is compounded by the fact that you are menstruating,” Severus added matter of factly.

Padma went bright red, her hand slipping to her skirt in case she had had an accident.

The boys didn’t know where to look, whilst Hermione and Eloise gave sympathetic glances.

“Oh please!” Severus said snarkily. “Excluding our newcomers, we’ve all carried out bodily functions in front of each other. There is no shame in menstruating. Old customs revered the transition to womanhood, and it was celebrated. Perhaps we would be wise to bring back such traditions, if you are all to be namby-pamby about it.”

“But how did you know?” Padma croaked.

“I have a nose of exceedingly large proportions, Miss – Padma. Despite its appearance it is advantageous to a potions master.”

“You can smell me?” she said in horror, as the boys snickered at Severus’ self portrait.

“Please. I can smell every girl menstruating in my class.”

He paused, assessing the look of horror on the girls’ faces, the relief on the boys’.

“And of course every boy who has nipped off to have a wank between classes,” he added.

Ron choked, Neville went bright red, Ernie smirked, and Harry thanked god that he always washed with different soaps and shampoos every time he changed persona.

“I won’t mention the horrors of teenage personal hygiene,” Snape finished.

“Thank heaven for that,” Harry grinned. “See, team effort does work! Moving on! I want you all to use your wandless all the time. Try using it for everything for a while. See what it’s better for and what it isn’t.”

“When other people are around?” Eloise asked.

Harry nodded. “You can’t hide it forever. If people ask, which I expect they will, you can say it’s just come to you, which is true. It’ll up the ante. More people will try it. Most won’t succeed, or find the little they can do not worth the effort. There are many here at Hogwarts working under par, though you lot were a beacon of need,” he teased.

“Respect!” Ernie grinned. “Think of the respect!”

Eli chuckled. “They all think I’m useless.”
“We’ll show them,” Ernie grabbed her hand.

“You ought to try some workings together,” Neville said quietly, “you have compatible magic.”

“What?’”

Neville looked at Harry, who encouraged him to continue.

“I can see magical signatures. Yours are really compatible. It could have interesting results.”

“Way to go! We could try that here in a minute,” Harry smiled encouragement. “But first, some heavy stuff. You all know I stand against Voldemort. And I know you are all committed to me or to the fight against him.”

He saw the eyes shift around the class, looking at Severus, darting away, returning to note his composed exterior.

“Some of the work in this class will inevitably focus on tasks to forward our fight against him. Not all. And I don’t want anyone to feel bludgered into anything they don’t want to do. If you are unhappy about anything, as before, speak to me, either at the time or whenever you prefer. If you have a project of your own you want to work on, great! Is that understood? Everything here is voluntary.”

There were mumbles of assent.

“Good. Now for this evening. Ernie and Eli, as mentioned. Draco, I’d like you to work with Hermione on a potion – yes, I know Severus is the expert, but sometimes a fresh approach is the best thing. Severus can look over it when you’ve moved it along. I’ll give you the details in a minute. Severus, I’d like you and Ron to work on some strategy. We’ll discuss that in a moment. Padma, you can see the actual shape of spells?”

She nodded.

“Good. Then I want you to watch Ernie and Eloise, ok, analyse what’s happening. Alright?”

Everyone broke up into groups, each setting up their own work area.

He spoke first to Hermione and Draco.

“I’d like you both to work on a potion. Well,” he backtracked, “it could be a charm, but I suspect a potion will be most useful. I want something that’s long-lasting – several hours, if possible – and will increase power several times.”

“Why do you think a charm wouldn’t work?” Hermione asked.

“We’re going to need all the available power we’ve got at the time. It needs to be something ready to use, leaving everyone free.”

“Who’s it for?” Draco asked.

“Me,” Harry said, causing Draco to choke on the pumpkin juice that he was sipping. Harry had asked the house elves to provide food and drink to counter the effects of wandless magic use.

“You’re a bloody mage! How power hungry can you get?” he asked in disbelief.

“Voldemort is drawing power from hundreds of supporters,” Harry explained. “My bet is, when it
comes to the crunch, he’ll draw all their power to defeat me, regardless of the consequences to
them. But I expect we’ll all be fighting, so I don’t want anyone else to be wasting their efforts
holding a charm on me when they need the power for themselves. So, I’d like it to multiply my
power. If it can work on everyone too, that would be excellent, but without sounding snotty, if I’m
the only one who can get rid of the bastard, it makes sense to make sure I can do it. Willing to give
it a try?"

Hermione looked at Draco. “What do you think? A dragon’s blood base has strengthening effects.”

“Yeah, but it’s so volatile. We’d need to –“

Harry got up.

Hermione turned to him, her hair flicking round. “Great project, Harry. Thanks!”

Ron and Severus were already sitting next to a low table in a couple of comfy armchairs. Harry
wondered who had transfigured them. There was also an impermeable sound shield in place.

Harry perched on the arm of Ron’s chair.

“Severus, Ron. Alright? I’d like you to work on some strategy for the upcoming war. Severus, Ron
may have said that he has been researching Muggle and Wizard warfare and is getting pretty
knowledgeable, but you will know if his ideas are workable from your insider information and
your general good sense. I don’t know how you think this might work, strategically, but I’ve been
having this idea.

We know that I have to kill Voldemort. I’ve asked Mione and Draco to work on a strengthening
potion, so that I can face him even if he tried to draw all his supporters’ power through the Mark.
So we need to think of a way to set up the battle to our advantage, given that we don’t know how
to find his base. Can I set you off thinking along this scenario? Of course, all other ideas most
welcome. It’s probably a crap idea.”

“Okay, Harry, that’s a starter,” Ron nodded, and Harry saw the man in the lanky body for the first
time. “It’ll get us talking at least, working together.”

“It is an interesting idea, Harry. I’d be happy to help with the potion, as you know. Are they
considering –“

“Hold up, Severus! Let them move along with it, and then look at their work. I’m very happy if
you have any time to consider it too, in parallel, but unless we get the strategy right no amount of
potions is going to do the trick.”

“Very well. Ronald – “

“Ron. Can’t stand Ronald ever since I saw this Muggle figure outside a restaurant.”

Snape snorted. “I enjoyed the burgers though,” he commented.

“You’ve been to a McDonald’s?” Ron gasped.

Harry, grinning, left them to it. That had been a very good night. Cinema, McDonalds – Snape’s
face was a picture – and home to bed.
Later, Harry joined Draco and Severus as they made their way down to the potion master’s quarters.

“Are you ready for this, Professor?” Harry asked, as the man began to take off his robe.

“As ready as I’ll ever be, given that I have wished this thing gone for two decades,” he retorted. “You may continue to call me Severus if you wish, Mr Potter. We are in private.”

“Thank you. Then it’s Harry.”

Snape inclined his head.

“Where should we do this?”

“On your bed if you don’t mind,” Draco said. “There’ll be room for all of us,” he added, and then blushed bright red, remembering that Severus liked men.

“You need have no worries for your virtue, either of you,” Severus said, drawing himself up. “We can go to the infirmary or create a medical couch in here if you prefer.”

“The bed sounds much more comfortable,” Harry said, knowing that indeed it was.

Severus looked at Potter. Draco’s pale beauty did nothing for him, but the thought of Potter’s tousled head on his pillow was a thought he’d rather not have.

However, needs must.

With a burst of flames, Dumbledore arrived through the floo.

“Good evening, all,” he greeted jovially. “Ready?”

Severus looked at Draco, his hands hovering by his shirt buttons.

Draco was still a glowing tomato, but nodded, and tried to sound authoritative. “Yes, please, Severus. Undo all the front, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Harry tried not to watch. He did. But Severus’ body was so —uhhhmmm! The planes of his chest — he could see Severus’ chest hair now, could feel the slow glide of Severus’ fingers through his button-holes. He turned away quickly. Getting aroused would not be a good idea, especially as he and Draco were going to link minds in a moment.

Severus wondered if Potter were repulsed by him. He was old enough to be his father after all, and just because a man was gay didn’t mean he lacked discrimination. Potter was powerful, attractive and lithe. He could have any man, and probably did.

They all moved through into the bedroom. Dumbledore conjured an armchair and sat himself down. Severus lay down on the bed, shirt spread open, head on the pillows.

Harry gulped.

He shut his eyes and forced himself to think of why they were there.

“Potter – Harry?” Draco prompted. He was already kneeling on the bed beside Severus. Harry couldn’t decide whether it looked hot or made him feel jealous.
“Sorry,” he turned away again, struggling to get his libido under control. Dumbledore was in the room, for Merlin’s sake! And – oh shit! Severus would be able to smell his arousal! He shut his thoughts off at once.

“How’s it going?” Draco asked.

Harry looked back quickly. “I’m not too keen on legilimency. Never been too good at occluding,” he prevaricated, “give me a sec to get myself ready.”

“Your powers haven’t helped with that?” Severus said with professional interest.

“Never put it to the test,” Harry responded.

“But what about Voldemort?”

“Oh, I sort of shut that down, rather than occluded, like we’re going to try on you. That’s why I’m pretty hopeful it will work,” he added, coming over to the bed at last.

He knelt on the other side of Severus, trying not to inhale his scent or lean too close.

“But you want me to do it here, right?” Draco questioned.

“Yes. I don’t think my scar works in the same way as the Dark Mark at all – there wasn’t any willing choice in its creation, for a start. And knowing how my magic feels isn’t the same as handling someone else’s. I may be a mage, but I don’t appear to be any good at healing. It’s obviously a very specific gift, like the Sight, or Nev’s.”

“Okay. Once we link, we can be sure of what we are doing together,” Draco said. “Severus, do you need sedation? Something for the pain if there is anything? I can’t guarantee my skills at all, so if you have a potion at the ready – blast, we should have thought of this before.”

Harry knew, though of course he couldn’t say, that Severus had a bottle of pain relief elixir in his bedside drawer, which he used after a bad night at the Dark Lord’s. He was relieved to see Severus reach across and put it on the top.

Draco looked curious, but restrained himself from asking why a strong pain potion was by the bed.

Draco and Harry reached out their hands and laid them on Severus’ chest, Draco’s underneath.

“Here we go,” Draco whispered, and they made eye contact.

They spent an unknown time adjusting to each other, accepting the meld, before Draco focussed his energies on Severus.

Harry found it extraordinary as they fell into Severus’ body. He could feel the cells, the nerves firing, the blood whooshing. He could feel Severus’ magic, the strength of it! But – yes – something was off.

Draco seemed to do nothing and Harry wondered if there was a problem, but suddenly Draco seemed to have found the point of loss and was dragging them to it, looking at it, feeling it without getting too close. Draco reached out, gently, so gently that Harry marvelled. His mind could feel Draco’s intention, and he began to siphon his power into Draco as he began to encircle the node. Slowly, slowly, a tourniquet was applied. Draco seemed to sit back, and Harry felt him seeking his opinion. How were they to set the parameters to shrink the outflow slowly, slowly, but never to the point of cutting it off? Carefully, on instinct, Draco set the magic. It was as they began to withdraw...
that something seemed to go haywire.

Physically, Harry could feel Severus start to convulse beside him. Panicking, Harry tried to communicate with Draco. Something terrible was happening. Harry could feel that Dumbledore had come to hold Severus. Mentally he was screaming at Draco.

The next minute, Draco had thrown him out.

Harry could suddenly see Severus, from outside his body, the muscular spasms tightening him like a bowstring. Dumbledore had shoved something between his teeth.

Harry was terrified. Why had Draco thrown him out? Had he done this to Severus? Had he done something wrong? Shaking, taking his eyes from Severus for just a moment, he caught Dumbledore’s eye.

“What’s happening?” he gasped. He could feel tears of terror and fear pooling in the corners of his eyes and brushed them away savagely. “What can I do?”


Harry slipped his arms about the beloved body, trying to hold onto the flailing limbs.

All of a sudden Severus gave a great gasp and lay still. Draco’s head fell onto his chest.

“Oh god, no!” Harry felt hysterical. “He can’t be – he’s not –“

He grabbed the now floppy wrist. He could feel no pulse. He tried to shove Draco’s head out of the way so that he could listen to Severus’ heart.

“He’s alright,” Draco groaned.

“He’s got no pulse!” Harry shouted.

“You’re probably feeling in the wrong place,” Draco straightened up, grabbed Harry’s hand, and held it over Severus’ chest.

He didn’t take him in; just let Harry feel the steady thump under his fingers.

Dumbledore was straightening Severus out, making him comfortable, but Harry could not take his hand away from that confirmation of life.

Draco flopped to the side of Severus, laying full length.

Dumbledore threw a blanket over the two of them, the cloth pooling over Harry’s knees.

“We shouldn’t have done it,” he whispered, horrified. “Why did we think we could – oh, dear god.” He bowed his head, just resting it on Severus’ chest. He thought he might throw up.

“Stop panicking,” Draco said calmly, even as he lay unmoving. “He was never in danger of dying. I had him.”

Harry lifted his head and looked at Draco. He meant it.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I can never thank you enough. I’m so sorry I suggested you go through that.”
“Potter, stop being such a wimp. It was fun!”

Harry gawked.

“Fun!”

“Well, there was a moment of worry, obviously, but then I had it under control. It felt – good, you know?”

“No, and I never want to! Dear god, Draco!”

“Healer Malfoy, can I help you sit up?” Dumbledore bustled quietly. “You need to eat something and then you’ll feel better.”

He helped the young man sit up against the headboard, and held a cup of something steaming to his mouth. Harry noted that despite his comments, Draco’s hands were shaking so much he couldn’t hold the cup, and allowed Dumbledore to help him.

If Harry wasn’t so shaken, he knew the scene would make him laugh. Draco next to Snape in bed, with Dumbledore attending and Harry freaking like an idiot.

“You too, Harry,” Dumbledore said gently.

Harry started to shake his head but thought better of it. “I think I’ll be sick,” he admitted.

“It has an anti-nausea component,” Dumbledore soothed. “Have a sip or two.”

A second cup rose in the air and hovered in front of Harry.

“What about Severus?”

“Let him sleep,” Draco said.

Harry accepted his authority, and carefully took the cup. Several sips later, he felt much better.

“Did it work, Draco?” he asked.

“Yup.”

Harry hung his head. He felt absolutely wrung out. He didn’t know if he wanted to vomit, cry, or what.

His hand was still on Severus’ chest. He looked at his face. He was pale, but then he always was. And there was none of that tightening associated with pain.

“Will he be in pain when he wakes up?” he asked.

“I don’t think so,” Draco commented. “At a guess, I’d say he’ll feel better than he usually does. Though he might need a muscle relaxant after the convulsions,” he added thoughtfully.

Harry nodded, and reluctantly slipped his hand away.

He staggered off the bed.

“He needs to be watched,” he said quietly. “Draco, you’re too tired.”

“I am,” Draco surprisingly agreed, “and you must be too. I drew a ton of power off you. I don’t
know how you can walk around with that much flooding you all the time.”

Harry didn’t know want to say, and didn’t need to say anything, because Dumbledore, who had been remarkably quiet and efficient, took control.

“You two boys need to go to bed,” he said. “I will stay with Severus. If he needs anything, I will call Madam Pomfrey, and if it seems to require your special skills, I will call you, Draco.”

“Please call me too,” Harry almost begged. “Draco might need my power.” He hated having no right to stay, no excuse.

Dumbledore looked at Harry over his glasses. Harry didn’t know what he was thinking.

“Very well, Harry,” he said at last. “You two have done Severus a great service, you know. Well done, boys.” And he sat himself down in the chair, drawing a book from within his robes.

They were dismissed, and walked back into Severus’ sitting room, closing the door quietly.

Harry stood by the floo, ready to return to his chamber, whilst Draco walked slowly to the door. Harry thought better of using the floo given the state of his stomach, and went to join Draco.

“I can’t face the floo. Can you check for me no-one’s around? It’s not suspicious you being here, but me –“

“Sure.” Draco touched the door handle and then turned to Harry. “Pot –Harry. I know that was scary, but your power was really useful in there. I couldn’t have done it without you. When I’m trained – if I live that long – “ his lips curled, “I might get difficult cases. We worked well together. Might you - ?”

“After I was such a sissy?”

“I had all the control. Not having it is scary, I understand that. But if at some time you trust me, we could do some good stuff together. Consider it?”

Harry touched Draco’s shoulder briefly: he knew his touch spooked him. “I’d be honoured to, Draco,” he said sincerely.
Friends Doing What They Do Best

It wasn’t until Hermione asked, that Harry realised he didn’t even know what had gone wrong with Severus.

He had made his way through the castle in a daze, and climbed through the entrance to the Gryffindor common room on automatic pilot, just determined to reach his chamber.

“Hey, Harry!” Hermione called out from the squishy sofa in front of the fire.

He turned glazed eyes towards her, as if he had suddenly stepped into a different reality.

Hermione had the books off her lap and was standing in front of him before he’d walked three paces.

“What’s up?” she said gently, hand on his arm.

“Let’s get him to his room,” Neville said, coming up alongside him.

Somehow Ron was there too and they were all crowding into Harry’s room.

He sat down on the bed.

“Wait a mo,” Ron said, and disappeared off, returning less than a minute later with a bottle of firewhisky.

“Take a swig, mate, I haven’t got any glasses.”

Harry did, and passed the bottle on.

“Where did you get this?” Hermione asked, wiping her lips daintily after her go.

“Bill gave it to me last time I saw him. Said every man needed a bottle for medicinal purposes.”

“I won’t go into how sexist that sounds,” Hermione said with an exasperated sigh.

“True though, eh?” he said, nodding his head towards Harry.

“What happened, Harry?” Neville asked quietly. “Did it not work? Was there a problem?”

“No. Yes.” Harry brushed a shaking hand over his hair.

“Care to elaborate on that?” Ron said, passing him the bottle again, “seeing as I haven’t a clue what you’re talking about?”

Harry took the bottle automatically but it just hung loose from his hands. He tried to pull his brain together, to make sense of the words.

Right. Ron and Hermione didn’t know where he’d gone after the class. Neville did. Everything was happening so fast and he was losing track.

He explained that he, Dumbledore and Draco had gone to cut off Snape’s magic from Voldemort.

“Hold on. What’s Malfoy got to do with it?” Ron asked.
Oh damn, there was such a lot he hadn’t told them.

“He found he was a Healer this weekend,” Neville explained.

“What? Draco Mr High-and-Mighty Malfoy a Healer? You have to be kidding me?” Ron sat back on his heels.

“Yeah, he is,” Harry confirmed. “That is, Nev’s not kidding and yes Draco is,” he clarified.

Ron shook his head. “And – let me get this right – a couple of days after he’d discovered it, you expected him to be able to just do stuff?”

It did sound utterly ridiculous, Harry agreed in hindsight.

“The thing is, he knows what to do,” Neville said. “He helped me at the weekend – that’s how he found out.”

“Helped you how?”

“I’d sort of overdone it and conked out,” Neville said sheepishly. “As I was coming round I could feel him in me –“

“Eeww!” Ron grimaced.

Mione slapped his arm. “Shut up, Ron! How did it feel, Neville?”

Neville shrugged. “Hard to explain. I – I just felt he knew what he was doing, that he felt perfectly at ease. Not like it was an alien invasion, or something”, he gave a small smile, not yet comfortable with making jokes. “He gave me some of his magic.”

“He did?” Hermione said in surprise.

“Yeah. And we all know how he’s despised me for years, so I think he really has got the Healer thing properly. You know, having to treat all and sundry. I’d trust him anytime, anyway.”

“I can’t see Draco Pureblood Malfoy consenting to help anyone of mixed blood,” Ron sneered. “He might not like you but you’re a pureblood, Nev.”

“Actually,” Harry inserted, “I think he’s quite interested in finding if there’s any difference to the feel of purebloods and us lesser species. I said you might be interested in helping him research, Hermione.”

“No way! No way is that git getting inside you!” Ron snarled, looking at Mione.

“Hey! This is my body! I make the decisions about it!” Hermione took umbrage.

“No. You’re my girlfriend. I’m not having another man poking around in your body. Especially that ferret.” Ron stuck his chin out mulishly.

Harry and Neville looked at each other, feeling the row brewing. There was no way Hermione would stand for that.

“Look,” Harry said, “if you want to have an argument go and have it somewhere else. I’m absolutely knackered.”

Hermione snapped back to Harry, her eyes softening. “Sorry, Harry, I really want to hear about this
evening. Ron, you and I will talk about this later,” she said severely.

“Damn right we will!” he muttered.

“Well, we went in together –Draco and I. Because I’ve got a connection to Voldemort and the power for doing it, and Draco for feeling his way round and – and making sure Severus didn’t get hurt,” Harry gulped.

“See, I told you he couldn’t be any good,” Ron said, “if it went wrong. So what’s happened to Snape? You reduced him to a gibbering moron?”

Harry looked at Ron. “Get out,” he said coldly.

“Wha -? Only joking, mate, come on!” Ron held up his hands in surrender.

“Yeah? I don’t find it funny. I nearly killed him tonight or something and he hasn’t come round and you can fucking get out if you find that funny!” Harry was standing up, fists clenched, actually yelling now. Ron had been having civilised discussions with Snape less than two hours ago: how could he revert to such childish crassness?

Ron reached out a hand to Harry’s shoulder – Harry shook it off: he couldn’t bear for Ron to touch him right now.

“Look, I’m sorry, mate,” Ron’s arms were out in a gesture of supplication. “I didn’t realise it was anything serious. Thought I’d lighten you up. How – is he going to be alright?”

Harry’s shoulders slumped and he sat down again heavily.

“Draco says he will be. Don’t say another fucking word,” he said, seeing the twitch of Ron’s lips.

“Can you tell us what happened exactly?” Hermione intervened, her voice gentle, a hand tentatively on his arm.

Harry gave her a thankful look. “It all seemed to go alright, we did it. Draco was amazing, believe it or not – “ he said, glaring at Ron before looking back at Hermione. “He was really – delicate. It was amazing going in with him, feeling what he feels. We found the node and tied it down. Then just as we were coming out, Severus started convulsing. I – I panicked. Draco threw me out and sorted him out on his own. Only I thought – I thought he was dead,” he croaked, his throat tightening. He turned his head away; he was having a hard job not to cry. Hermione put her arms round him and that was it, a huge sob tore out of his throat. Tears leaked out of his squeezed-shut eyes. He held on tight, his fists bunched in her robe.

“Sorry, sorry,” he babbled, knowing Ron and Neville would be horrified, but unable to stop the torrent.

Neville settled on the bed beside him and gave him a tentative pat on the back.

Ron was crouched at his feet, a hand resting lightly on his knee. “You cry it all out, mate, no harm in that. Didn’t realise you’d had such a horrible time. Charlie bawled his head off when one of his baby dragons snuffed it, and you don’t get more macho than Charlie, now do you?”

Harry snorted a choking laugh at the irrelevance of Ron thinking he cared whether he was macho or not – but it was a Ron sort of distraction, he knew. The man was often thoughtless but he was also carelessly clever at times. And the tension between them had dissolved in an instant.
Nev handed him an only slightly grubby handkerchief as he eventually pulled away from Hermione, stroking the front of her robe to try and wipe away the wet before he realised that the globe under his palm was her breast.

He yanked his hand away, blushing.

“God, sorry, Mione -” he began.

“Oi! “ Ron teased, “think you can cop a feel just because you’ve had a few tears? Good thing you’re gay, mate, that’s all I can say!”

Neville was blushing, his eyes glancing at Mione’s chest as she gave her front a quick rub.

“So, is he in the hospital wing now?” Mione asked.

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore stayed with him. Draco – Draco says he’ll probably feel better than normal in future,” he said tentatively.

Ron was about to make a comment, but even as he opened his mouth he thought better of it, which was just as well because Hermione and Neville were both glaring at him.

“But you don’t know what happened?” Hermione prompted.

Harry shook his head. “Dumbledore gave us both a drink to get our strength back and then basically told us to go and sleep it off. That was it.”

“Well, you’ll have to ask Draco tomorrow,” Mione said practically.

The abandoned bottle was retrieved and after the emotional outburst they were all glad to have a drink.

Harry took himself off for a shower and the combination of the firewhisky and the hot spray seemed to ease the tension from his muscles. He crawled into bed and slept like a log.

He walked into breakfast almost late the next morning, and nearly wilted in relief to see Snape at the Head Table. The man’s eyes passed over him as he made his way to his regular spot, and his head gave just the tiniest hint of a nod. Harry felt like a fist in his chest had released itself. He turned briefly to look at Draco and saw the Slytherin give him a quick thumbs up, before the boy turned and took up a conversation with Pansy Parkinson.

Ron and Mione grinned at him. He tucked in happily, enjoying a bowl of porridge with cream and brown sugar before moving on to sausages and bacon. He must have used quite a bit of energy the night before.

He had just finished up and was about to leave when Neville scooted into the hall and sat down next to Harry. His robe exuded cold and Harry guessed that Nev had been out to the greenhouses before breakfast.

“I see our friend is better,” Neville commented, grabbing a piece of toast and the marmalade pot.

“Can’t see any improvement yet,” Ron said, “he looks as sour as ever.”

Harry thought of all the times he had seen Severus looking anything but sour – smirking, content, sated, tense with passion - and decided to let the comment pass. He was happy to have those
memories to himself.

“I’m off,” Hermione said, bending over to pick up her bag.

“I’ll walk you,” Ron got up. “I’ve got a free period.”

Once they’d gone, Nev turned to Harry, who had decided to wait a moment as Ron was obviously intending to snog Hermione en route.

“I’ve got an idea,” he said, “Got a moment?”

“Only a short one, I’m due to meet McGonagall for my review.” Term ended the following week, and the sixth form students had individual meetings with their teachers every term to review progress.

“Right. I’ve just had mine with Madam Sprout,” Neville said.

“Before breakfast?”

“I’m usually over the greenhouses first thing and so’s she,” Neville shrugged. “Anyway, the thing is, I’m nipping over to China tonight to take some cuttings from Siu Lee, the old lady who gave me the plant under your window. When I was talking to her last time, she told me her niece ran a small store selling rare ingredients.” He looked at Harry.

Harry thought he knew where this was leading, but was still grinning at the just ‘nipping over to China’ comment.

“Thought you might like to come along?” Neville suggested. “You’re planning on talking to him this weekend, aren’t you? Thought it might soften the blow or something,” Nev blushed at having made the suggestion.

Harry gave him a quick hug, and got up. “You’re a good friend, Nev. Thanks! Love to!”

That evening, having got permission slips from Madam Sprout for the trip, they chatted as they walked to the gates.

Snape had been at lunch as well as breakfast and appeared to be perfectly well. Harry hadn’t had a chance to talk to Draco, but he felt much happier about the events of the previous night.

“Nev, do you have any idea how hard transatlantic apparition is?” Harry asked, rubbing his hands together against the cold.

“Seems alright,” Neville protested, “I suspect it’s just a ruse on the part of the floo companies to get business. I’d rather apparate any day.”

Harry laughed and shook his head. “I looked it up. Only really powerful wizards can apparate huge distances. Even quite strong wizards are scared to attempt it in case they fall short, in the middle of the sea or a foreign country where they don’t speak the language. There’s some really gory stories in ‘The Splinch-free Guide to the Do’s and Don’ts of Successful Apparating’.”
“Good thing I didn’t know then,” Nev grinned at him, clapping his arms across his chest to promote some warmth. A thought occurred to him. “What’s the furthest you’ve apparated, Harry?”

“You alright for managing it, then?”

“Don’t know. In theory I’ve got the power – “

“Why don’t I take us both out – I know where we’re going – and you bring us both back. I can take over if there’s a problem and at least you won’t be distracted by not knowing the location well.”

“You think you can take us both?”

“Yeah, if you’re happy to trust me?” Neville said tentatively.

“You know, your lack of confidence is endearing, Nev, but one of these days you’re going to have to face up to the fact that you’re one of the most powerful wizards on the planet.”

Instead of shrugging it off, Neville didn’t say anything, and Harry wondered if he’d offended him.

“Nev?”

“I like it,” Nev said quietly.

Harry looked at him, waiting for more information, and kept walking, feet crunching on the frozen gravel.

“Knowing that I’ve got all that power in me,” Neville explained, “knowing that people underestimate me. For years, I felt such a failure. Now, that’s really handy. It’s hard to disappoint people if they don’t expect much of you,” he said. “And you can sort of get on with what you want to do without being pestered. God knows what people will expect of you when they know you’re a mage, Harry.”

Harry found the trip with Neville a revelation. Out in China, using his translation spell (“not good enough yet, Harry, I’m still working on it,”) Neville charmed the pants off Siu Lee and her niece. Some of it, he was sure, was down to the fact that Neville had had a lot of experience in handling old ladies; some of it was because his love and knowledge of herbology shone through, and some of it was that his shy and unassuming manner just made people want to do things for him. Neville came back with several more cuttings and plants than he had hoped for, and Harry had a small collection of what he understood to be very rare potions ingredients indeed. As the money he had taken turned out to be unacceptable, he had paid (at Neville’s suggestion) by working a complex strengthening charm on the structure of Sui Lee’s crumbling home. Everyone had been happy.

After apparating them both home (no mid ocean splinching either), he had tumbled into bed utterly exhausted.
Despite his exhaustion on going to bed, Harry had a fitful night’s sleep, full of fleeting anxieties and nameless fears.

He got out of bed and headed down to breakfast. He wondered if he had worked too much magic - he hadn’t felt a limit before, but he had done the big working at the weekend, helped Draco with Severus, apparated two of them back from China, and done a fairly hard bit of magic whilst he was there.

Of course, he could no longer fail to acknowledge that the tense knot in his stomach, and perhaps the nameless night fears, were due to another reason: in less than 36 hours he would be telling Severus that Alex Johnson was, in fact, his all-time favourite student, Harry Potter.

He had put off and put off thinking about it, quite deliberately cutting the two lives apart. But now he had to face up to it. Although he liked the idea of the gift Neville had suggested, he didn’t think it was going to do much to calm Severus’ ire. It might work best when the man had calmed down a bit.

He needed to work out how to explain his reasons. But what was there to say?

_I really fancied you, Severus, and it was sooo good between us. I couldn’t tell you who I was until you’d got your magic properly. If it hadn’t taken you so long I could have told you ages ago....._ 

Maybe not.

_I was in my other persona when I met you. You were so different! Funny! Sexy! Nothing like Professor Snape! And you weren’t so slow to sleep with me either..._

God! What was he going to say?

_Look Severus, I know you’ve always hated me because of my father but I’m not a bastard like him...._

All day various ideas flitted in and out of his head. No brilliant words appeared to help him out of the pit he had dug himself into. He cared for Severus. If he explained that, would it be enough?

Ha! He was talking about Severus Snape.

He felt rougher and rougher throughout the day. He tried to eat a bit more at lunch but anxiety seemed to be tying his stomach in knots and it was hard to force more than a small meal down.

After lunch it was Double Potions. At least he would be able to check that Snape was ok. And afterwards he was going to sleep.

The class filed into the room. Severus was already there, looking at some papers on his desk. Harry settled in his normal place, watching the man surreptitiously. He seemed to be fine, and Harry relaxed.

Potions classes had been easier – less fraught was perhaps a better way of describing it – since they had started NEWTS the year before. The less able or inclined people were no longer in the class,
and that appeared to help Snape’s temper considerably. Although the man still made sarcastic comments on anything from the colour of a potion, its poor consistency or the appalling way ingredients had been prepared, now at least his remarks were related to the work rather than the individual. He was always right too, and in some ways it was easier to accept his acerbic criticism and improve than if he had tiptoed around the fault.

Not that anyone could ever imagine that happening.

Harry had found that his mage powers appeared to lend no improvement to his potions’ skills. He was competent, but that was it. It was disappointing, but he supposed it just proved that being a mage didn’t mean that he was literally all-powerful, as people seemed to assume the term meant. He hadn’t suddenly turned into Trelawney’s best friend either, so maybe he should be thankful for small mercies. And that was odd – that was a branch of magic that mages weren’t suddenly supposed to be proficient at. And Healers were special….Harry realised his mind was wandering. But he hadn’t even considered if any of his group had the Sight, and loath as he was to do it, perhaps it was unfair not to explore this avenue.

Snape had meanwhile called the class to order and Harry had collected his ingredients on autopilot. They were working individually on a complex wart removing potion.

Harry set up the base; potions in a particular family had the same base ingredients and they had been working on how small variations of ingredients let to major changes in purpose and outcome. Although it sounded simple, all work this year was expected to be of perfect quality, suitable for use in the infirmary or wherever else the potion pertained to. Students had to return after hours to redo unsuccessful work and there was a small laboratory for their use to which they had access during evenings and weekends. A house elf called Flinger was always present, his sole job to take control should any situation get out of hand. Harry knew Hermione went there frequently to work on potions of her own devising, and this was encouraged, if not expected. She had, of course, made good friends with Flinger, and had also been furthering her knowledge of house elf society.

Harry had been there plenty of times, but only for redoing work. Much as he liked Severus, potions held no draw for him.

He had looked at potions as he had other subjects, wondering if there were other ways to achieve the results, and had come to the conclusion that although strong magical powers could help the brewer ensure perfection and consistency in the potion, the subject required an incredible knowledge of ingredients – their properties, composition, every possible reaction with any other substance……and the step between competency and mastery also required an inventive mind, an open mind, that considered anything as a potential ingredient.

Harry chopped off and weighed a section of horseradish root, returning the rest to the table at the front for someone else to use. Severus was already prowling the class, commenting on technique. You’d think they’d have satisfactorily mastered cutting after nearly seven years, but Snape expected total accuracy and precision.

Harry was so tired that he felt his hands shaking as he worked and knew that his efforts were not going to pass muster.

He kept working and Severus seemed to ignore him, thankfully. He had just added the scraped newts tails – a disgusting job which was making his stomach revolt – and had washed his hands at the sink in the corner.

At least now all the major ingredients were in and he had 20 minutes to rest while it simmered, although continuous stirring was required.
Harry realised that the previous night’s travelling had definitely been a step too far, when 10 minutes in, his arm ached so badly that it felt like lead. He should have eaten more at lunch, he had been silly. He knew he had some chocolate in his pocket and although eating was strictly forbidden in the class, Harry had clean hands, wasn’t working on ingredients, and was going to keel over if he didn’t do something. Keeping up the stirring with his left hand, he slipped his right into his pocket and surreptitiously broke off a piece of the chocolate. Luckily it had softened up enough against the warmth of his body not to make a distinctive crack. Turning slowly to check where Snape was, he thought he was clear and pulled the piece of chocolate out, lifting it carefully curled in his fingers to hide it.

It was at that point that everything fell to pieces.

And he had no-one to blame but himself.

Pansy Parkinson saw the movement and assumed Harry was cheating by adding an unknown ingredient to his cauldron. She shouted out. The surprise made Harry’s stirring hand jerk, knocking into the other; the chocolate cube seemed to just fly out of his fingers and the next moment had plopped pathetically into the cauldron. Harry stared bemusedly at the pale potion which was even now gaining a brown swirl. He could hear Snape stalking up to him and despite the lurch of adrenalin at the impending discovery of wrongdoing, it felt more like a trickle of added energy rather than a flood. The next moment the cauldron contents whooshed up into the air. Harry threw his arm across his face and a wandless containment charm around the elevated mix and the cauldron, but not before the first drops had hit his arm and chest.

He could hear Snape bellowing his name but it felt like everything had moved into slow motion, before it shot into normal speed again and Snape was demanding to know what he had just dropped into the mix.

“Chocolate,” he admitted.

He could tell that in just a fraction of a second Snape had calculated the effects.

“Get your robe off! Fast, boy!” he was shouting. A glob of mixture slid off his robe onto the floor and Harry looked down in bemusement as he heard it sizzle: the stone floor had developed a small crater-like dip, which was smoking. Blankly he realised that his robe now sported several speedily growing holes.

With a growl Severus had thrown a spell on him to remove it, looking round quickly at the class to see if anyone else was hurt.

Everyone was staring, but the containment spell seemed to have worked. The potion had retreated into the cauldron. Snape flicked a quick spell to put out the fire under it, and hearing the sizzle on the floor, snapped at Potter to move out of the way.

Harry walked in a daze to the front. He was feeling dizzy and disorientated and didn’t know if it was the potion or the final drain on his already depleted magic from putting up the containment charm.

Snape walked to the front, coming up behind Potter, ready to give him a piece of his mind.

He was a mage! How stupid could he be? Seven years of pounding the rules into their heads and the boy was eating in class. He was not going to get away with this! He pulled in front of him with a string of invective in his mouth and realised with horror that the toxic, caustic substance Potter had created had not only eaten through his robe, but was now working in spots on his shirt and
“Get them off!” he yelled.

The boy looked down, as if dazed.

Snape whipped a spell at him, stripping off his outer clothes.

He heard the hiss of shocked laughter from the class and strode to stand beside the boy, flashing up an impermeable vision and sound barrier. Were they really so immature as to be shocked at the sight of a naked back and legs? Honestly.

He glanced sideways at Potter, his eyes slipping down the boy’s side to realise that he was completely naked, apart from his socks.

Oh.

The boy went commando.

That explained the shocked giggles.

“Are you alright, Potter?”

The man still seemed dazed.

Harry shuffled towards the door. “A spare robe?” the boy croaked.

Severus had one in his workroom.

He couldn’t help noticing that the boy’s arse was magnificent.

Round and firm and just as he liked – and he was so not going there.

“Are you injured at all?” he asked again, walking past the boy to get the robe from the storeroom door.

He kept his back to the boy, his hand gathering up the robe and his arm extending to the side to hold it out.

“Potter?” he asked, his voice surprisingly gentle. The boy was obviously mortified. Or maybe he was more injured than he thought.

Severus turned round quickly, saying, “Don’t be embarr –“

His voice cut off. Harry Potter’s head had gone up. His face was deathly pale and he looked ill. His body – his body was small and lean and amazingly well muscled for a boy. In fact, it was a man’s body.

Definitely.

But that was not what had cut off Severus’ words.

The black-haired Boy-Who-Lived stood straight in front of him, arms by his sides.

Severus’ eyes had taken everything in at a glance, disbelieved, and returned to look again.

Below the ripple of abdominal muscles, below the neat belly button, above the long slim cock
hanging limp from its black nest of curls was an intricate Celtic tattoo that he was very familiar with.

He looked down at the cock, the slender but muscular legs. His eyes moved over the bony hips, the washboard stomach, the pale nipples with their dusting of hair. There was a burn from the caustic mixture just above one of them, and on the curve of the shoulder. The firm biceps, well known to him, were free of marks, but one forearm had several burns.

His eyes slid up and met the guilt in the green gaze.

“Get out.”

“Severus –“

“Out! Now!” Snape bellowed, and flung his hand, finger extended, towards the door.

Harry Potter disappeared.
Hermione, shocked (and rather intrigued) by the sight of Harry’s muscular back and derriere, had been thankful when Snape had flung up the charm, preventing the rest of the class seeing what was happening at the front. Her own potion was at a crucial stage, and as Harry had obviously done a containment charm (without his wand and wordlessly – she wondered how many in the class had noticed) she added the next ingredients carefully and continued to stir.

Several minutes passed.

Hermione looked over at Draco Malfoy.

The boy – man – was staring at the shield. Well, he was a Healer – perhaps he was wondering if he could help?

The class were beginning to wind up their work and there was muttering about what was happening.

Draco strolled over to Hermione.

“Granger, did you see if Potter had been badly hit?” he asked casually.

Hermione, conscious of the others around them, shook her head.

Eloise Midgen spoke up. “What would chocolate have done to the mixture, Hermione?”

Hermione looked at her. “Well, it was obviously pretty caustic,” she said. “I think the cocoa solids must have converted –”

“That doesn’t really matter, does it?” Pansy Parkinson cut her off. “It was obvious that it burns. Serves him right for eating in class,” she added nastily.

Draco’s eyes met Hermione’s briefly before looking away.

Potter wouldn’t have done it unless it was absolutely necessary. He had used a lot of magic in the working on Monday; maybe he hadn’t made it up yet. It had been stupid, though.

“Should I go in and see if he’s alright?” Eloise asked tentatively, promoting a surprising feeling of possessiveness in Hermione.

“I’ll go,” she said quickly.

“You can’t do that,” Terry Boot interjected, shocked, “he had no clothes on!”

Draco sighed, and walked up to the shimmering barrier.

“Professor?” he called out. “Everything alright?”

After a moment’s silence the shield dropped. Snape was writing something at his desk.

There was no sign of Harry.

“If you’ve finished, bottle your work and clear your workstations,” Snape said, not looking up. “Keep your distance from Potter’s work area,” he added. “I’m sure you have been sensible enough
to do so already,” he said with his vicious sneer in place.

The students were all looking at each other.

“Well? Get to it!” Snape snapped. He was obviously in a foul temper.

“Sir?” Hermione said tentatively, “where’s Harry?”

“I neither know nor care, Miss Granger,” Snape said, not even lifting his head.

Hermione noticed that his pen had paused. And he was practically grinding the nib into the parchment.

Eloise and Hermione exchanged a glance. Snape had been civil with Harry at the remedial magic class on Tuesday. Harry had worked to help Snape that very evening, Hermione thought, had been upset that the professor had reacted badly. She avoided looking at Draco, but could feel his surprise.

“Is he all right, Sir?” Eloise asked bravely.

Snape looked up. His face was a blank mask. “I have no time for students who are foolish enough to eat – eat! – in my class! Have I got nothing through your thick skulls in all these years? Clear up and get out!” he snarled.

Working hastily, they did so, exiting the room as quickly as possible.

Snape was barely holding himself together until the last one had left. He had felt Draco hanging back, but had glared so hard at him that the boy had picked up his bag and gone.

Harry Potter. He had been having a relationship with Harry Bloody Potter!

Sex.

He shuddered.

With a student.

They might not have gone the whole way – full anal sex – but they had done pretty damn much everything else. The only reason they hadn’t done the other was because –

Because Alex had said they wouldn’t until he could reveal his real identity.

Fucking hell!

Did the idiot believe he would sleep with him after this?

He had had sex with a student.

He had liked –

No.

He did not like Harry Potter.

He might have grown used to him, but like?
And Alex?

Alex was - no-one.

Severus had not known him at all.

All that time, Harry Potter had known....had sucked his cock, laughed –

No.

It was all a lie.

*Why? Why?*

What was in it for Potter?

And the Headmaster would kill him – he had not only had sex with a student, but his fucking Boy-Who-Lived.

But –

His stomach lurched.

Bile rose up, vicious and burning in his throat.

Albus had known.

Albus had known and not said a word.

Severus picked up one of the potion bottles left on his desk and flung it at the wall.

Harry had found himself just outside the potions' classroom, naked apart from his socks. His legs seemed to drop out under him and he slipped to his knees.

Two tiny must-be-first-years came round the corner, chatting. Harry curled into a ball. The noise stopped, overtaken by giggling. The halted footsteps started up again, and he lifted his head a fraction to see two pairs of black shoes in front of him.

“You’ve got no clothes on,” one commented, giggling.

“Potions' accident,” Harry ground out. “Never eat chocolate in class.”

The giggle cut off.

Feet shuffled.

He felt something shoved against his hand, and looked up.

Piercing blue eyes under tousled mousy hair met his.

“Better borrow my robe,” the figure said, and Harry realised that the person had stripped their robe off and was trying to shove it into his hand.

Taken aback by the kindness, he clutched it. The figure turned round, quickly followed by his mate, who had started giggling again.
Harry slowly stood up, and wrapped the robe around him.

It came just below his knees, and had a Slytherin crest on the front.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

The two boys turned round.

“Send it back when you’ve washed it,” his helper said practically. “I’ve only got three.”

Harry nodded. “I will. Who do I send it to?”

“Aaron Greengrass,” the boy said, inclining his head. He turned to his friend. “This is Jon Wilkes.”

“Pleased to meet you both,” said Harry. He felt like he had fallen into another dimension.

“And you are?” Aaron prompted. “Just in case I need to chase you up, you know,” he added. Obviously he’d had things borrowed before.

“Harry Potter,” Harry said. He saw the boys’ eyes move to his forehead. “Still want to lend it to me?”

Aaron looked at him. “You can’t walk around the school naked,” he said pragmatically. “Daphne says you’re ok. She’s my sister,” he explained.

Daphne Greengrass. Yes. In Harry’s year and also a Slytherin. That was interesting, though Harry wasn’t in a position to process any of it.

“Thank you, Aaron Greengrass. I’ll send it back straight away – as soon as it’s clean.”

“You’d better go before class comes out,” the boy said sensibly. “You don’t want to be seen like that.”

Harry looked down at himself. “I’ve no objection to the Slytherin robe,” he said quietly, causing the boys’ eyes to widen. “The Sorting Hat nearly put me in with you. But I think the naked hairy calves bit is a bit over the top, eh?”

The boys laughed.

Harry turned and stumbled off.

Back in his chamber, he carefully took off the robe and called Dobby, to come and clean it and return it to the boy. Dobby saw the burns and fussed. Harry was too tired to do anything, and let Dobby apply salve and generally mother him. Dobby gave him a hot drink full of sugar and milk. Harry forced himself to drink it down. His head, his whole body screamed at him that Severus knew, Severus knew and the look on his face....the shock, the disgust. He didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t think. His muscles were screaming with an exhaustion he had never felt before and his brain had shut all active functions, he felt. He curled up on top of his bed, too tired to pull back the covers.

Dobby did something and suddenly he was snug and warm within it.

He curled in on himself, feeling agonised and fearful and lonely.

So lonely.
Hermione, Eloise and Draco had all headed to the infirmary after the class, but Madam Pomfrey had met with their request to see Harry with surprise.

“Harry? He’s not been in all term, dear. Why? Did something happen?”

“He got a spill on him in Potions, but maybe it was just on his robe after all,” Hermione explained.

“I expect so, dear. Professor Snape usually keeps treatments for minor potions’ incidents to hand, and he’s not put through a report. He always specifies the contact substance if he has to send anyone through so I can treat it properly,” she expanded.

“Oh, right. I should have gone straight to Gryffindor Tower. Harry’s probably just changing his robe,” Hermione apologised. “I’m sorry we’ve wasted your time, Madam Pomfrey.”

“Not at all, my dears. It’s always a pleasant change to see people when they aren’t injured. Actually, Mr Malfoy, do you have a moment to have a word?” she asked, turning her attention to Draco.

Hermione looked at the blond boy, and realised that he was actually worried about Harry Potter. It was an odd feeling after all these years of sniping and nastiness.

“I’ll check the tower and let Eloise know how he is. Eli, can you pass the message to Draco?”

And so it was agreed. They all knew that a message direct from Hermione to Draco would be suspicious, but other Slytherins knew that Draco took an extra class with Eloise.

Back in the tower Hermione bumped into Neville.

“Have you seen Harry?”

“Not since breakfast, why?”

Hermione explained the potions' incident.

Neville’s eyebrows drew sharply together and they both headed up to Harry’s room. As they opened the door onto the darkened chamber, they both jerked back in surprise as Dobby apparated into their faces and bundled them back out.

“Master Harry is sleeping,” Dobby said firmly.

“But Dobby,” Hermione asked, “is he alright? He was hit in Potions –“

”Dobby is looking after Harry Potter,” the elf interrupted. “He is putting salves on his burns and they is not hurting any more. And Harry Potter is needing to sleep because his magic is all used up and so Dobby is giving him a sleeping draught. Dobby will look after him, Miss Hermione,” he said firmly.

“Thank you, Dobby,” Hermione said, realising that she was going to get nowhere with the protective house elf.
“Come and talk in my room?” Neville said tentatively.

The castle appeared to have old fashioned principles. Although the boys could not get into the girls' rooms or dormitories, the opposite was not true. Hermione nodded. She had spent a lot of time in Harry’s room, and considerably more in Ron’s, but had never been in Neville’s.

There were plants everywhere.

Rather than looking like a greenhouse extension, they were arranged in such a way that each was an object of beauty and interest. Hermione was enchanted.

“Wow!” she breathed.

Neville blushed. He had never had a girl in his room before.

“Can I get you a drink? Tea? Squash? Pumpkin juice?”

Hermione settled for tea.

“Gosh, Neville, this tastes refreshing,” Hermione sipped blissfully at the pale liquid. “What make is this? I’ll have to get some.”

“It’s a strain I’ve been growing,” Neville’s blush returned, “Do you like it? I can give you some.”

“Yes please! Neville, you’re a marvel!”

Bright red, Neville turned away, and bustled about putting some leaves into a little caddy for Hermione.

“Shouldn’t you have Arithmancy now?” he turned round suddenly.

“Yes,” Hermione sighed, “but I was worried about Harry.”

“I think it’s partly my fault,” Neville said, sitting down tentatively on his desk chair. Hermione was ensconced in his comfy armchair and he didn’t think it was polite to lounge on the bed. “We went to China last night. I didn’t think – he’s done so much magic this week that he must be knackered.”

“China? You went to China?”

“I’ve a friend who gives me plants and cuttings,” Neville explained.

Hermione was fascinated and asked lots of questions.

“But why did Harry come with you?”

Neville didn’t want to lie, but Hermione hadn’t given any indication that Harry had told her about Snape. He shrugged his shoulders. “He’s not apparated out of the country before,” he said. “We thought we’d give it a try.”

Hermione shook her head in amusement.

“Snape was really angry,” she commented.

Neville nodded.

He could imagine what had happened. They’d shared a dorm until this term...
Naked, Harry was definitely – distinctive.

Hermione pulled herself up. “I’d better let Eloise and Draco know he’s ok,” she said. “Thanks, Neville.”

“You’re welcome,” he gave a genuine smile, and helped Hermione lift her bulging shoulder bag on.

“You should put a lightweight charm on that,” he suggested.

“Yeah, I know, but somehow the weight is comforting.”

Neville laughed, and Hermione slipped out of the room.

She walked down the corridor – there was obviously magic at work in creating these individual rooms in a tower – and passed Ron’s room, her hand sliding over the door fondly.

Ron usually used the gym at this time. She needed to go to the library and do the work she would be missing in Arithmancy, once she’d spoken to Eloise, but maybe she’d leave him a seductive note on his bed to amuse him when he got back. She opened the door.

And staggered back, her bag clattering to the floor.

There was no room on the bed for a note.

It was already occupied.

A very naked Ron was sweaty and definitely getting a workout.

With an equally naked and moaning Lisa Turpin.
Neville heard the thump of the bag and ran out into the corridor. Hermione was backing away from Ron’s door. Racing up, he stared in. Ron was just in the process of pulling himself from Lisa Turpin’s body with a wet slurping sound. His eyes, and Lisa’s, were fixed on Hermione with a look of horror.

Neville leaned in and slammed the door.

“Mione.”

She pulled away from the arms that were trying to embrace her, kneeling down and shovelling up her books. Harsh sobs were coming from her throat.

“I need to get away. I can’t talk to him, I can’t!”

Neville grabbed the bag and books and hauled Hermione back into his chambers. He wasn’t going to let her go into her own room where he couldn’t follow. She wasn’t particularly friends with any of the other Gryffindor girls in their year, and although she was good friends with Ginny Weasley that would not be a brilliant choice right now.

Once in his room Neville felt like he had too many arms and legs and didn’t know where to put them. Hermione collapsed back into his armchair and sobbed into her hands, relieving him of the worry. He knelt quietly at her feet, waiting. Ron was an idiot.

“How could he? How could he?” Hermione moaned, talking to herself rather than to Neville. “I can’t face him. I can’t!”

Neville heard footsteps in the corridor, but they went the other way, pounding down the stairs. A door clicked, and a quieter set of steps followed. Lisa leaving. So Ron had gone after Hermione at least.

“What am I going to do, Neville?” Hermione asked him, looking up at him.

He patted her knee awkwardly, not knowing what to say.

She didn’t seem to need an answer.

Her shoulders were shaking convulsively, and Neville really hated Ron in that moment. Hermione was always so strong, so in control.

“God, what am I going to do?” she whispered again.

Neville got up and pulled the throw off the bed, wrapping it round Hermione’s shoulders. She hunched down into it.

Neville crouched down again. He might not know what to say, but at least he could just be there.

“God, I’m such an idiot!” Hermione groaned.

“You are not!” Neville repudiated the idea.

“I am!” Hermione retorted. “It’s my fault. I bloody told him that Lisa Turpin fancied him!”
“Hermione Granger, you know that doesn’t make it your fault! He thinks with his … you know!” snapped Neville.

Hermione sat back in the chair, her face turned away. “I know,” she agreed.

Footsteps could be heard pounding along the corridor.

Hermione looked terrified, and Neville instantly threw up a locking charm on the door.

Ron started pounding on it, then tried the handle.

“Mione! Come out! For Merlin’s sake, please!”

Hermione turned, eyes brimming with tears, to Neville.

“Don’t let him in! I can’t face him! I can’t, Neville.”

“Mione! Come on! I know you’re in there. Look, I want to apologise! It was the first time – shit!”

There was a pause. “The only time, Mione! I wasn’t thinking – please, open up, let me explain.”

Hermione sat there shaking her head. “I’ve got to get out of here. I can’t face him, Neville. Not yet. I can’t think. I need to think. I can’t - please!” Her hand was on his arm.

They would not get out of the room without having to deal with Ron. Even if they waited, they’d have to pass his room.

Neville took out his wand and laid it directly onto the stone floor, and held his hand on top of it, in contact with wand and stone. He slipped his other hand round so that it locked with Hermione’s, and begging the castle to let him pass, threw his power into the spell.

Hermione stared.

A hot breeze ruffled her hair. Waves lapped at the fine sand on the beach. She was still sat in Neville’s chintzy armchair, Neville kneeling beside her. A choked laugh escaped her.

“Neville? You apparated us out of Hogwarts? Where are we?”

“Australia. I collected a nice hibiscus cutting here a few weeks back. Thought it’d be quiet.”


“Are the wards down?” she asked, suddenly.

“No, I just made contact with the castle and asked it to let us go. Harry took us out the first week, so I – oh.”

“What?” Hermione asked, curious at the sudden halt.

Neville blushed. “Harry took us to the Forbidden Forest the first week - I remembered that when I wanted to get you out – only I forgot that, actually, he didn’t. He’d just made a construct-thingy.”

Hermione gave a choked chuckle.

“Maybe we’d better get the wards checked when we get back,” Neville suggested. “I’ll talk to
Harry too,” he added.

Hermione sat back in the chair. Her body felt like it had lost all its energy. She stared at the sea for long minutes. Neville settled himself comfortably on the sand. The warmth after the cold in Scotland was delicious. He allowed the grains to trickle quietly through his fingers.

“It’s very peaceful here,” Hermione commented.

“Yes. I really liked it. I’m glad we’ve come – not glad for the reason, of course,” he added hastily.

Hermione nodded.

“Why did he do it?” she asked, a few minutes later.

Neville looked at her, not sure if she was asking him or talking to herself.

Hermione turned her head and looked at him.

“I know I’m not as pretty as her, and that I can be annoying at times, but – you know, we love each other. Or at least, I love him. And the sex was really good. I didn’t think he had any complaints, anyway. I was obviously wrong.”

Hermione’s bluntness made Neville blush. He was still working hard to get the visual of Lisa and Ron out of his head. He hadn’t realised sex was so sweaty and earthy, somehow. It had hit him hard that he really was missing out on this amazing-looking aspect of life.

“Mione,” he said cautiously, “I don’t know anything about sex, more’s the pity,” he gave a wry grin, “but I’m sure Ron loves you. He just doesn’t necessarily put the two together.”

Hermione thought about it. “I know you’re right, partly at least. He’s a walking hormone. You only have to give him a suggestive look and he’s up and ready to go.”

Neville tried not to smile.

“The trouble is, I do put the two together,” she whispered quietly. “Maybe it’s just a girl thing – but I hate that sexist bullshit!” she groaned. She flopped back in the wings of the chair.

There wasn’t really anything to be said. They sat quietly. Hermione suddenly looked down at Neville.

“Oh god, Neville, I’m so selfish!” She quickly transformed the chair to a small sofa, and patted the seat encouragingly.

“I was fine on the ground,” Neville said, but got up and sat down next to Hermione anyway.

Actually, he missed the feeling of the sand. Bending down, he took his shoes and socks off, and sighed as he buried his feet in the sun-warmed grains.

Hermione gave a wet chuckle, and bent down to undo her own shoes. “Don’t look,” she ordered, then stood up and walked behind the sofa, where she peeled off her thick woollen tights and came and sat back down again.

“Oh, Neville, that does feel good!” she sighed, wiggling her toes.

They sat there a long time, disturbed only by the wail of sea birds and the hush of the sea.
“We’ll have to go back,” Hermione said regretfully. “What am I to do?”

Neville looked at her. “Do you have to make a decision?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, Ron’s going to pester you, and to be honest, you might as well listen because otherwise he’ll drive you nuts. But that doesn’t mean that you have to come to a decision, does it? Just tell him you’re willing to listen to what he has to say but you want to think about it.”

Hermione looked carefully at Neville. “You’re absolutely right. I was jumping three steps ahead and thinking of the outcomes, when what he has to say will have a bearing on those anyway.”

“What do you see as the outcomes – only if you don’t mind discussing it?”

“No, it’s good. Well, there’s kiss and make up and go on as before. Then there’s talk and break up: side order on that one is a fight and I really don’t want to go there. That’s it, basically. The thing is, even kiss and make up isn’t going to get us to where we were before. The magic’s just – gone. I don’t want to walk about worrying if he’s off screwing someone else everytime I’m putting in extra hours in the library – and I don’t want to give up going to the library or doing extra research just to keep an eye on him. That’s not my idea of a healthy relationship.”

“No, I agree with you there.”

“And the thing is, Nev, he’s my friend. He’s always been my friend. I so don’t want to lose that. Maybe we should never have gone out.”

“Well, I don’t agree with you there,” Neville said surprisingly. “You’ve been really happy, even if it’s painful now. I think I’m a believer in that old ‘it’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all’. And I’m saying that from the boring safe side of the fence. I think I’d love to have that, to love someone and have them love me, even if it wasn’t for very long.”

Hermione gave Neville a compassionate smile, and rested her head on his shoulder.

“It hurts,” she whispered.

Neville squeezed her hand.

It was supper in the Great Hall, and Professor McGonagall was looking askance at her House table. Potter, Granger, Longbottom and Ron Weasley were all missing.

She turned to Dumbledore. “Albus, have you got Potter’s group working on something?”

“Minerva, my apologies, I forgot to tell you. Dobby informed me that he had given Harry a sleeping draught. I gather Harry had overextended his magic and had a minor accident in Potions this afternoon.”

“What? Severus never sent me a report!” She looked round, but her colleague was absent. “He’s usually very precise about that, even when he is working on a potion.”

“Dobby said he had only a burn or two. Nothing to worry about at all. Dobby is watching over him and he should be fine tomorrow.”

“Well where are the others, then? They can’t be sitting with him whilst he’s asleep, surely?”
The hall door opened. Ron Weasley’s red head poked through, scanned the Gryffindor table and withdrew quickly.

Minerva was on her feet in a moment. “Something’s going on! I can smell it!”

She strode over to her House table.

Draco Malfoy, across the hall, was watching curiously. He had been cross with Hermione for not contacting Eloise with a report on Potter’s wellbeing, but the anger had turned to anxiety since he had come to supper and none of Potter’s cronies were there. And Snape was absent. Harry must have been more hurt than initially thought. He was therefore confused that when a rather distraught looking Weasley poked his head round the door, McGonagall headed to the table rather than after him. He reached in his bag and grabbed out a potions book, getting up quickly.

“Where’re you going, Draco?” Goyle asked.

“Granger left her book behind after the potions' accident,” he lied. Pansy had loved telling the tale of Potter being stripped naked in front of the class to the whole Slytherin common room. “She’s not bothered to come and I’m not traipsing up to bloody Gryffindor Tower. One of the others can take it,” he kept his voice sounding as if he was very put out, and sidled over to the table, hoping to catch the conversation.

“Mr Finnegan, why is Mr Weasley lurking outside the hall when he should be in here eating? Heaven knows, he usually takes little enough persuasion! And where are Miss Granger and Mr Longbottom?”

Seamus, along with practically every other member of the house, knew exactly what had happened between Ron and Hermione. Those who were there had been very excited to pass on the scandal that Ron had raced around the common room asking if anyone had seen Hermione, when only moments later Lisa Turpin from Ravenclaw had come down the boys’ stairs and left in tears. Half the people present had followed Ron when he had charged up the stairs and started banging on Neville Longbottom’s door.

Neville had refused to open it and no-one had gone in or out. Ron, not entirely sure that Hermione was there, has searched the school and returned to the common room asking again if anyone had seen Hermione. He had repeated this several times, getting increasingly more frantic, and going up to Neville’s room and trying to kick the door in in-between. Ginny had asked him what was up and Ron had told her to mind her own business, but did she know where Hermione was? When someone whispered to Ginny that Lisa Turpin seemed to be involved, Ginny had disappeared out of the portrait hole, and when she had returned she had slapped Ron a cracker on the cheek and told him he was a disgusting piece of shit.

No one knew exactly what Neville’s role in this could be – the suggestion that it wasn’t a love triangle but a foursome gone wrong had met with hoots of laughter, and one fifth year had been met with derision when she suggested that she thought Neville Longbottom was hot.

Knowing all of this, Seamus managed to keep an absolutely straight face and say,” I’m afraid I’ve no idea, Professor McGonagall. Perhaps Hermione is in the library and Neville in the greenhouses? They both tend to get carried away, don’t they, Ma’am?”
“I knew I shouldn’t have asked you, Mr Finnegan. You’ve obviously kissed the Blarney stone! Ginevra Weasley,” she said, moving down the table, “why is your brother not at supper?”

Ginny looked up and her eyes were hard. “He’s probably scared of me. I slapped him around the face earlier,” she said defiantly.

“Miss Weasley, however you behave around your siblings at home, we do not condone violence in this school. You may see me for detention tomorrow. I take it you have no intention of telling me what this matter is about?” Minerva knew enough about Weasleys to write a book. Years of experience had taught her that even when they were mad at each other, which appeared to be an occurrence far too frequent for the peace of mind of anyone in charge of them, they closed ranks against outsiders. There was no point wasting time on a lost battle, and at least she had gleaned that the boy’s mottled countenance was not the result of illness.

“No Professor,” Ginny agreed.

“Very well. I hope none of you are hiding anything of importance: if anyone is hurt because of the information you are withholding I will hold you all responsible.”

The table had fallen silent, shifting guiltily, but no one broke ranks. Draco was impressed. Just as he was about to sidle away the professor turned to him.

“And what do you know of these matters, Mr Malfoy, that you are lurking listening?”

Draco straightened. “I didn’t wish to interrupt you, Professor. Granger left this book behind. I thought I’d do her the favour of returning it,” he said coolly.

“Indeed? I would have a greater belief in your noble offering had you managed to address Miss Granger properly, Mr Malfoy. Why is it you have her book?” and she held out her hand for it.

Draco cursed.

His own monogram was on the inside page.

“We left Potions in a hurry after the accident to Mr Potter,” he emphasised the honorific with his trademark sneer. “I was last out and saw it had fallen under her desk.”

Professor McGonagall was looking at the inside page now. Draco’s heart was thumping.

“I have no wish to carry around heavy books at the moment,” she said, handing it back to him. “Kindly return it to Miss Granger when you next see her.”

Draco tried to look annoyed; he didn’t find it difficult, though he was surprised.

“Yes, Professor, of course,” and he went back to his table to report that the old trout was too lazy to carry it herself and had insisted Draco do it.

It would, of course, give him another excuse to go to Gryffindor Tower.

Professor McGonagall returned to the High Table. Dumbledore had finished and awaited her.

“Thick as thieves,” she snorted. “I’ll head up and find out what is going on.”

“I’ll join you,” Albus said, standing. Minerva raised an eyebrow, but was pleased.

Moments later they had flooed into the common room. A couple of students who had left dinner
early scrambled to their feet, but were waved back to their game of gobstones by Dumbledore.

“I’ll check Miss Granger’s room,” Minerva said.

“And I’ll do the boys’. Meet me there.”

Miss Granger’s room gave no clues to her whereabouts. It was neat and tidy, although books and papers were piled everywhere.

Albus was talking to a house elf outside Potter’s room. Dobby was reluctant to let even the Headmaster in, but finally consented to do so, having thoroughly berated the Headmaster for not having taken greater care of his young mage.

“For even though he has power so great, Sir, he is needing someone to guide him, and you is not doing it,” the elf said sternly. Dumbledore looked at the elf, who was biting his fingers and grimacing with pain, having dared to be critical. Despite the self inflicted pain, elves did do what they thought needed to be done, Dumbledore thought. Had he neglected the boy? But he had so much power...and he had also asked Dumbledore explicitly for advice and counsel, the elderly wizard remembered.

“You are right, Dobby,” the Headmaster said. “Please stop punishing yourself. I will attend to the matter just as soon as Harry is well.”

“Dobby is thanking you, Sir,” the elf said. “I is very happy to be caring for Harry Potter, of course, but he shouldn’t have been needing me for this!”

Dumbledore stood over the boy, listening to his breathing. Such a small figure. He slipped back out of the room, satisfied.

“Dobby, have you seen Mr Weasley?”

Dobby looked furious. “Harry Potter’s Wheezy was a very bad boy! He came banging and banging on the door and it was a very good thing Dobby had given Harry Potter a sleeping draught. Dobby told him to go away and not come back!”

“Did Mr Weasley say why he wanted Harry?”

“He didn’t want him at all!” Dobby said, outraged. “Wheezy was shouting for Mistress Granger. As if she would be in Harry Potter’s bed! Harry Potter doesn’t even like witches!” Dobby finished triumphantly.

Minerva McGonagall choked.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Quite, Dobby. Thank you for your help.”

“Dobby be getting back to Mr Harry, then,” said the little elf, and with a little bow to both, disappeared.

“Albus, did you know – ?” Minerva was giggling.

“Yes, and you look like a prudish schoolgirl like that, which I know for a fact you aren’t,” Dumbledore looked down at her, smiling.

“It is rather embarrassing when you come here to teach and realise how much information is
available to the staff,” Minerva blushed.

Albus chuckled.

“It sounds as if Potter is not in this at all, and Mr Weasley and Miss Granger have had a lover’s tiff. Mr Longbottom, I expect, is comforting one or the other. I do not think we need worry any further about this, Minerva, though please let me know whether they are in the Tower by curfew.”

“Should we not just check Mr Longbottom’s room whilst we are here?” Minerva asked. “I take it you’ve already looked in Weasley’s?”

“Yes. Messy but empty. Very well.”

It was a good decision. Dumbledore was surprised by the strength of the wards, but broke them and stepped in. He could sense at once a feeling that a strong piece of magic had been cast. The room, however, looked peaceful, the plants looking lush, the bed tidy.

“The chair is missing,” McGonagall said, her voice surprised.

Dumbledore clicked his fingers, and a house elf appeared. “Minty, can you bring me Miss Padma Patil? As quickly as you can?”

“Yes, Headmaster Dumbledore, at once, Sir.”

Several minutes later, Padma appeared at the door, a third year having brought her up the stairs.

“Headmaster? Professor McGonagall? You wanted to see me?” she said, voice curious.

“Miss Patil, thank you for coming so quickly. I believe you have recently discovered a gift?”

Padma blushed, and nodded.

“Can you tell me what spell has happened in this room?”

She walked into the room. Her nose twitched. She opened her mouth and shut it.

“Yes?” Dumbledore said.

“Well, it feels like – but that can’t be right – but- “

“Do just spit it out,” Professor McGonagall had lost her patience.

“It feels like –“

“Apparition,” a male voice joined Padma’s uncertain one.

Neville stood at the door.

“Good evening, Professors, Padma, and apologies,” he added. “I take it we’ve caused you to worry. I’m so sorry. Hermione and I are back now, and I apologise for not getting a pass.”

“You apparated from this room?” said McGonagall, trying not to screech. That would be very undignified.

“Yes, I’m very sorry,” Neville apologised again. “I really think we need to look at the wards. Though they wouldn’t let us in, which is, of course, the most important thing.”
There was always a moment when a child you had taught turned into an adult. It was happening now. Nevertheless, Mr Longbottom was a pupil.

“\n
“I trust Miss Granger is well?”\n
“She has been better,” Neville said cautiously.

“I’m led to believe that she may have fallen out with Mr Weasley?” Dumbledore commented. Not knowing what had passed in their absence, Neville simply said, “Yes, Sir.”

“It cannot excuse leaving the school without permission,” Professor McGonagall said. “You will both see me tomorrow for detention.”

“Yes, Professor,” Neville agreed equably.

Professor McGonagall bustled out, taking Padma with her. Padma cast a shy smile at Neville, who returned it. Dumbledore brought up the rear.

At the door, he turned and looked at Neville. “I take it you went somewhere safe, Mr Longbottom?”

“Yes, Sir,” Neville answered.

Dumbledore was dying to ask, but held back. He didn’t go, though.

Neville laughed. “Australia, Sir.”

“Ah yes. Nice and warm at this time of year, I believe.”

Neville grinned.

Albus returned to his room and helped himself to a small glass of port. Firewhisky was all very well, but sometimes you needed something mellow.

He was almost relieved that Mr Weasley and Miss Granger had had a normal thing in their life: so many of their adventures had been so dangerous, and there would undoubtedly be more to come. Whatever had occurred would either bring them closer together or not, but he believed that the vagaries of love did a great deal to build character. Pain was a great developer of inner strength, and love – or rather the loss of it - did it without physical damage, at least.

The twin brother of the gargoyle defending downstairs informed him that Severus Snape was on his way up.

Dumbledore got out a second glass.

Severus knocked and stepped in.

“May I have a word, Headmaster?” Severus’ voice was at its most colourless.

“Of course, Severus. Would you like a glass of port to go with it?”

“No thank you. I merely came to inform you that I would not be staying in the castle over the Christmas break.”
“No? Are you spending it with Alex?” Dumbledore said brightly. It was the first time in many years that Severus had spent the season out of the castle.

“I will not be spending Christmas with Harry Potter, no, Headmaster,” Snape said icily.

“Ah.”

“Indeed. Excuse me;” Severus swept to the door.

“Sit down, please, Severus,” Dumbledore said, rising.

Snape looked down his nose at him.

“Do you wish to discuss school business with me, Headmaster?”

“I wish to discuss your relationship with Harry –“

“Then I’m afraid we are at odds. I have no wish to discuss it with you.”

“Severus. Of course you are angry, but think how hard it must be for him to have told you –“

“You have obviously been misinformed. I found out quite by chance, when there was a potions’ accident today.”

“Oh dear! But Harry had intended telling you, Severus, I assure you. He could not until you had your magic and until it was withheld from Voldemort.”

“How very convenient. I am afraid I have little confidence in your assurances anymore, however. If you wish me to speak this is all I have to say: I had thought we had friendship and trust between us, but it appears I was grossly mistaken. I will take up your time no further.”

“Severus! What did you expect me to say?”

“Expect? I did not expect you to condone a member of staff having sexual relations with a pupil! And I made perfectly clear it was a sexual relationship!” Snape practically shrieked.

“And I made perfectly clear that I did not approve. I told you I thought you would both be hurt. And you said that you were old enough to make your own decisions,” Albus argued back.

“Without all the information!”

“You knew he was someone in disguise. He told you himself.”

“How in hell was I expected to think it would be Harry bloody Potter?!”

Dumbledore sat down. Severus, shaking, was prancing round the study. But at least he was talking.

“You said you thought the relationship had potential,” Dumbledore said calmly.

“Potential? He’s seventeen, Albus! I’m not a child molester!”

“And Harry Potter is most certainly not a child. Did you ever feel you were with a child? Did you?”

Severus turned away, not answering. He walked over to the fireplace and stood leaning on the mantle, poking ends of log with his boot.
“You knew I couldn’t stand him,” he whispered. “You must have been laughing your head off.”

“No. You may acquit me of that, at least. I was cross with Harry for putting me in the position in which I now find myself, and which I knew was inevitable from the moment I supported his identity. However, he was right. I had not considered your happiness –“

“My happiness!” Snape snorted.

“Your chance to have relationships, then,” Dumbledore corrected. “And Severus, you were sparking off each other! I had never - never - seen you like that before. Was I really supposed to tell you you could not have that relationship? What would you have said?”

“I would have thanked you for saving me from the folly of anything with Potter!”

Dumbledore sat silently.

“A student, Albus!” Snape said again. “How could you?”

“As to that, you are his student as much as he is yours. And you are therefore both staff. Relationships among staff are not forbidden.”

“Oh honestly! That is the weakest drivel I have ever heard!”

“Then consider this, my boy,” Dumbledore said, his voice hard. “He is a mage. A mage, Severus! And he chose you!”

“He liked being sucked off by his greasy old potions master!” Snape snapped.

“Now you are being crude.”

“Now we are getting at the truth.”

“I am sorry, but you cannot believe that. You have been together – what? – nearly four months? No one has a relationship for four months with someone they hate.”

“You are wrong, Headmaster. Apparently, I do. It is over, however.”

“At least talk to Harry – “

“I will not. And if you attempt to wrangle me into it I will leave. As it is, I give you notice that when the war is over, in the remote possibility that I survive, I will be leaving. I do not find that Hogwarts has the moral standing that I expect. Goodnight, Professor Dumbledore.”

Severus swept from the room.

“That could have gone better, dear,” said the portrait of Dilys Derwent, Headmistress from 1741-1768. “Young love, it’s always so fraught, isn’t it? They’ll kiss and make up, I’m sure.”

Dumbledore regretted his earlier thoughts on the pain of lost love being good for the character. Some people had had too much pain already, or too little love. Or both. He did not share Dilys’ optimism.
Hermione and Neville had actually attempted the apparition back into Neville’s room, if only because of the issue of what to do with the chair otherwise. After the unsuccessful attempt (and the weird feeling of being bounced back, which meant that they returned all the way back to Australia) Hermione showed her practical streak by shrinking said chair and popping it in Neville’s pocket.

The final return, with Neville yet again providing all the power (Hermione feeling as rough as she did, it did not seem the best time to attempt to apparate when her previous longest distance had been less than fifteen miles) was smooth and unproblematic. They landed outside the gates and walked hurriedly up to the school, the wind bitter and the frost already settling in. It was a stark contrast with their Antipodean interval. They reached Gryffindor Tower without trouble.

“Allright?” Neville asked, before they passed through the portrait hole.

“No, but I’ll survive,” Hermione said grimly.

And she knew she would. Her life had changed in half a day, the tantalising glimpses of her future life had dissipated like steam over a cauldron, but she would survive.

Ron had been waiting on the stairs to the dorms, and leapt up as they arrived.

All the usual talk evaporated, leaving a tense silence and an expectant audience of fellow Gryffindors just back from supper.

Neville and Hermione walked over to the stairs.

“Ron, if you wish to speak to me, we’ll do it in private,” Hermione said authoritatively. “Otherwise, I’m going to bed. I’m rather tired.”

The wind taken out of his sails, Ron nodded agreement.

“The Room of Requirement?” Ron suggested.

“The Library,” Hermione corrected, dashing any hopes that Ron might have harboured that he could use physical means to soften Hermione up.

“Sure you’re alright with this?” Neville checked, hand on Hermione’s arm.

She nodded. “Thank you, Neville,” she said, and quickly leant forward and pecked him on the cheek.

Neville’s hand went to the spot, and with a slight smile he nodded and went up the stairs.

Hermione turned and made her way out of the room, Ron at her heels.

They could hear the buzz of gossip before they had even shut the portrait door.

“I take it the whole of the House knows?” Hermione said, tight-lipped.

Ron, red in the face, stuttered. “No! Yes – well, more or less. I – I was getting frantic looking for you. And Li – Lisa left. And Ginny thumped me one in front of everyone.”

“Wonderful.”
Ron didn’t know what to say. “Hermione—“

“Not yet,” she said coolly.

The Library at this hour held only a few regulars – all familiar to Hermione. She received one or two glances and smiles, and ascertained that the news hadn’t yet spread out of the House; did that mean that Lisa had kept her mouth shut? Hermione turned the corner to the alcove where she liked best to study: this was her territory, her safe ground.

She sat down, and Ron sat at the angle of the table, next to her.

“I don’t know if I’m ready for this, Ron,” she said simply. “What did you want to say?”

Her hands folded in her lap, she waited.

Now Ron had found her, he was stuck for words.

He put his hand out towards her, but Hermione’s stony face froze it off.

“I’m really sorry I hurt you,” he said at last.

“Thank you,” she nodded.

Ron looked startled.

“I think that’s the most important thing,” Hermione said.

“Wha-? Do you forgive me, then?” he asked with relief.

Hermione gave a harsh laugh. “I expect I will, eventually,” she answered.

“Oh.” Ron looked a bit downcast, then brightened. “So, so you’ll still go out with me?”

“I said I’d forgive, Ron. Not forget.”

“What? But Hermione, we love each other!”

“Yes, we do. But obviously not enough, and maybe not in the right way.”

“What?”

“Ron, did you give it even a second thought before you whisked her up to your room?”

“I didn’t come on to her!”

“I didn’t ask if you did.”

Ron couldn’t meet Hermione’s eyes. “You know what I’m like,” he said.

“I do, Ron.”

“I’m impulsive, and - and- “

“Your brain shrivels every time your dick takes an interest. Which is frequently.”

“I think it’s the genes. The twins talk about sex all the time, and Charlie’s always got a hot –“
“And Bill’s attracted a Veela and your Mum and Dad –“ Hermione began sarcastically.

“Alright, alright! Now you’re going too far!”

“Yeah, well you shouldn’t have used your family as an excuse.”

Ron hung his head. “Okay. I think about sex all the time and it’s my fault, no one else’s. There! I admit it!”

“Bully for you. Were there any others?”

“What?! No! Hermione – please! Of course not!”

“There’s no ‘of course’ about it. It was the first time, then?”

Ron nodded.

“And what would you have done afterwards?”

Ron opened his mouth, paused, and shut it again.

“What am I supposed to say?” he said at last.

“That depends if you were going to lie or tell the truth. But I expect it’s somewhere between feeling awfully guilty and just thinking about it all the time, to feeling awfully guilty but going and doing it again. And maybe then there’d be others –“

“No!”

Hermione just looked at Ron, who shifted under her gaze.

“I really didn’t mean to hurt you, Hermione,” he said again, as if he couldn’t think of what else to say.

And what else was there to say?

“I know. But you did,” she whispered.

Ron suddenly felt tears springing into the corners of his eyes, horribly shocking, unexpected. It was as if the tension of the last few hours, the fears, had all come to a head: the arousal, the unfinished sexual pleasure, the heart-stopping horror of discovery. The frantic search to find Hermione – the relief now she was here. She hadn’t hit him or any of the things he knew he deserved. Just this awful painful admission that he had hurt her.

He scrubbed his hand across his cheek, trying to force the tears away by willpower: he had no right to cry.

“Ron,” Hermione said, and her voice was shaky, “I’m sorry, but I’m not who I thought I was, maybe.”

He looked at her, not understanding.

“I’m not strong or cool the way I thought I was. I don’t like feeling jealous. I don’t want to be thinking of what you might be doing every time we aren’t together –“

“I won’t do it again, Mione –“
“You can’t promise that, Ron. And I’ll always have it in the back of my mind that it’s a possibility. We’ve got too much on our plates to have a lack of trust going on. All I can see is we need to take this out of the equation. We’ve got lots of work we need to achieve together. We can’t let Harry face Voldemort without us right behind him – and I’m not laying this at Harry’s feet – it’s just there isn’t space for me to be full of seething anger or jealousy. I don’t want to be that person, even if there wasn’t a war going on. I’m – I’m going to miss you – miss you,” she faltered, “but – “

“You’re finishing with me,” he said resignedly. “I know I deserve it, but I hoped – I love you – I know I haven’t shown it -“

“It’s not about deserving it, Ron,” Hermione said impatiently. “Since when have I been vindictive?” she demanded.

“I – of course you’re not, but –“

“Look. I didn’t come back knowing I was going to say this, alright? But I’m sitting here looking at you and how I like how long and lean you are and then I just think of her hands on your body, and I don’t want to! I don’t own you, I know that. But this jealousy – and – and it makes me feel – inadequate, not good enough to keep you, and –“

“Oh Hermione, It’s not like that at all! You’re gorgeous! You know how much I fancy you!”

“Well, maybe, but I used to feel special, Ron. Now I just feel convenient.”

Ron stood up. His chair scraped on the floor, and the student across the way glanced up. Ron ignored her. At least Madam Pince appeared to be absent. He took three paces before the bookcase was in front of him, and turned round, leaning his back against it in a weary gesture.

“Never that, Mione. It took all my courage to ask you out,” he tried to smile.

Hermione’s eyes drank him in, as if she’d never look at him again. Long, long legs sticking out, slim hips and waist, and shoulders broadening out. Thick lovely hair. Dear face.

She shook her head. “I think we both have to have courage, now, Ron, and finish it,” she said quietly.

“For ever?” he gulped.

“I’d like to be friends again,” Hermione said. “We should be able to do that, shouldn’t we? After all these years?”

“Always,” Ron nodded. The tears were back threatening again. He stood up. “I’ll go now,” he said awkwardly.

Hermione nodded.

And he was gone.

Hermione sat there, feeling so very odd. Her head felt empty, as if Ron took up a large part in there which had been extracted.

This morning, she had been somebody loved.

Now, she was just plain old Hermione Granger the bookworm again.
How simple it was for your life to just change like that!

How could that be? No wailing banshees or tantrums or throwing of things.

Nothing to mark that now she was not the person she had been 24 hours ago.

Draco was sat in the Slytherin common room, lounging in one of the armchairs by the fire. It was Greg Goyle’s 18th birthday and his father had sent a crate of wizarding beer and his mother a birthday cake and an expanding basket full of other foods. Everyone had been happy to dive in and there was a hubbub of laughter going on. Snape had appeared briefly and wished Goyle a happy birthday, warning that only the sixth formers were allowed to drink the alcohol. A house elf had appeared with non-intoxicating beverages for the others. He had given Goyle a small gift as was customary for their last birthday in the school. It was a tradition that they were never opened in front of the House, and Draco wondered what Snape had given him.

He had felt relief when his Head of House had appeared. First impressions suggested that he was his normal self, but Draco knew Severus better than his housemates, and could see the tension in his body. Had he been sanctioned for Potter getting injured in his lesson? For stripping him in front of his classmates? It would be absurd to do the latter – Severus had acted exactly as he should to remove the contaminated clothes and then cast the privacy spell, surely the Headmaster could see that? No one died of embarrassment, but a toxic potion could be fatal in moments.

Draco wanted very much to ask Severus if Potter was alright, but the notion of showing - even feeling – any concern for the Gryffindor hero, here in front of the Slytherins was absurd, he knew.

Snape had stayed only moments, but that wasn’t unusual.

He looked around now at his colleagues. The younger students would be sent to bed soon, and then the party would really begin. He could feel that transitional stage like a palpable entity – the lull when the initial flush of the party and the eating was tailing off and the alcohol was kicking in and loosening up their inhibitions. Soon there would be dancing and smooching and all the rest of it. Snape had taken a surprising tack on these events. At the start of sixth year, all Slytherins had been taught how to brew Hangover Cure and Contraceptus: Snape would not accept any Slytherin letting the House down by appearing inebriated in front of the other members of the school. He gave a stern lecture on sexual activity too: he accepted that it happened, but outlined the effects that such behaviour could have on their magic, both positive and negative, and on their standing in the wizarding world should a child be conceived, responsibility for which was not an issue as a paternity spell would easily settle that matter, and each parent would suffer the repercussions, varying from a forced marriage or being outcast, depending on their family.

Draco wondered at the way Snape treated his Slytherins, given what he now knew. How could he treat them with the care that he did? Knowing that many would leave school and take the Dark Mark? Be his enemies? But most of them – from the old families – knew that Snape had been a Death Eater and had got off being sent to Azkaban after the fall of Voldemort. That certainly wasn’t held against him – it was a Slytherin success story. Although the Dark Lord was never openly discussed in the House – caution having been bred into them - most of them assumed that he was a Death Eater still: after all, he kept company with Draco’s father, and Avery and Rookwood.

And all this time he had been a traitor in their midst.

Draco was in awe. The courage! And he had chosen to do it – without the knowledge that they had
a mage on their side – how bad was that, anyway? To find you had a mage heading your ranks, only to know it was a person you had reviled and hated for the best part of seven years.

That must be - Merlin – horrendous! To have played your cards and have them turn out so badly.

And yet, Potter had taught Severus. Seen the power within him and given it to him. Bloody Gryffindor!

Pansy suddenly dumped herself in his lap and slid her hand over his chest.

“Draco! You’re miles away! Gonna dance with me?” she pressed her body against him, her small breasts thrusting against his ribs. “Horizontally or vertically, either way,” she purred.

Draco resisted the urge to shove the tart off his lap. He hated lack of subtlety. Not that he hadn’t partaken of the goods, back in the heady days of fourth year when he was less picky. When doing it with anyone was a good thing. Now, he hated the slight smell of sweat as she slung her arm around his neck and tried to nuzzle his chin.

“Pans. Fuck off,” he growled.

Not the slightest bit put out, the girl slid off his lap, making sure to rub against every part along the way.

“You’re such a bore these days, Malfoy,” she sneered, as she prowled across the room and sought out another victim. Ha! Eb Frazier from the year below. No seventh year was interested any more. Everyone had been there, even Crabbe and Goyle. They’d done her once, together, to ‘try it out’ as Goyle so eloquently described it to him, before deciding that women were exactly as Pans had described him: boring. They might be the two meatiest bruisers in the school, but Greg and Vince were perfectly happy with each other’s company, thank you very much. One look at the hulking size of them and no-one was exactly likely to object.

Not that anyone else fancied them anyway. Their relationship was a sigh of relief for everyone. None of the girls had to worry that either of them would ask them out, or even worse, ask for a betrothal. Their fathers being solid servants of the Dark Lord, many of their parents would be very happy for their daughters to marry into their families.

Draco had actually been quite impressed with them. They never kissed or groped in public, and it was only by accident that Draco had even realised that they were more than friendly. The two had known each other from childhood, and when Crabbe had had horrible nightmares in first year, Goyle had started taking care of him at night, much to the relief of the others in the dormitory. They had got used to seeing Goyle in Crabbe’s bed in the morning. It was only in third year, when the noises emanating from the bed had stopped sounding like nightmares and started sounding like something else altogether more familiar, that Draco and Zabini had shared a startled look, and with a shrug, taught them a silencing charm.

The relationship had held fast.

Draco wondered what would happen when they left school: both boys’ families would expect them to marry and produce heirs, and both sets were so simple Draco could not see that they would understand that their sons wouldn’t want to follow the norm. He was pretty sure the boys had stuck with him because of his casual acceptance of their relationship. It was no skin off Draco’s nose: more girls for him.

Only he didn’t feel like sex right now, or even the groping in the name of dance that was going on.
He didn’t feel part of his House anymore, as if his decision had cut him off from everyone else.

Although Snape was Head of his House, and he didn’t support Voldemort.

And probably, quite a lot of the others didn’t, but just never showed their hand, tried to get through without ever committing their political views to open discussion. Slytherin wasn’t really a place for open debate anyway – people held things close to their chests, for fear it would be used against them later. Potter’s classes, with open discussion and his little scraps of paper games, were a revelation.

The holidays were in a week. Draco had decided that he wasn’t going home. It was too new for him, too dangerous in case he should give his attitude away unintentionally. He wasn’t ready for it. He was going to ask if he could stay back and work on that research project he was supposed to be doing with Granger. He knew he could spin that one off – his father knew of his keen interest in Potions (though had none himself) and would not think it odd that he had been given the honour of a specialist research task. However, if Draco said that the Granger girl had also been given it, he was pretty sure that his father would almost suggest that he stay at the school even before he asked: there was no way his father would accept the shame of a Mudblood doing better than him on something like that.

Draco looked around the room. The lights were low, and students were dancing, or sitting in small groups, some on each other’s laps. He realised that he was alone, here by the fire. Glancing round, he saw Greg and Vince playing gobstones off to the side.

He wondered if any of these people, people he had known for years, would want to know him if they knew he had defected. Which of them would happily hand him over to the Dark Lord?

Nott and Pans would probably hand him over without a thought. They were both ardent supporters, he knew, and more to the point, both very ambitious.

Who would he miss? Zabini, definitely. The man was funny and clever. And – he would miss Greg and Vince. He wondered whether he might be called on to kill any of the people in the room.

That was a thought he couldn’t handle right now. He got to his feet and made his way to the door. Greg looked up and lumbered across.

“Need us?”

That simple loyalty had become addictive. It was the idiot’s birthday!

“Nah, I’m going up to the library for a bit.”

“Got a headache? I’ve got a potion my mum sent.”

“Thanks, Greg,” Draco said, surprising his – friend? “I’m okay. Just don’t fancy Pans feeling me up all night,” he prevaricated.

Goyle laughed.

“Want some cake to take with you?”

“Pince’d have a fit,” Draco shook his head. “Thank your Mum though. Your elf’s a good cook.”

“Will do, Draco,” Goyle smiled and wandered back through the couples to his partner and his game.
Draco wondered if he could save them. They were too innocent for this rubbish.

And now I’m getting a bloody hero complex, he thought to himself. Bloody Potter!

He strolled into the library and headed to the corner where Granger usually sat.

Sure enough, there she was, her head bent over a thick tome.

“Thanks, Granger,” he said sarcastically. “Might have known I’d be foolish to expect courtesy from a Mudblood.”

Hermione looked up.

“What?” her face looked strangely bemused. And she was pale and blotchy. Not a good look for her. And she hadn’t risen to the bait. Was Potter really ill, then?

He pulled the book from under her hand to see what she was reading. Not a medical text. Potions. The research, rather than a ‘save Potter’ thing, then.

“I realise Potter’s welfare has hardly been my major interest over the years, but you did say earlier you would get a message to me,” he gritted, disgusted with himself even as he spoke that he had even asked.

“What? Oh. Oh! Oh, I’m sorry!” she flustered.

“Yeah, I bet.”

“No, I’m sorry Draco, I completely forgot –“

“Thanks.”

“Some – something –“ her voice shook and she looked away – “came up.”

“What, Weasley’s dick?” he quipped.

Hermione choked, her face still looking away.

How could she be that much of a prude? Draco thought in astonishment. They’d been shagging for months, he was sure. They had that intimacy feel written all over them. Not that Potter wasn’t always touching Granger – he used to wonder if they had threesomes, a thought he found embarrassingly hot – before Potter had thrown out that he was as queer as a wingless snitch. Mind you, he and Weasley could still get it on whilst - he dragged his thoughts quickly away from that scenario.

“Grow up,” he growled. “Is Potter ok or is the wizarding world coming to an end?”

Hermione looked at him sharply. Did Draco know? That quip about Ron – and now this – her world had certainly upended today.

She shut the book with a bang and stood up, shoving it in her bag.

“You’re an absolute bastard, Malfoy,” she hissed, “Fuck off!”
And she stormed out, disregarding the shock on Madam Pince’s face.

Which was pretty much the same as the look on Draco Malfoy’s visage too.

Two thoughts were in his mind. Potter must be really ill. And who knew the Mudblood had a mouth like that?

Draco meandered back down to Slytherin. On an impulse, he went along to Snape’s chambers and knocked on the door. It was a long time before the door opened and Draco wondered if Snape was entertaining his man friend again. Lover. Whatever. He lounged against the opposite wall. He was in no hurry to return to the common room, and he would have to go through it to get to his room. Finally, the door opened.

“Mr Malfoy. What do you want?” Snape said, his usual cordial self strangely absent. Yeah, right! Nevertheless, Draco was not often the recipient of such a curt tone from the man.

“Do you have a moment, Sir?” he asked politely, straightening up.

“Is it important?” Snape demanded.

Everything urged him to leave it at that. Snape was obviously still in a foul mood. But if Potter was seriously injured, maybe he could help.

“Yes, I think so, Sir.”

“In.” Snape held the door open.

There was a two thirds empty bottle of whiskey and a tumbler on the table by the fire. The room felt chill despite the flames.

“Well? I don’t have all evening, Mr Malfoy,” Snape said peremptorily.

“How is Potter?”

Snape stared at him.

Draco felt more than the stirrings of intimidation. Maybe he had made a misjudgement.

“I wondered if Potter was hurt in the potions’ accident, Sir. He wasn’t at supper.”

“And why in the seven hells would you think I would know or care?” Snape demanded.

Draco was floundering. “Uh, it was your lesson, Sir? Madam Pomfrey said he hadn’t gone to the infirmary but I thought you might have checked—“

“You thought wrong, Mr Malfoy, and I have wasted an entirely good level of inebriation to talk to you!” snapped Snape, thrusting a potions' bottle in his face.

A Sobering Solution.

Draco glanced at the whiskey bottle.

“Yes, Mr Malfoy. I would like to return to it. Why don’t you return to the party? I’m sure Miss Parkinson will be delighted.”
God, he was a bastard tonight! He knew what Draco thought of Pansy in-your-pants Parkinson.

“Goodnight, Sir,” he turned and left with as much dignity as he could muster.

The door slammed shut behind him.

Bugger them all! Why the fuck should he care?! He stormed through the common room, avoiding Pansy’s move towards him, shook his head at Crabbe who had started to rise, and slammed his own door with a resounding and satisfying bang.

He supposed he ought to be grateful, he thought half an hour later, showered and lying musing in bed.

He had thought the Light Side bunch would be horribly sweet and sickening.

Instead, they appeared to be as foul-mouthed and as obnoxious as the most curmudgeonly bastard could wish.

Harry woke with a start.

Dobby was there, on the bed in front of him, even as his heart was racing and his hand reaching for his wand.

“Harry Potter, Sir! You is awake!” squealed the elf gleefully.

“God, you made me jump! What time is it, Dobby?” he said, reaching for his glasses and noticing the dark outside the frosty window.

“It is being about eight o’clock, Sir,” Dobby said cheerfully. “You has had a very good sleep, and now Dobby will get you some supper.”

“Thanks Dobby, but I need to go and see –,” Harry started, putting his feet over the side of the bed.

Dobby jumped into his lap, making him almost fall back on the bed.

“Harry Potter! You is not going anywhere without eating after sleeping for 30 hours! Winky has a nice chicken soup at the ready –“

“Thirty hours?” Harry squawked. “I can’t have slept for thirty hours!”

“Yes, you did, and Harry Potter was needing it very much,” said the elf, wafting a bowl of very tempting brew in front of him.

Harry just stared at it, and at Dobby, who stood there waiting patiently.

“It’s Friday night?” he croaked at last.

“Yes, and the weekend tomorrow and Harry Potter can get lots of rest. Dobby told Professor Dumbledore that he was a very naughty wizard for not watching over Harry Potter’s magic and –“ he shoved a spoonful at Harry’s face so fast that Harry had opened his mouth and swallowed it without thinking, “and he agrees that he will not be so naughty in future!”

Harry goggled at the thought of Dobby telling off the Headmaster, and Dobby took the opportunity to get another spoonful in.
Harry took the bowl and spoon, knowing he was going to get nowhere until he had eaten it. With a
day lost, the urgency had gone anyway. And he smelt. He needed to shower.

“Master Longbottom is wanting to be told when you is awake,” Dobby said. “Dobby will get him
while you is in the shower.”

Harry was about to put him off when he realised that Neville undoubtedly understood what had
happened, and might well have news for him.

“Thank you, Dobby,” he nodded, and headed into the bathroom.

Neville was sitting in his armchair when Harry returned, a towel around his waist.

“Neville! How is he? Any news? How does he look?”


“Ron? What’s up with Ron? Snape, of course!”

“Ah. He’s not been to meals and I gather he is his usual bastard self in class. The fourth years said
he took a hundred points in their lesson today. But I didn’t come to talk to you about that.”

“Oh? Can it wait, then? I really must get down there and see –“ Harry grabbed a pair of trousers
and shucked them on.

Still commando, then, Neville noted; he had heard the story.

“No it can’t wait,” he said impatiently as Harry grabbed a shirt. “It’s Hermione.”

Harry spun round. His heart started to thump erratically. He sat down quickly. “What’s happened?”

“She and Ron have broken up.”

Harry just stared. It was like someone saying men had never walked on the moon. It couldn’t be
true. But...

“They’ve had an argument? They’re always arguing. It’s nothing -”

Neville snorted. “More than that. It’s over.”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t believe that. Anyone can see they love each other.”

“Well, Hermione didn’t take too kindly to seeing Ron and Lisa –“

“Ron and Lisa? Turpin? But it was Hermione that said Lisa fancied him! She knows they work
together on Divinations sometimes. I can’t believe she was jealous.”

“Harry, Lisa was in Ron’s room –“

“Well, Hermione’s in mine often enough. It doesn’t mean anything –“

“Will you just shut up for a minute!” Neville exploded, shocking Harry to the core.

He held up his hands and made a zipping motion across his mouth.

“Piss off,” Neville said without rancour. He leant forward. “Harry, I was there. It was after we’d
come to check on you. Dobby told us to bugger off. Hermione came to my room for a cup of tea –
“See?” Harry began, but Neville stared him down. “Sorry, sorry, go on.”

“She called in on Ron on the way back. He’s usually in the gym Thursday afternoons, right?”

Harry nodded.

“Yeah, well he was working out with Lisa Turpin.”

“What? What do you mean? Ron was snogging her?”

Neville gave him a look. “They were naked, Harry. Ron was – was – inside her.” Neville blushed, picturing the exact angle of Ron’s body and that wet noise as he withdrew.

“Oh, holy shit!” Harry gasped. “Oh god! Poor Hermione! How is she? Who’s with her? I mean Ginny’s her friend, but –”

“Exactly. Actually, Ginny cracked Ron a whopper round the face. All the House are giving him the silent treatment.”

“Well, he bloody deserves it,” Harry said, even as he remembered how painful it was to be ostracized like that.

“Yeah, he’s an absolute idiot. He had the nicest, cleverest witch in the school and blows it for Lisa Turpin.”

Harry looked at Neville in surprise. “Do you fancy Hermione?” he asked, curious.

“What has that got to do with anything?” Neville said angrily. “I’ve never even thought of Hermione like that. Of course I’ve admired her – how could you not? But she’s always been Ron’s girl, always. Long before they went out, hasn’t she?”

Harry touched Neville’s arm quickly in apology. “Yeah,” he agreed quietly, “I always thought so.”

“You need to see her,” Neville said. “She’s gone all – organised. Like nothing is wrong, you know?”

Harry did know how Hermione went when she was hurt.

“Where is she?”

“Library.”

Harry nodded.

He called Dobby and thanked him for his help, much to the delight of the little elf, and then headed off to the library.

What could he say to Hermione?

What could he say to Severus?
He found Mione in her usual nook, scribbling notes. He sat down beside her, pulling the chair close, giving her a warm smile as she looked up.

“Harry!” her face lit up for a moment, and she hugged him tight. Harry held on, stroking her back.

She pulled away. “You know,” she stated. “Who was the one to spread the gossip?” she said bitterly.

“Actually, Nev came to see me to stop me putting my foot in it,” Harry said. “I couldn’t believe it.”

“It was a bit of a shock to my system too,” Hermione agreed.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry whispered. “He’s such a prat. I don’t know what else to say. I’m sure he loves you –” he floundered.

Hermione nodded. “Yes, I think he does. But I can’t live with worrying about who he’s getting off with behind my back. I – I ended it. Jealousy feels awful, Harry. I had no idea.”

“Did you row?”

“No, it all came out calmly. Sort of slithered out. I hadn’t even meant to say it then. I was going to be all calm and listen to him and go away and think about it, because - well, I love him and logically, it seemed silly to throw that away because he was tempted once,” she said, looking down at her hands.

Harry sat leaning towards her, hands hanging between his knees. “But?” he prompted.

“But I looked at him and it hurt so bad,” she whispered. “I looked at Ron and I just saw them at it again. I couldn’t stand the thought of that going on and on, me getting to be a crabby, suspicious bitch. We need to trust him for the fight. And I know I can trust him in everything else,” she said, looking down at her hands.

Harry stood outside Snape’s chambers and knocked on the door. His heart had thumped all the way down the flights of stairs. He was struggling with guilt too – he had felt guilty all the time he was talking to Hermione because half his mind was on what he was going to say to Severus, and yet guilty because talking to Hermione had put off talking to Severus and that was a relief too, to put it off for another few minutes.

But he was here now.

He knew Severus could see him in the mirror, and although his presence in the dungeons was unusual he had no doubt that the story of Snape spell-stripping him in class had made the rounds of the school. People would think he was there either to berate or thank the Potions Master.
He waited.
And waited.

Eventually the door opened.

“Mr Potter.” Snape looked at his most severe. Black, pale, expressionless.

“May I speak with you?” Harry said quietly.

Snape waved his hand for Harry to proceed.

“Inside?”

“No.”

Harry gulped. He had had the tiniest hope that Snape might have understood, having had a day to cool off.

“I came to apologise –“

“Well done.” Snape went to shut the door. Harry put his foot in it, and looked around the corridor. No one was about.

“I had intended to tell you tonight –“

“Oh please! “

“I did!” Harry insisted.

“Mr Potter,” Snape sneered, ”has it not occurred to you that when I found out would be entirely irrelevant? My reaction would be the same. Goodbye, Mr Potter.”

And he forced Harry back with a burst of wandless magic, the sound of the door shutting echoing down the corridor.

Harry made his way back to his room, and sat down at his desk to write to Severus.

He tried not to let his spirits plummet completely. He had known Snape would be angry – he would have felt just the same if their positions had been reversed, wouldn’t he? He needed to think exactly what to say to make Severus understand. He had avoided it the whole of their relationship. The time had come.

He had completed five bunched up drafts when there was a quiet knock at the door.

Shoving them in the bin and hiding the current attempt, Harry pulled out a parchment and wrote ‘Potions Assignment’ on the top, then called, “Come!”

Ron’s head appeared. Harry put the pen down and looked at his friend hovering on the threshold.

“Come in, Ron,” he said exasperatedly. “There’s a bloody draught.”

“Oh, sorry, mate! Are you still feeling rough?”

“Much less tired than I was,” Harry answered. He felt like shit, but it wasn’t physical.
Ron still hovered.

“Sit down, I’ll get a crick in my neck.”

“Wasn’t sure if you’d want to see me,” Ron mumbled, turning red as he slumped onto Harry’s bed.

“’Cos you’re an idiot?” Harry asked. “What’s new?”

Ron didn’t laugh. “I hurt Mione,” he said.

Harry sighed. “Yes, you did, you great pillock. What possessed you?”

Ron shook his head. Shrugged his shoulders. Started a gesture with his hands, and dropped them.

Harry waited.

“I never meant to hurt her,” Ron said at last. “It’s just – just –“

Harry kept quiet.

Ron went red. It was a horrible contrast with his hair. He looked like a weather-roughened Young Farmer. “It was flattering, you know?” he said at last. “After Hermione said – you know –“

“That Lisa fancied you?”

“Yeah. I started noticing her looking at me. And – and I suppose I smiled back, I don’t know. Alright, I did,” he admitted. “It felt really good. To know that someone wanted me.”

“Hermione wanted you,” Harry said.

“Yeah.” Ron looked away.

“Alright, go on,” Harry prompted. If Ron wanted to spill his soul he might as well let it all out. But Harry didn’t think there was a nice easy return after speaking to Hermione, and he was hoping Ron wasn’t expecting him to try and persuade Mione otherwise.

“It was – exciting. I mean, it’s not as if it’s not with Mione, but –well, we’ve known each other for ever, right? So we were all comfortable. Lisa – the thing with Lisa – it felt all edgy and exciting. But I wasn’t intending to do anything! Really, I wasn’t, Harry!”

“So what happened?” Harry wanted to be a good friend. He wanted to listen and help. But he was cross with Ron for wasting what he’d had, for hurting Hermione and for making them all uncomfortable, and he wanted to write to Severus. He supposed he was selfish too.

“Lisa asked for a book I had in my room. I was going to go and get it but she said she’d come with me to save me the journey back. It all sort of happened from there,” Ron said miserably.

“Lisa asked for a book I had in my room. I was going to go and get it but she said she’d come with me to save me the journey back. It all sort of happened from there,” Ron said miserably.

“Ron. Are you lying to me or to yourself? Are you really expecting me to believe you didn’t even think anything might happen if she came into your room? Come on!”

Ron shrugged. “You’re probably right,” he mumbled.

They sat in silence for a bit. Harry was rephrasing yet again in his mind.

“What can I do?” Ron muttered.
“Not a lot. Move on.”

“That’s harsh!” Ron said, looking up.

“Realistic,” Harry said firmly. “You can’t expect Hermione to trust you. You were her first lover, Ron! She committed totally to you!”

“She was my first!” Ron protested.

“But not your last,” Harry said. “Look, did you see yourselves settling down to marriage and kids and the rest?”

“Yeah,” Ron nodded.

“And didn’t ever think you might be missing out on not having been with anyone else?”

Ron looked away.

“Look, you don’t have to feel guilty about thinking that,” Harry said, his voice gentle. “I should have thought you’d be pretty odd if you didn’t. It’s a pity you hadn’t slept with others before Mione, that’s all. Maybe you would have worked it out of your system.”

Ron flopped back on Harry’s bed, hands behind his head.

Harry wished he wasn’t thinking that Ron looked like he had settled in for the long haul.

“You’re good to talk to,” Ron said. “Everyone else is treating me like a leper.”

“Even Dean and Seamus?”

“Well, they’ve spoken to me. But I don’t want to talk to them – not properly, you know. And Neville and Ginny are furious with me. Gin can’t have told Mum yet – there’s bound to be a Howler when she hears,” Ron said glumly.

“Maybe Ginny won’t go into details,” Harry said. “And your Mum must have dealt with lots of boyfriends and girlfriends coming and going over the years.”

“True. But she really likes Hermione. I think she was looking forward to teaching her all the household stuff that Mione doesn’t know.”

Harry laughed. “If you can manage to keep her as a friend, I expect Mione will still be glad to learn from your mother. And who knows, if you can manage to do that, maybe in the future you’ll find each other again.”

In the early hours of the morning, Harry had completed his letter to Snape. He didn’t know if the man would still be awake, but sent a school owl with it telling it it had to wait until Severus was awake, and hand it to him only.

Half an hour later, as Harry was brushing his teeth ready to catch a few more hours sleep, the owl tapped on the window-pane. Heart jumping hopefully, Harry opened the casement and let the creature in, the cold air blasting him as it did so. The owl shook her wings out, snowflakes flicking in the air and melting as they fell. She held out her leg, a letter tied to it.

Harry’s excited bubble burst.
It was his own letter.

Returned.

Unopened.

On the outside of the parchment, Snape had written:

*I thought I had made my position clear. Do not write or attempt to contact me in any way. Future missives will be burnt without removing them from the carrier’s leg.*

Harry, Hermione and Ron all lay in their beds, awake, hearing the muffled wind hitting the castle, seeing the soft fall of snow in the dark night.

It was Friday night, but there were no warm arms around them, no bodies snug up against their own.

The bleak winter had set in.
The Christmas Break

The weekend felt the loneliest Harry had ever experienced. He didn’t know why – he had been alone many times in his life. He had been alone after his relationship with Derek had broken up, although he supposed that wasn’t strictly true – he had continued to live in the same flat.

Having ascertained that Hermione had buried herself in her potions’ work, and Ron was off playing quidditch – the team were practicing and needed him, even if they didn’t talk to him – Harry went off to his cottage. He changed visage. It was unexpectedly painful looking in the mirror, knowing this was the face that Severus had found acceptable, whilst he hated his real one. He nearly gave up and went straight back to Hogwarts, but he didn’t really want to be there either. Maybe Snape would come and look up Alex.

Talk it out with him.

He walked to the market, chatted to the stall-holders, bought food – for two, just in case.

He went back and sat in front of the fire. The snow had settled, and everything looked very pretty. But cold. He felt his internal temperature was dropping too.

He checked on his magic – it was back up to full strength. He tried some exercises, testing what he could do. He cooked supper. He read. He went to bed. It was cold, and too big.

He slept badly and somehow ended up getting up late because he had finally dozed off just as he was thinking about getting up. His body felt funny, and then he realised that usually, here, his night was full of touching and sucking and coming, and none of that had happened. No aching muscles, sore throat, overworked jaw.

He slumped down at the kitchen table cradling a steaming mug of tea. He and Severus had – on the –

He couldn’t think about that. Shouldn’t. Couldn’t stop himself.

He got up and dressed, and wandered again into the village, leaving a note on the door to say that he would only be gone for an hour.

Just in case.

He bumped into Sebastian Flight, the financial advisor he had met at Lucius Malfoy’s. They had a drink in The Tufted Duck. Following the conversation at Malfoy Manor, Sebastian Flight had offered to manage Harry’s wizarding investments. Harry had made several, and kept up a correspondence with the man. The unexpected meeting was useful, though Harry thought it was sad that such a meeting proved to be the highlight of his day.

He returned to Hogwarts that night feeling utterly lost.

The common room had returned to its usual buzz. Harry noted Ron playing chess with Dean, and Hermione on the sofa with a book. With a nod to Ron, he flopped down next to Hermione.

She smiled absentmindedly at him.

“What’s going on?” Harry whispered.
“I got fed up with people shutting up and then starting talking the minute I passed,” she said. “I asked Ron to come and be normal in here. They can’t gossip if we’re both here, and once they realize we’re ok it’ll all stop.”

“Are you ok?” Harry asked, taking in her pale cheeks and slightly drawn expression.

“Not really. Sort of. Sounds stupid, doesn’t it? I mean,” Hermione lowered her voice even more, “he’s still Ron. Still the person who’s been my friend ever since I’ve been here, give or take the first term. But it feels odd too. Lonely. I said that before,” she shrugged. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to whinge.”

“Hey, first, you’ve got a right to whinge – for a bit anyway –“ he cowered, grinning, as Hermione mock hit him. “Second – well, it’s new, isn’t it? Anyway, I want you to talk to me. I’ll tell you if you get maudlin.”

Hermione smiled. “You had a good weekend?” she asked, attempting to change the subject. “Been with your mystery lover?”

“Unfortunately not,” Harry said. He stood up. “I’d better talk to Ron – make it all seem normal. That I’m not taking sides.”

Hermione nodded and he walked over to Ron, pulling up a chair to watch the game for a few minutes.

He could almost feel the collective sigh of relief from the students that they were all apparently on good terms.

Tuesday came round and his after school lesson. Harry had spent a lot of time working on it, fearful of how to handle Severus, of how to cope with his absence.

He had walked beside Ron to the meeting, Padma, who had been visiting Parvati, with Hermione. Harry was aware of Ron trying to follow what Hermione and Padma were talking about the whole journey. Neville was coming straight from the greenhouses, and was already there when they arrived, with Ernie and Eloise.

Harry was just wondering nervously about his Slytherin contingent when Draco walked in.

“Ah, you are here,” Draco said, in his supercilious manner.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I’ve only seen you in the Great Hall the last day or so – I thought maybe you were still recovering.”

“That was embarrassing, Harry,” Eloise said. “Were you badly burnt?”

Harry shook his head. “No, but I learnt a lesson. I’d overused my magic. I’d done pretty heavy magic over the weekend and then in the week as well, and I was just knackered, basically. Made me sloppy.”

“What else were you up to?” Ernie asked.

Severus wasn’t there, and appeared to have sent no apologies via Draco. It wasn’t his place to
comment on the removal of the Mark.

And – God! He was so selfish! He hadn’t really thought whether Snape had fully recovered – hadn’t asked him, hadn’t – God! No wonder the man hated him. He’d practically killed him and not spoken to him since, just shown what a dreadful person he was.

“What?”

“Sorry,” he started.

“We went to China on Wednesday night,” Neville volunteered.

“China! Why?” Ernie asked.

“I was after a plant and thought Harry might like to come along for a bit of fun.”

Even Draco had to stop himself from gawking. “You apparated to China? And back? In one day?”

“He took me to Australia on Thursday,” Hermione smothered a giggle.

“What!” Ron burst out.

“Harry?” Padma said. “No wonder he was finished!”

“Neville,” Hermione corrected.

All eyes turned to the shy young man.

“Let’s get this straight, you apparated to China – and back – on Wednesday, and then Australia – and back – on Thursday?”

“Actually, he did the Australia bit twice in each direction – and took me along each time. I’ve only ever apparated little skips before.”

“Holy shit!” Ernie muttered.

“I think it’s just one of those things,” Neville said humbly. “You know, like Draco can do potions just like that, whereas the whole business terrifies me. Apparating just feels – natural, I suppose, to me. I don’t know where the hard bit is,” he confessed.

“Neville, you are the man!” said Ernie, giving him a high five. Red and grinning, Neville returned it.

“Okay, to work,” Harry said. “Hermione and Draco, would you like to update each other on your potions’ research? I’ve got some group tasks later. Neville, listen in, would you? I know you don’t like potions, but I just want you to consider what they’re discussing and see whether any of the weird and wonderful plants you’ve come across have any potential to be useful.” He gave instructions to the others, and turned to Ron. “It doesn’t look like Sn – Severus – is coming. Do you want to stay or go?”

“Malfoy? Snape not coming?” Ron called across the room.

Draco looked up. “That’s Severus and Draco in here, Ron, follow the rules like the rest of us,” Malfoy complained.

“Yeah, well is he coming?”
“No idea.”

“He’s your Head of House –“

“Yes, and if you fancy asking him anything in the mood he’s been in lately then go right ahead.” Malfoy’s sneering tone changed abruptly. He got up and walked over. “Can I have a word, Harry?”

Ron stood, waiting.

“Buzz off, Ron,” he said impatiently.

Ron looked at Harry. “I’ll go and listen in with Padma’s group, alright?”

Harry nodded and looked at Draco.

“Much as I don’t want to, do you think I ought to suggest to Severus that I look him over? Only he’s been as grumpy as sin. Maybe something needs tweaking.”

Harry didn’t know how to answer. He was pretty sure Snape was grumpy because of him, and not from any problems caused by the downgrading of the link, but he hadn’t checked out Severus’ post-operative state at all. And he would bet his bottom dollar that there was no way Snape would allow him anywhere near him now.

“Do you think you can check on it without me?” he asked.

“Why?”

Straight to the point.

“Because I almost killed him?”

“You did not,” Draco said with a laugh, and then looked hard at Harry. “Shit! You really thought that! Idiot! He was alright. It’s just your power is enormous – it feels huge being alongside it – actually having it in you – well, it was a shock to his system, I think. Once you were out he was back to normal in no time.”

“But he was in a coma or something.”

Draco shook his head. “Not because of that especially. I think the whole closing down the link would have left him sleeping anyway – it had been established for years, and it was hard to wrench away.”

Harry nodded. “So he should be alright.”

“He should, but now I think of his behaviour, I’m concerned.”

“I don’t think it will help at all to have me involved again,” Harry said carefully. “My own magic has just gone haywire and I don’t think it would be wise to enter someone’s body in that state.”

“That’s a good point,” Draco said. He thought for a minute. “I still want to do it. I’ll ask Dumbledore. Perhaps if he or Madam Pomfrey supervise me…”

“Do you want to go now?”

Draco shook his head. “I could hear him yelling at some kids in detention as I came. And I need to talk over some of this stuff with Gra – Hermione. I’m planning on staying here for the holidays and
working on this, so I want to talk some ideas through.”

Later that evening, Draco made his way to Dumbledore’s office. He was becoming a regular visitor, he thought sourly, having visited over the weekend to ask for permission to stay during the break.

He wondered what was up with everybody. Granger had been surprisingly quiet. Not that she ever shouted or anything. He tried to put his finger on it, but couldn’t.

Maybe she was embarrassed by her outburst the other night.

Potter had been – what? Organised for a start. Not that the lessons weren’t usually productive, they were always good, he had to admit. It was just that Potter had notes. His usual spontaneity was missing. Maybe now that he had got them where he wanted them, more or less, he was working on previous plans. Who knew? The man had kept the mage thing to himself, for Merlin’s sake! There was more depth to Potter than he had seen, and that made him edgy. He had misjudged Potter, and Severus. His views of his own abilities were shaken, and he didn’t like not feeling sure of himself.

Up in the Headmaster’s office, Draco sat waiting patiently, a cup of coffee steaming in his hand, whilst Dumbledore finished off a letter.

Draco wondered to whom he was writing.

The coffee was excellent; they rarely had coffee at Hogwarts, for some reason, though it was his favourite drink at home. The brief thought occurred to him, and was discarded, that Dumbledore had somehow known this and had deliberately provided a ‘home comfort’.

Dumbledore had called an owl, tied the letter on and sent it, then turned and gave Draco his full attention.

“Thank you for being so patient, Mr Malfoy. What can I do for you?”

Draco put his cup down. He needed to be tactful, but he could feel something gnawing at him – maybe Healer’s had instincts, or something – and he needed to act.

“I’m a little worried about Professor Snape,” he began.

Dumbledore leaned back. Draco could almost feel the old man closing off, though his face remained benign.

“And why is that, Mr Malfoy?” he asked pleasantly.

“Without meaning to be rude, Sir, Professor Snape has been – particularly – short-tempered?” he chose his words with caution.

“I don’t believe it is the place for students to comment on their teachers’ deportment, Mr Malfoy,” Dumbledore said coldly, “- unless you believe any student is at risk of harm?” he added, eyebrow raised.

Draco shook his head. “It’s not that, Sir, and I wouldn’t normally comment, obviously, it’s just that – well, it seems to have developed after our work on tying down his link, and I’m a little worried in case I did something wrong, missed something.”
“Ah.” Dumbledore’s demeanour changed.

“It’s just that I think maybe he ought to be checked over – that I ought to just see – and maybe Madam Pomfrey should supervise – “

“I don’t think that will be necessary, Draco,” the older man replied.

Draco looked at him curiously. “Something’s obviously wrong, Sir. Surely it would be a good idea to check it out? I don’t want to cause the Professor any damage. It seems stupid that we went in at all, but of course it was necessary –“

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. I don’t have any doubts about what you and Harry did. But I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go back in –“

“Not both of us, Sir!” Draco interrupted, thinking Dumbledore was worried for Potter’s health. Of course he’d put his Golden Gryffindor’s needs before Snape’s. Well, he wasn’t having that! “I’ve talked to Harry and we’ve agreed that it wouldn’t be appropriate for him to assist with his magic a bit shaky, but I just want to check. It would just be me, Sir,” he said earnestly.

Dumbledore looked at the young man in front of him, actually caring about someone else enough to argue with him.

“Draco, do you feel this matter can wait?” he asked, his tone genuine.

Draco opened his mouth to say no, but instead “Why?” came out.

“If you truly feel that something has gone wrong, after further observation, then I would prefer your return into Severus be assisted by an experienced Healer, rather than Madam Pomfrey or I. I will not risk Severus and if you consider there is truly something wrong....”

Draco sat back and thought. To call in a Healer was only done in the direst circumstances, as there were so few, and most mediwitches and wizards could deal with all the banal injuries. He was obviously wrong about Dumbledore’s attitude to Professor Snape. And he was asking him for a professional judgement.

“I think it would be alright to observe for a day or two,” Draco said cautiously. “He appears strong and healthy, it’s just his –“ he faltered.

“His temper, yes. Well, Draco, come back to me at once if your concern deepens, and I will arrange a consultation immediately. Professor Snape has many aspects to his life that may cause his temper to – shall we say fray? – a little at times.”

Draco thought about that, about Snape’s secret role. No wonder he was grouchy at times! He had mentioned being tortured to Draco – and yet Draco could never remember the man ever missing a class until last week. He was perhaps misjudging again.

“Yes, thank you, Sir,” Draco said, standing. “I hope I haven’t wasted your time.”

“I would never regard concern for another human being to be a waste of time, Mr Malfoy. I am always at your disposal in such matters,” and surprisingly, he leant over his desk and extended his hand to Draco. Draco took it and shook it, more pleased than he could believe.

The week rolled on. Harry’s Thursday Potions class loomed. He had seen Snape in the Great Hall,
but the man ignored him. And this was the tack that Snape took in class.

Harry had been ready for derision, for Snape’s vitriolic tongue.

Instead, the whole two-hour class passed as if Harry were not there. Snape did not address him, or look at him, or even loom over his cauldron to look at his work. He lectured much as he always had, his tone surprisingly even given the tales of how vile Snape was being in his other classes.

Harry felt more wrung out than he could believe possible, a cold clammy sweat leaving a trail down his spine as they headed up the stairs afterwards.

“Well, that was weird,” Hermione said. “Do you realise, Harry, that Snape didn’t say one sarcastic thing to you?”

Oh, Harry realised it.

“He was probably embarrassed about the stripping you thing,” Eloise chimed in from behind. “Maybe he got into trouble.”

Hermione turned round. “You’re probably right,” she nodded, “but he had to do it, of course. You must have been really off, Harry, not to have whipped them off yourself.”

Harry gave a mumbled agreement.

Eloise patted Harry on the shoulder. “Never mind, Harry. Hottest Potions lesson ever! And you’ve got a really nice body, nothing to be ashamed of at all! Coming to Arithmancy, Hermione?” and the two girls peeled off up a different staircase, Hermione looking back to smile sympathetically at her friend.

There wasn’t exactly a Yule Ball that year, but there was a disco in the Main Hall, with a student band playing as well as The Wands, an up-and-coming mostly male group who were known for their sex appeal. Fortunately they also had a single female, their lead guitarist, who was getting a reputation for her skimpy costumes as well as her guitar skills. The students were going wild.

They would all be leaving in the morning, and were letting their hair down with friends in the meantime.

Draco sat at a table half-way down one side of the Hall and watched the world go by. He knew he looked good. He had slim cream trousers on that moulded his body tightly, and a navy short sleeved shirt, which he knew brought out the colour of his hair. He eyed up the girls dancing around. Crabbe and Goyle sat next to him. He wondered if they would like to dance together. Wizarding society accepted homosexuality, but basically didn’t like it flaunted, he thought. He knew of several gay wizards, but he had never seen any dance together, or show public acts of affection.

Draco leant over. “Why don’t you dance?” he asked.

The boys looked at him and each other as if he’d grown a second head.

“Don’t fancy anyone,” Greg said, looking at the masses gyrating nearby.

“I don’t mean with that lot,” Draco said impatiently, “with each other.”
The boys looked at each other, and then at Draco.

“You feeling alright, Draco?” Vince asked.

“Yes, of course I am! Why shouldn’t you dance?” he demanded.

Vince looked at Greg, a silent communication.

“Don’t like dancing,” Vince said simply.

Draco thumped his head on the table. And looked up, surprised.

Ron Weasley was dancing with some bint in a tight skirt and skinny rib vest. Which would be alright if he didn’t have his hand right on her arse, practically rocking against her.

Draco looked around surreptitiously.

He could see no sign of Granger. He hated to think of that woman pissed at him, he knew she could give a right mouthful. Weasley would be in for it later.

He watched Weasley’s hand manoeuvre all over the girl’s arse, up her back and round to the side...it was indecent! He was about to grope her breast here in front of everyone. He always knew the man had no class, but really!

The girl knocked Weasley’s hand away.

About time too!

But the next moment she was dragging him off the dance floor, and they slipped out of the room together.

Draco felt surprisingly outraged.

“Did you see that?” he asked Greg. “Weasley making a disgusting display of himself?”

“Yeah, I suppose he’s spreading his oats now he’s free,” Goyle answered.

“What? What about Granger?”

“Split up last week,” Vince said. “She caught him in the act screwing some Ravenclaw.”

“What?! No way!”

“It’s true,” Greg agreed. “Heard it from Johnson. His sister’s in Ravenclaw and she’s best friends with Turpin.”

“Lisa Turpin?”

“Yeah, she was the one having it away with Weasley. Said she thought he’d already broken up with Granger. Like anyone would believe that! She’s as bad as Pans,” Vince said.

“How come no-one told me?” Draco demanded.

“Thought you’d know, mate,” Goyle said. “People were talking about it at my birthday party. Oh. Maybe it was after you left that Johnson came in?”

Where had he gone? To the library. Where Granger – oh bollocks! He quickly recalled the
conversation. God, he had even mentioned Weasley’s dick – whatever had possessed him to even think of that organ – but no wonder she had told him to fuck off. She must have thought he was having a go. Which in the past, he would have, and just like that too. No wonder she had been frosty ever since.

Well. Who would have believed it? That had looked like a relationship that would have ended in hundreds of red-headed little brain-boxes running around. Granger had had a lucky escape.

An owl suddenly swooped low, and with a frisson of anxiety Draco recognised his father’s owl, Archimedes. He cleared an area of table and it landed, holding out its foot. Draco took the missive and Goyle held out a strip of salmon from one of the appetizers, which Archimedes ate with obvious pleasure, sticking his head forward for more. Draco quickly read the letter.

Draco

_I have spoken to Severus this evening and discovered he is not intending to stay at Hogwarts over the break._

_Prayer tell me who is supervising your research project? If there is indeed any such endeavour. The owl will await your return letter, and I assume I will see you at home tomorrow._

_I am very disappointed in you._

_Father._

Draco stood up nervously.

“Bad news?” Goyle asked.

“A misunderstanding,” Draco answered after only a moment’s hesitation. “I must speak to Dumbledore.”

He wound his way through the tables. Hermione Granger was sitting at one, next to Ginny Weasley. Draco could see the tension in her shoulders even from across the room. But he had no time for that.

He found the Headmaster, talking to a huddle of other teachers and a stranger. He waited patiently to be seen.

Dumbledore was nudged, and turned to him.

“Mr Malfoy!” he smiled, very convivially, then seemed to assess Draco’s face.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Sir, but may I have a word?” He gestured slightly with the letter.

“Of course, dear boy. Do excuse me,” he said to the others.

He led Draco to a small side room that Draco could never remember having noticed before.

“I’ve had a letter from my father, Sir,” he said, handing it over. “I had no idea Professor Snape would not be here – I thought he always stayed at Hogwarts over the breaks,” he added curiously.
“Well, well,” Dumbledore said, “I think this is all pulling together quite well. Do come and meet my friend Cuthbert,” he said, taking Draco’s arm and leading him back into the ball.

“But Sir –“

“Yes, yes, all in good time! Cuthbert!” he called, and an elderly wizard who must have at least equalled Dumbledore’s age turned round. He was simply and elegantly dressed, in a lilac satin robe with neat edging. It screamed class, Draco thought. So unlike Dumbledore’s lime green with flashing snowflakes that he was sporting today.

“Cuthbert, let me introduce the young man I was telling you about! This is Draco Malfoy. Draco, this is Cuthbert Entwhistle.”

Draco knew that name.

“Healer Entwhistle?” he asked, looking the man over with growing respect.

“That’s me,” the man smiled, shaking Draco’s hand. “Albus has been telling me about your recent adventures.”

“And you’ve come to help?” Draco said, worried suddenly. If Dumbledore was so concerned about Snape that he’d called a Healer in, why were they wasting time socialising?

“More than that, dear boy,” Dumbledore said, a hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Cuthbert had been promising to come for Christmas for years. And finally, I was able to give him the perfect reason to do so: I have asked him to do some initial assessment and tutoring with you, Draco. If you find yourselves compatible, Cuthbert is willing to consider offering you an apprenticeship, and should he have faith in your abilities but you don’t mesh, he will be able to recommend you to another Healer that might more suit your disposition.”

Draco stared in awe at the Headmaster.

“Thank you, Sir,” he gulped, “Thank you both,” he said, turning to Healer Entwhistle.

“I am looking forward to it,” the Healer said. “I understand that you have already intervened twice?”

Draco nodded, anxiously. “Yes. I – I know it seems foolhardy now, but –“

“Calm yourself, young man. Most Healers discover their skill when an event arises and they cannot help but act. And it is hard for a Healer to do damage – the learning is in how much more it is possible to achieve, with guidance.”

“Thank you,” Draco whispered, surprisingly relieved.

“Now, Mr Malfoy, why don’t you write back to your father and tell him of your true Christmas plans?” Dumbledore asked.

“I’m to tell him?”

“He’ll have to know. And he will appreciate the honour of Cuthbert’s visit,” Dumbledore added.

Draco sat in his room and composed the letter, the owl waiting patiently on the perch in the corner.
Finally, he felt reasonably happy with it.

Father

I am indeed conducting a research project, in which I have been partnered with Granger. All the initial research has been left in our hands and Severus has agreed to assess the project in the new term, and provide assistance only at that point. Granger has already changed her holiday plans, having heard I was staying, so that I wouldn’t get ahead of her.

However, you were right to assume that there was more to it than that.

I was not sure how to tell you the following news, because although it is a great honour I know you will have reservations about it, and I did not wish to upset you.

I have recently discovered that I am a Healer. Now you will understand. Professor Dumbledore has arranged for Cuthbert Entwhistle to spend the holidays at Hogwarts to assess me, and to consider whether he would be willing to take me as an apprentice. I know, despite your misgivings, you will appreciate the great honour it is to even be considered by him. I met the man tonight and he is the absolute epitome of refinement and elegance. I had hoped to know the results of his assessment before I told you of my discovery, as I had hoped that the additional honour of his patronage might make the situation more acceptable to you.

Whilst appreciating your concerns about the type of people I must treat – indeed, the whole thing is terrifying to me, Father, I assure you – I have a further research project in mind. I believe, from my initial impressions of entering within another’s body, that I will be able to discreetly research the differences between Purebloods and Mudbloods, and this research, with the authority of a Healer behind it, will provide conclusive and unarguable proof that may be of use in ending the current conflict to the satisfaction of us all.

Therefore, I am sure you will understand that I will not be returning tomorrow. Please give my love to Mother – I will write to her separately but you are, of course, at liberty to tell her my news.

Draco.

Lucius Malfoy, sitting before the study fire in the early hours of the morning, read the letter over yet again. Narcissa had long ago retired, and after all, she did not know that he had written to Draco earlier. He was amused by the Slytherin nature of his son’s approach. Not only to telling his father of this news, but also in seeing the possibilities of using the unpleasant aspects to further their cause. He was very impressed with the boy. And the tone – polite, but firm. He obviously had no intention of forgoing the opportunity he had been given, and that was wise too. And he made no bones about saying it – just the facts, and that he would not be home.

His son was turning into a man. And a man he could be proud of.

He poured himself a last brandy.

Perhaps he and Narcissa would go skiing for Christmas. She always adored the après-ski, and he the challenge of the slopes. He fire-called their elves at their chalet in Austria.
Hermione spent Christmas with her parents, enjoying their love and even the contact with aunts and cousins that she so rarely saw. Ron would not have spent Christmas with her here anyway, so his absence was not so profound a loss as it might have been. Her parents were comforting, appreciating the pain of first love lost. She was whisked to the pictures to see the latest movie blockbuster and to neighbours' houses for drinks and awkward conversations about how she was getting on at school and what her favourite subjects were.

She returned to Hogwarts the day after Boxing Day, feeling that she had somehow drawn a line under the Hermione who was Ron’s girlfriend and was now just Hermione. There were few people in the castle – Harry had disappeared away as he did every holiday, and Hermione realised with a start that she didn’t actually know where he had spent Christmas.

There was one thing she could say for Draco Malfoy and that was that he worked hard. He had done loads of work in her absence and even though he was spending considerable parts of the day with Healer Entwhistle, he still came to work in the library till late at night.

He had taken the wind out of her sails the first time they met up by apologising for the meeting that Thursday evening – he hadn’t known that she had split from Ron. She accepted it with grace and they didn’t mention it again. She had rather expected merciless teasing, and she really didn’t feel she could face it. The ease with which Ron had fallen into bed with Lisa, and started groping that Miranda at the disco, had not done her confidence any good.

One evening at supper, Healer Entwhistle had asked for volunteers for Draco to explore. Most of the staff and students present had agreed, much to Hermione’s surprise. She had actually mentioned it to Professor McGonagall, who had looked at her curiously, before saying, ”The thing is, Hermione, it’s an honour. Healers are very rare, you know. And they don’t cause any harm going in for a look – indeed, if there is any misalignment in your magic they will come out and tell you rather than act without your permission. They are very highly respected in the magical world, I assure you.”

“But – Draco Malfoy?” she twitched her nose.

Minerva sat down. “He can’t hurt you, you know, or use what he finds against you. It’s almost like a binding on Healers. They can only act for the best.”

Hermione wasn’t sure, but as the other members in the castle seemed to talk about it at every mealtime, on the last day of the holidays her feet found their way up to the infirmary.

She knocked on the door and stepped quietly in, not wanting to disturb anything.

Healer Entwhistle, Draco and Madam Pomfrey were seated at a table together, having tea and arguing in a friendly way.

Madam Pomfrey looked round and came over.

“Hello, Hermione, dear. Do you need me?”

Hermione shook her head. “I didn’t know if Draco needed any more test subjects, but I’ll go away if –”

“Come over, come over,” Entwhistle called. “I heard that! Another subject! Excellent.”

Draco looked rather askance at Hermione.

“I’ll go if you’d rather not,” she said briskly.
“Sit down, child, do,” Entwhistle smiled encouragingly.

“Why did you come?” Draco asked.

Hermione blushed. “Curiosity, I guess. Everyone’s talking about how it felt and I - well, you know I like knowing things,” she added.

“What an excellent reason,” Entwhistle said. “Now, your name, child?”

“Hermione Granger.”

“Set up a record chart, then, Draco. All the usual details.”

Hermione sat, feeling awkward, as Draco went through a list of questions. He stumbled at one.

“No point feeling embarrassed, either of you,” Entwhistle said gently. “All perfectly natural. Go ahead, Draco.”

Draco glanced up at Hermione, and then back down at the chart. “Have you used any form of contraception in the last three months, and if so, which method?” His cheeks were fiery.

Hermione, red too, wished with her whole heart she hadn’t come. A thought suddenly struck her.

“You’re not going to do a physical exam, are you?” she asked, “because I don’t think –”

“Certainly not,” Madam Pomfrey interjected. She smiled encouragingly at Hermione. “You need a great deal of training and certification to be able to do physical examinations,” she said. “Healing, on the other hand, is an intuitive skill. Draco knows how to do it. The only physical contact is the touch of his hands. The stomach is the usual place. He and Healer Entwhistle will both enter at the same time, and I will be here throughout. You need only to unfasten a few buttons on your shirt – no need to undress. Alright?”

The thought of Malfoy putting his hands on her stomach was an unwelcome one. She kicked herself for not having found out more information before she started, but she’d look a right prude if she pulled out now; no wonder Draco had looked surprised.


“Not at all,” Entwhistle said. “I was entirely at fault for not having told you what to expect from the beginning. I rather thought the others had told you, but Draco, learn from this: never make assumptions about the patient’s prior knowledge.”

“Yes sir.” He looked back at Hermione. “About the question –“

Trying not to quaver, Hermione said, “The answer is yes. I brew my own Contraceptus.”

“It’s always a good idea to use condoms or a barrier charm as well, dear,” Madam Pomfrey said practically.

Hermione, not wanting to go into explanations that they had both been virgins – after all, Ron could have got something from Lisa and passed it on had she not found out – just nodded. “Yes, Madam.”

There were several more questions and then Hermione found herself hopping onto a high gurney. Madam Pomfrey was placing a blanket over her hips and asking her to undo her shirt. Hermione felt a ridiculous sense of relief that she had one of her prettiest bras on, and decided instantly to
throw out the comfortable but greying one that she often wore. She felt horribly exposed as Draco and Entwhistle came to stand on either side of her.

“Can you just lower your skirt a bit, Hermione?” Entwhistle asked, his voice neutral and pleasant. “With two of us and you so petite we need a little more space.”

Hermione sat up and twisted round to undo the button and lower the zip.

Draco looked away quickly as the flash of a surprisingly voluptuous cleavage slid past his gaze as she bent over. He tried to control his breathing.

Hermione lay back again, shoving her skirt down.

Draco looked at the expanse of creamy stomach, the dip of belly button and the jut of hip bones just appearing at the top of her skirt. Her belly was rising up and down with her rapid breaths and it looked incredibly erotic. His blood seemed to rush into his groin so fast that he felt dizzy. His hand gripped the side of the table to steady himself.

Entwhistle looked at him sympathetically. “Now, Mr Malfoy, use the focussing skills we’ve been working on,” he said smoothly, “breathing first, then shut your eyes and focus before touching the patient. Nod when you are ready and I will place our hands.”

Draco nodded. This wasn’t exactly their normal approach and he was embarrassed that Entwhistle knew he had a problem. There was no condemnation in his tone however, and nothing to give away this was not the way they always did it. He followed instructions, and after a few moments the desire slipped away and he nodded.

Entwhistle’s warm hands enfolded his and the next minute they were touching cool flesh. His mind pushed, and then there was the incredible feeling of being inside someone. They explored. Hermione was fit and her magic strong. He felt the pulse of it, suffusing her being. He was shocked to feel the sadness in her. She said nothing and acted as if the Weasley thing was all over and dealt with, but here, he could feel the pain of it edging her every nerve. He felt Entwhistle move to withdraw, but kept his hand steady; his mentor waited. He looked carefully, exploring the magic from every angle. At last, he withdrew, coming out to see Entwhistle looking at him with interest.

Draco gave his head the tiniest of shakes.

Entwhistle helped Hermione sit up, and Draco turned his back as she rebuttoned her clothes.

“Well, Miss Granger, how did you find the experience?” the Healer asked as he helped her hop down.

“Not at all as I expected – well, I don’t know what I expected,” she added with a smile. “Am I fighting fit?”

“Very healthy,” he confirmed, “thank you so much for your assistance.”

“Yes, thank you, Hermione,” Draco added.

Hermione nodded, and left. Madam Pomfrey excused herself and retired to her office.

“Well? What were you looking for?” Entwhistle asked.

Draco wasn’t sure what to say. He was supposed to be totally honest with his mentor, but he felt rather dirty about what he had done.
“Let me guess. You’re surprised to find that Muggle-borns have exactly the same type of magic as every other witch or wizard.”

Draco stared at him, and Entwhistle laughed. “Draco, it’s the first thing every Healer wonders!”

“Oh. And they’re all the same? No difference at all?”

“I’ve yet to find any differences in the quality of magic. Of course, you come to recognise the differences between individuals, but it is not something that you could judge their heritage by.”

“But – but then why –“ he found it hard to continue.

“Why do so many believe Voldemort’s nonsense?”

“Why haven’t Healers just made it clear?”

“A Healer’s purpose is not politics, Draco. It is the individual. And you will find, people believe what they wish, despite the evidence. Voldemort is of mixed parentage himself, and yet still believes in the supremacy of Purebloods. Do not look for logic in the motivations of man.”

Entwhistle began to tidy things away. “Finish up the chart, Draco. And do not be embarrassed by your arousal. She was a very attractive girl.”

“I don’t fancy her!” Draco squawked.

“Really? I did.”

Draco’s eyes practically fell out.

“Draco,” Entwhistle said with exasperation, ”just because I am old does not mean I don’t have eyes. Just because I am a Healer, does not mean I am not a man. However, whatever feelings a patient provokes, the Healer’s duty is to acknowledge and then ignore his own response.”

Draco nodded, still feeling a bit shell-shocked at this man fancying Hermione. He was about a century and a half older than her, for a start.

“Anyway,” Entwhistle went on, “it’s quite common to get an erection even if you do prefer men. Part of the general heightened awareness, I think. Don’t worry about it, my lad!”

And he was gone, leaving Draco gawping.

Harry had spent the worst Christmas of his life, and that was truly saying something. He had secluded himself in his cottage and refused even the invitation to Christmas dinner at the school: Snape usually attended, as far as he knew, and he wasn’t prepared to do anything to make Snape any more uncomfortable in his own home. He did not know that Severus had left the castle.

He had slowly, slowly come to the conclusion of how much he must have hurt Severus. He hadn’t really appreciated the man’s strict morality, not given his history and his frequent nastiness. But he had spoken once to Dumbledore. Albus had been very unhappy about the situation. He had told him that Snape had been mortified by discovering that he had slept with a student, let alone Harry Potter, and had tendered his resignation for after the war.

Harry realised that not only had he compromised the man’s morals, made him sleep with someone he hated and generally made him feel abused and cheated, he had caused a major rift between
Snape and his mentor.

He knew that he should have known these things already. He knew that, partly, he did. But he had loved the relationship, and spent the whole time not thinking about what he was doing to Snape, just enjoying his company and hoping with a ridiculous optimism that Snape would care about him enough that it would all come out all right in the end. He had come to realise that this awful pain and misery that sat in his chest day after day was not just loss, but grief because he had hurt Snape.

He understood, finally, that his behaviour must be unforgivable to the other man.

And he realised at last, that the feeling he had had in Snape’s company, the warmth with which he looked forward to their meetings, thought how Snape would react to this or that – it was love.

Harry had written to Hermione a great deal, and once to Ron to wish him a Happy Christmas. Hermione was surprisingly open and honest in her letters, without Ron looking over her shoulder as she wrote. He knew and sympathised with the emotions she wrote about, but he couldn’t visit – he knew she would know something was wrong, and he couldn’t talk about it. It wasn’t fair to Severus.

Severus went to a conference in Italy for the break. He learnt very little that he didn’t already know, but fucked four petite black-haired Italians (two at the same time) and definitely didn’t think of or miss Harry Potter at all.

Ronald Weasley spent Christmas at the Burrow. He had sex with four different women (two at a party at Fred and George’s flat, one of whom had slapped him afterwards), and felt very pleased with his widened experience. He admitted (to himself) that he missed the cuddling bit with Hermione, but no doubt she would soon be back to cuddling him anyway, as long as he worked hard to rebuild their friendship. Life was good.
Harry arrived at the castle shortly before the Express was due to pull in, and having settled back into his room, he made his way up to the library. To his surprise, Mione wasn’t there, although there was a pile of books on the table in her usual nook. He looked for Madam Pince, and asked the stiff witch if she knew where her most regular customer was.

“Gone to the greenhouses, I believe,” the witch said sourly, as if Hermione were entering a brothel. “That Longbottom came to find her.”

Harry hadn’t known that Neville had returned early, feeling a stirring of guilt that he had not done so himself.

He meandered down the stairs and out into the gardens, seeing the students arriving in the distance as he did.

Harry found not only Hermione and Neville, but also Draco, all three of them sitting on some straw covered in sacking, reading a book and looking at the leaves of a plant Neville was carefully holding.

Mione shoved the book at Draco and leapt to her feet when she saw him, giving him a big hug.

It was the first physical contact he had had with another human being since he was last at school.

He pulled back at last, reluctantly.

“I hope you don’t expect that from all of us,” Draco drawled.

“If you feel like hugging me, Draco, I don’t mind giving it a whirl,” Harry said, holding his arms out wide, and watching with amusement at the look of horror on Draco’s face. “Of course, I’m not prepared to take it any further, you understand. No offence, but you already know you’re not my type.”

“And you’re already taken,” Hermione piped up. It was a sensitive point as far as she was concerned.

“You’ve got a boyfriend? Uugh, you been shagging all Christmas?” Draco recoiled.

Harry was horribly aware of Neville. Now was not the time for details, if it ever would be.

“My heart is already taken,” he sighed dramatically, holding his hand over said organ. Well, it was given, if not taken. “Unfortunately, the answer to your second question is no. You got something against queers, Malfoy?” he asked, actually curious. Had he never seen his father around other men? Not that that could be a very easy thought. He still had a mother after all.

“No, just glad you haven’t been getting your jollies whilst Granger and I slave away here,” he said.

Harry’s eyes sharpened. “Have you found something?”

Hermione grinned. “We think so. We found this old text, and this recipe that seemed to have potential, but we couldn’t identify three of the plants – the names just didn’t seem to exist any more. Nev’s helped us from the descriptions of the bits that you use in the potions, but one of them was stumpng us. We think this might be it. Neville got it from Egypt.”
“Don’t get too excited, Potter,” Draco drawled. “We need to brew it, test it, refine it – “

“Yes but – well done! This is excellent! Have you talked to Professor Snape yet?”

“He’s away,” Hermione said off-handedly, “but we’ll talk to him later, see if he can see anything wrong with it.”

“He’s gone away when the students are just coming back?” Harry asked, and then wondered if Severus had been Called. Could Voldemort tell that the link had been tampered with? His anxiety was building just as Draco said, “He’s been away all holiday. Some conference, I think. I expect he’s in heaven.”

Right.

Harry tried to get his thoughts together. It was no good falling apart every time Snape’s name came up.

“How long do you think it will take you to brew?” Harry asked.

“Only a few hours, but it has to ferment for three weeks before use,” Hermione explained.

“The sooner the better, then,” Harry said. “Can you spend extra time on it? Not just do it in class? I hate to ask, but –“

“Idiot!” Hermione shook her head at him. “We’ve been working on this for hours and hours every day. Don’t you think we want to get going with it?”

Harry looked suitably chastened. “Sorry, sorry. And thanks!” he grinned sheepishly. A thought occurred. “Do we have all the ingredients? If it needs anything expensive that’s no problem, I’ve got the money.”

Draco nodded at Neville. “He’s the supplier of the rare ingredients. As well as all the indecipherable ones, there’s a whole host of other peculiarities.”

“I can handle that, Harry. One of them might be tricky if we need to make large quantities, though. It only flowers every 45 years, and of course the recipe is asking for the stamens.”

“I’ll pretend that I understand all that entails,” Harry said, making Draco bark a laugh.

“How you ended up being - what you are,” Draco said discreetly, just in case their conversation could be overheard, “when your basic knowledge is so minimal, I don’t know. It’s a travesty, Potter!”

Harry grinned. “I know. Doesn’t it make you mad, Malfoy!”

Ron sat down next to Harry and opposite Hermione at supper. “How’s things, mate? Good Christmas?”

“So-so,” Harry said, non-comitally. “You?”

“Excellent!”

They both heard Hermione choke.
Harry looked at her sympathetically, whilst Ron reddened.

“Sorry, Mione! I open my mouth and put my foot in it, you know me,” he apologised.

“What did you do?” Hermione asked, trying to be polite, to be the new Mione who didn’t care.

Ron reddened even more.

God, could he be more transparent? Hermione thought.

“Well, Christmas was normal sort of Burrow stuff,” Ron floundered. “My Mum’s sister Janet came with her son and his girlfriend,” (who I had in the garden shed, Ron thought, but didn’t say). “And the twins had a brilliant party. Angelina Johnson, Oliver Wood, Katie, Alicia – all the old team and loads of others. I got stonking drunk and it was brilliant! Not the next morning of course, but the twins have developed this excellent hangover cure, works at once and tastes great – not like the usual stuff that makes you want to puke before it works. They’ll be able to sell gallons of it once they work out how to stop it making your skin turn blue.”

Dean laughed, having been listening in. Ron grinned at him, and took up his tale of pleasure.

“Then some neighbours had a party and I got drunk again.” (And laid Emily, their daughter.) “So, I’m sorry if I enjoyed myself, but it was really good – you know, when I was expecting to be all sad and everything,” he added.

Harry just glared at him.

“Sounds good,” Hermione said carefully, not thinking of all the things that she knew Ron’s words meant but hadn’t said. For a start, no evening would count as brilliant without some form of sexual activity, she was sure. Well, he’d wasted no time! And she felt how ridiculous she was that she had to restrain herself from asking when he had found time to do his homework – it really wasn’t her business any longer, was it?

She turned to Dean, keeping her voice cheerful. “What about you, Dean? Anything exciting happen in your break?”

Later than evening, Hermione, Neville and Draco knocked on the door of Snape’s classroom.

“Come!”

They went inside, where Severus was busy setting up the room for the following day. He glanced over at them.

“To what do I owe this honour?” he sneered, looking them all over, then turning to Neville. “Mr Longbottom, I thought it would be a cold day in hell before you ventured in here again. In fact, I’d prayed it would be so.”

To the amazement of them all, Neville grinned at him, shoving his hands in his pockets. “I come under duress, I assure you,” he smiled. “If it will make you feel easier, I promise wholeheartedly not to even attempt to touch a stirring stick, let alone think of brewing anything.”

“My heart can beat again,” Snape drawled. Who knew Longbottom had it in him? The boy had always been a terrified rabbit the moment he’d set foot in this room. “Well?”

Draco turned and silently asked for permission to ward the room. With sharp eyes and a nod, Snape
did it himself.

“Thank you, Sir,” Draco said. “I think we’ve found something,” he continued without preamble, “and would like your views on it.”

“Indeed?” he said, but his eyes were interested.

There was a sudden rapid knocking on the door, and the sound of someone turning the handle.

Snape strode over to it, using the door to block the sight of those within. They could hear the sounds of panic.

He shut the door and turned to them. “I must go. Bring it to me tomorrow.”

“Will you be at Remedial Magic?” Hermione asked. “We can go over it then.”

Snape’s back stiffened infinitesimally. “Very well,” he said, and swept out.

Snape walked into Remedial Magic the next day, his face composed. He had not intended to attend a single lesson more, but if the class was now being used as a driving machine towards the war effort, he had no choice but to participate. Once the Dark Lord was gone, either he would be too, or he would be free to leave this place once and for all. His time at the conference had shown him that there were plenty of opportunities out there for a skilled Potions Master, in more ways than one.

And he had no intention of letting that little bastard Potter feel that he was in any way concerned about being around him. The boy had done all he could to humiliate him, but no longer! He looked around for reactions from the others. Granger and Weasley were in the room, though they weren’t talking to each other – well, he had heard all about their shenanigans. Maybe it had taken the edge off of laughing at the slimy old potions master having sexual relations with his most hated student without knowing it.

Yes. Granger was looking at him with a smile on her face. Maybe she considered them to be in the same boat – both betrayed by their lovers – that was the type of maudlin sentiment the bint might believe. How disgusting. He could not see her approving of Potter’s behaviour – she was too tied up in rules and regulations to approve of a relationship between staff and students, he was sure.

He carefully did not notice Potter, who was sitting with his back to him, talking to McMillan and Midgen. They were touching hands under the table. How well suited the little love-birds were. Saccharine sweet. Vile.

He did not notice the muscular breadth of Potter’s back, or the way his robe strained over it, or wonder whether the black hair felt softer than Alex’ curls.

“We’re all here, Harry,” Hermione said.

The little shit turned round quickly, and met his eyes head on.

They looked – raw – Snape thought, before they shuttered and the boy took a breath before addressing them all.

“Right, welcome back, everyone. I hope you’ve all been practicing a bit as well as enjoying your break?” There were some mumbles and grunts. “I’ll take that as an occasionally,” he grinned. “I’ve been attempting to do some thinking over the hols – yes, I appreciate that you all understand what
an effort it was for me,” he added, to chuckles of laughter; he studiously avoided looking at Snape. “And I’m afraid that I’m no longer going to be able to work with you on pure magical development.”

“What?” Padma squeaked, “but we’ve only just got going!”

“I need to concentrate on defeating Voldemort,” he said. “I’ve made pretty clear all along that this is my objective, but it’s now time to step up the game. I want him dead before the end of the year and then you can all go on and lead normal lives, not have this threat and fear hanging over you. You all know I welcome your assistance, but I will not expect it. From now on, all the work here will have the ultimate goal of the defeat of Voldemort. I quite understand if you’d rather pull out – and I won’t assume that you’re a follower of the Dark Lord or anything like that. You may just wish to devote time to your other studies, or prefer to keep out of the nasty stuff. If you wish to leave, please do so now. No-one here can say anything against you to anyone else, and I for one won’t think the worst of you for having made what is a very sensible decision.”

There was silence, and no movement.

“I’m not going anywhere, Harry,” Ernie said into the quiet.

“Nor me,” Eloise added, gripping Ernie’s hand.

“Harry, we’re all behind you for good or bad. Can you just pass on this boring stuff and get onto the good bits?” Draco whinged, to laughter and nods of agreement.

Snape sat still, just watching, Harry noted, and tried not to be spooked. His spine tingled just being so close to the man.

“Okay, thanks everyone. I want us all to throw in some ideas on the following. I think it’s a really important development and any ideas are valid at this stage, alright, so don’t worry if they sound stupid. Mine usually do, as you all well know,” he grinned, and continued, “Mione and Draco have done some amazing research over the holidays – not a holiday for them, at all, from the look of it –” he smiled his thanks at the two of them – “and have come up with a possible potion for increasing my strength.”

“You don’t think you have enough power already, Harry?” Snape drawled. “What sort of megalomaniac are you?”

“I am powerful, but Voldemort is drawing power from all his followers, which must be in the hundreds at the very least. I’ve got to overcome that. So, one way seems to be to increase my power.”

“What about tackling it from the other end?” Ron suggested. They all looked round, and Ron went red, but continued, “cutting his followers’ power off from Voldemort?”

“Can that be done?” Padma asked, furrowing her brow.

“It can,” Snape said after a pause. “Draco and Harry have already narrowed down my own link to the Dark Lord.”

“You have the Dark Mark?” Padma squeaked.

Snape sighed. “Do you not know your history at all, you young people? I took the Dark Mark when I was as young and foolish as some of you appear to be. I have recanted. Nevertheless, the Dark Lord has been able to draw on my power. Draco and Harry have been able to deal with it.”
“To cut it off completely?” Hermione asked, her eyes glowing with interest.

“That would not best serve our purposes, would it?” Snape responded.

“What does that mean?” Ernie frowned.

“It means, leaving a hint of access open allows me to know when he is calling his followers,” Snape said. This group may be protected by Potter’s spells, but the more people that knew a man was a spy, the less his life span, Snape thought sourly.

“I take it that only works for a voluntary closure of the connection?” Hermione asked.

“There’d be no practical way of doing it to large numbers, anyway,” Draco said.

“It’s an interesting idea, though,” Padma commented, surprising everyone. She was usually pretty negative.

“I agree,” Harry said. “Would you, Padma, Eli, Ernie and Ron do a brainstorm on that in a minute? Thanks. First though, let’s have a look at the potion notion.”

Ernie groaned.

Harry grinned. “Fire away, Draco, Hermione.”

With a quick glance at each other, Draco started. “Harry asked us to find a potion to increase his powers. I’m not going to bore you with the details; suffice it to say that we’ve found something potentially interesting. Have a look and see what you think.”

He handed them all a parchment with the potion recipe on, and there was a few moment’s silence whilst they read. Harry had not yet seen it. It didn’t make a lot of sense to him, but he picked up on the translation of the purpose of the potion.

“This should double my powers?” he asked.

Hermione nodded. “In theory.”

“So how would you go about tripling or quadrupling them?”

Draco humphed. “Give him a twig and he wants the whole broomstick…”

“Actually, it’s an interesting task, that,” Hermione began. “Would increasing the active components work, and if so would it be in a direct progression? Or would there be an exponential increase in the rate of –”

“I believe it would be foolhardy to try to increase the potency at the first attempt,” Snape said coolly.

“But it takes forever to ferment – “ Harry began.

“Yeh, but you don’t even know if it works, Harry,” Ron argued.

“And he may be allergic to one of the ingredients, or the combination,” Draco commented. “It’d be important to see that you can tolerate the constituents,” he continued. “Some of these are so rare that you’re unlikely to have ingested them before, and therefore you may not have any tolerance for them.”
“Does it keep?” Padma asked.

They all looked at her, and she shrank back a little, but Snape looked over the ingredients again. “I can see no reason why it should lose efficacy if correctly stored.”

“Well, then why not make two batches – or three, or more, of different strengths – then if Harry’s okay with the first you can just try the next.”

Silence met this proposal.

“Now that is why I like brainstorming,” Harry said. “It sounds a good idea to me. Are there any reasons not to do that?” he asked.

“Limitations on the ingredients, I’m afraid,” Neville said. “Also, we’re jumping too far ahead: a couple of the plants used are only tentative identifications. We may have to try other alternatives, so it would be pointless to waste the really rare ingredients if we’re barking up the wrong tree with some of the others.”

Snape nodded. “As incredible as it is to find myself agreeing with you, Neville, on a potions’ matter, I believe you are correct. We ought to make one batch first, and see if it works.”

“Can you start on that now, or is it too late?” Harry asked.

“Where’s the fire?” Ernie grinned.

“The fire is Voldemort, and he’s going to burn us up,” Harry said tightly. “Seriously, I don’t want to waste a moment. He could attack at any time, and the more advantages we have under our belts the better. I’d rather be in a position that we can attack, to suit us, than be caught on the defensive. I’m sorry if that sounds grim, but people will die, and if we can prevent it, we must.”

There was a moment of painful silence.

Neville broke it. “Actually, Harry, we need to make it in daylight. Some of the plant ingredients require it.”

“Oh. Fair enough, then.”

“Do you have all the ingredients, then?” Ernie asked, “if they’re as rare as you say?”

Snape looked at Draco and Hermione.

“We were wondering if we could get the base ones from your stores, Severus – we’ll pay, of course.”

“It isn’t a matter of payment. Schools do not use the best quality ingredients – they’re wasted on - well, I need say no more. I have most of these in my private stores, but I will need to order some iridium and antimony – “

“Oh, I have those,” Hermione said carelessly.

“Indeed? What have you been up to, Miss Granger?” Snape said silkily.

“A little research,” Hermione blushed.

“My mind is boggling already at what required that combination – “
“They were in different potions,” she interrupted.

“I see. Or rather, I do not. Nevertheless, we ought to use only the finest –“

“They are.”

At his disbelieving look, Hermione sighed, and added, “it would help if you could occasionally trust my word. I ordered them direct from Beresford’s.”

“In South Africa?” Snape’s eyebrows were in his hairline. Almost.

“I wasn’t aware there was another branch,” Hermione retorted.

“Well, Miss Granger –“

“Hermione,” Harry corrected. “Can we get to the point? Are the anti-whatsit and the rainbow-thing ok or are they going to kill me?”

“They surely would kill you in sufficient quantity, Harry, but at least it won’t be from impurities, given the source,” Snape conceded. “However, these plants, if correct – am I to assume you have access to all of these, Neville?”

“I have. But we’ll have to be careful. I’ve been working on forcing the eridacia purplura into flower, since Draco and Mione asked me about the plants in the recipe, but it will only do it once, and so the stamens are going to be a big sticking point.”

“Can’t you find another plant wherever you got that one?” Eloise asked.

“I could, but apparently the only place in the world where they grow is the home of a flock of hippogriffs,” Neville said. “They were not pleased to have one of their nesting sites invaded, and I can tell you, Draco’s arm back in whatever year it was was nothing compared to what they did to my back and…and…and…elsewhere.”

Padma giggled, and Neville grinned sheepishly.

“I find that very hard to believe,” Draco drawled, “I was almost mortally injured.”

“Yes, right,” Ron snorted. “Bloody wuss.”

“Hey! I still have the scar!” Draco rolled up his shirt sleeve to show the thin line along his arm.

“What’s with that, Malfoy? Kept the scar as evidence?” Ron was taunting.

Harry was just about to shut Ron up, but at the same time Eloise had said to Neville, “Let’s see your scar then, Neville!”

And to the surprise of them all, Neville turned his back on them and after a moment’s fumbling, peeled his robe and shirt down.

“Holy shit!” Draco said, leaping up to have a look.

Padma and Eloise had gasped.

“Mate, when did they happen? Why didn’t you get Madam Pomfrey to sort them out?” Ron asked, tracing his finger just above the line of one of the long, red furrows on Neville’s back.
“I’ve put stingwood sap on them,” Neville said, turning round and shrugging his shirt and robe back up with a wince. “They’ll go down in the end with that. No point bothering Madam Pomfrey.”

“How did you reach?” Hermione asked, practically, then blushed.

“Spell on my back, hands on my arse,” Neville said, and then blushed horribly. “Oh Merlin, that sounded way wrong!”

Ernie laughed. “I’m surprised you can even sit down if they go much below the waist,” he commented.

“Have you taken a pain potion?” Snape spoke at last.

“Nah, I’ll be alright.”

“Mr Longbottom, unless you are a masochist, I can see no earthly reason to suffer. If we are done here, I must go. I will send you a potion by owl,” he nodded at Neville.

“Hold on!” Hermione said, and went red at speaking to Snape like that. “Are we meeting Saturday, then?”

“Do you wish me to be involved in the brewing?” Snape asked.

“YES!!” Hermione and Draco both answered.

“Then I suggest my private workroom at ten on Saturday morning, if that will have allowed adequate light for the plants?” he asked Neville, who nodded.

“Pray excuse me, then, but I have matters to attend to,” and he was gone.

Saturday came, and Hermione and Neville made their way down to Snape’s office, as they weren’t sure where the private workroom was. Draco was waiting outside it, and took them along.

They worked remarkably efficiently together, Snape ignoring Neville who sat on a stool and watched, pointing out which plant was which of the rare specimens, and which parts were easy to get more of and which required the greatest care.

“How you catalogue these, Mr Longbottom?” he asked.

Neville nodded. “I asked Colin Creevey to photograph them for me from every angle. I keep a record book,” he explained.

“Good. I would be very grateful if you would be kind enough to allow Mr Creevey to make me some copies.”

“Sure,” Neville said. “I’m sorry, I should have thought of that.”

“Not at all. The honour is mine. It is very useful for a Potions Master to have a reference when dealing with such rare ingredients.”

He was looking very carefully at the scales which contained one of the pieces that Neville had brought.

“We need a fraction more of this, I am afraid. With the leaf bud removed, the shoot weight is 9
“Okay, you’ll be able to get on with the other things?” Neville asked. “Hold on, best check all the weights so I’m not running hither and thither.”

“A sensible suggestion.”

The remaining plant elements were weighed and were satisfactory.

“I’ll be 40 minutes or so,” Neville said – don’t start if that’s going to be a problem.”

“40 minutes to go to the greenhouse?” Draco scoffed. “Bring me back a bun if you’re stopping off at the kitchens, I’m starving.”

Neville blushed. “I’m not going to the kitchens,” he said with dignity, “nor the greenhouses.”

Draco looked up from his measuring.

“This isn’t another quick trip to China, or Australia, is it?”

Neville shook his head, walking to the door.

“No, it’s not far,” he said.

Snape’s head shot up. Everything clicked into place. He strode over to the door, and followed Neville out, shutting it firmly behind him.

“Do you know what that’s all about?” Draco asked.

“Not a clue,” Hermione said.

Outside the door, Snape threw up a privacy ward and loomed over Neville.

“You knew all the time,” he said, his voice deadly quiet.

Neville stuck his chin out and tried to stop his legs quaking.

“Yes.”

“You – you saw –“ Snape’s voice was strangled.

“Two men enjoying each other? Yes. I admit it was a shock to see you in that – that situation. I’m sure we’d both have preferred it if I had not. But you knew I’d seen that weeks ago.”

“It was bad enough that you should see your professor in any intimate situation! With a student - ”

“I didn’t know if you knew it was Harry or not,” Neville commented. “Either way, it wasn’t my business. It seemed consensual enough.”

“What is it with you Gryffindors?” Snape said in disgust. “You appear to have no morals at all.”

Still terrified, Neville drew himself up. “I believe you are wrong, Sir. Harry was wrong not to have told you of his identity – I don’t know any of the details of why that happened. But I trust Harry; he’s not malicious and would never deliberately hurt someone – Voldemort apart, of course. He was happier last term than I’ve ever seen him. If you are asking do I think relations between staff
and students are wrong? I would probably have said yes, months ago. But Harry’s of age, whatever that means – sometimes he’s so innocent he’s a baby, and sometimes he seems older than Dumbledore. But I know he wasn’t a virgin, and that you weren’t taking advantage of him – “

“How can you know that?” Snape snapped.

“With the sounds he was making?” Neville blurted out. “Oh, hell.”

Two spots of colour flagged Severus’ cheeks.

“So. You were really there to spy on me. No doubt the common room was in stitches at the thought of the Potions Master taking an interest in the boy who hated him.”

Something snapped in Neville. He pointed his finger into Snape’s chest. “You recommended me for the job there! I had no idea who I was going to work for, till I got there! And yes, I recognised Harry, but I assumed he knew what he was doing acting as someone else, and treating me as if he didn’t know me. And I didn’t even know you were seeing him then! And as for discussion in the common room – yes, we all guessed Harry had someone, because he was away a lot, but he never mentioned a name, ever, and we all assumed it was a Muggle, because, frankly, who can he date in the wizarding world?”

“Half the population, I would have thought,” Snape came straight back.

“Right. Like Harry is going to put anyone at risk like that. But you? You’re already at risk. And Harry was in disguise. And I suspect he was paying you the compliment of believing you were pretty much able to defend yourself anyway. But this is all guesswork. Harry never mentioned or hinted at your name. And neither did I, not even to Harry. And I resent the assumption that I would have done so.”

“Very noble, Mr Longbottom, but tell me this: if Mr Potter didn’t take up with me to amuse his friends, why did he do so?”

Neville stared at him, shook his head sadly, and turned to walk away.

“Exactly. There is no alternative you can think of,” Snape sneered.

Neville whipped round and came back. “Alternatives? I can think of plenty! But do you want to hear them?” he gritted.

“I don’t believe you could come up with a single one. Go and get the wretched plant. I have had enough.”

Neville lifted a hand and counted off on his fingers. “One: how about, maybe, just maybe, he enjoys your company? Why, I can’t imagine. Two: he’s lonely; maybe anyone would have done, and it just happened to be you, he was that desperate. I don’t believe that he’d be desperate enough to choose someone he didn’t like, though: Harry’s not a masochist, even if you think I’m one. Three: sex. Obviously no argument there. Four: you look hot half-naked. If I can think so, I’m sure Harry does. Five: he’s an idiot. There can be no other explanation. Now, I’m going to get the plant, which by the way, I’ve been growing at Harry’s request especially for you. Not that either of us knew it would happen to be in this potion, he just asked for plants for your potions and especially anything rare. Exactly the sort of thing a man does for someone he wants to laugh at behind their back!” and Neville stormed off down the corridor.
The next three weeks crawled by. Harry worked out more rigorously than ever, and ran farther. He had done a lot of running over the break, seeking the calm it brought.

It was hard seeing Snape, and only ever seeing indifference on his face, or disgust. Harry did not know which was worse. Snape continued to completely ignore Harry in Potions class, until the Friday of the third week.

Seventh year Potions was grouped in two blocks, on a Thursday afternoon after lunch and first thing on Friday. Snape had no classes after the Thursday session, which meant any students who were free could continue working, and that any Potions with a long brewing period could be left up and running overnight.

Snape had bustled in a moment late, which was so rare for him that Harry had allowed himself a good look at the man to check if he was alright. Snape had a slightly wind-blown air about him, as if he had been outside, and as the man walked past Harry, strolling down the aisle ignoring him as usual, Harry could sense the outside chill, and noted the damp edge to his shoes. Had Snape been Called and only just returned? Had he taken a walk, out in the cold January air?

Snape inspected all the cauldrons, speaking with each student as they moved to the next stage of the process, assessing and directing. Finally reaching Harry’s, he was prepared for his teacher to walk past, but instead Snape stepped up, and looked in. Harry’s body tightened at the closeness of the man now invading his body space. Was this a new punishment tactic? The cold feel had gone off Snape, and his body scent was coming through. Snape brushed against his arm as he leaned in, and Harry could not help take a swift intake of breath. He could smell Snape’s shampoo – the scent faint, as if he had washed his hair the previous night rather than this morning, and another smell – tobacco? But Snape didn’t smoke. And – sandalwood? Snape didn’t use sandalwood – he said it interfered with - and then the faint undertones of a familiar scent just caught Harry’s senses. Earthy, musky, delicious – and then it hit him.

Snape had had sex. He had had sex and hadn’t washed and stood here reeking of another man and was deliberately standing close to Harry for the first time in six weeks.

“Your technique is still entirely inadequate,” Snape sneered.

So shocked and hurt that he felt frozen, Harry said nothing. He had no right to care that Snape had slept with someone else: but he did care, and the pain was like a twisting rod of steel in his chest. And Snape had deliberately done this, deliberately hurt him, deliberately shown him that he had moved on, that Harry was nothing to him. He knew he ought to feel glad for Snape, glad the man had someone.

But he found he couldn’t feel glad.

Not when it wasn’t him.

Snape’s eyes met his, mocking, knowing, and then he swept back to the front of the class.

Hermione looked across at Harry and gave a sympathetic shrug.

Hermione was getting concerned about Harry.

He could always be secretive – she knew he kept things bottled up, but they usually came out in the end. Like the mage thing. That was just typical of Harry. But as she came out of her own blinkered pain, she had begun to realise that all was not well with her friend.
He still seemed to go away at the weekends, but he also came back earlier and didn’t have that joie de vivre about him that had been in evidence so much last term.

Hermione had tackled him in the common room only two nights before. It was late, and they had both been reading, curled up at either end of the big sofa in the common room. Ron was still out somewhere, and somehow, Hermione was getting used to seeing him chatting up girls left, right and centre. Now that they were no longer a couple, other people had stopped looking with pity on her. Somehow the Christmas break had drawn a line under it for everyone else, and although Hermione knew that student relationships changed as quickly as the scores at a quidditch match, somehow she had never put her own in that category. But obviously everyone else did.

And to be fair to Ron, he was working hard at being friendly and was obviously having a great time. Which was just proof that he wasn’t ready for a long term relationship, so it was better to have happened now rather than later.

And she had to admit, quietly to herself, that she had been surprised to notice how muscular Neville’s back had been when he had stripped off his shirt in Remedial Magic. Surprised that she had noticed, as well as surprised at Neville’s body. He had always been just Neville. She had, of course, realised that his shape had changed - that his face was more angular and that he needed to shave more often than most of the other boys. She just hadn’t really linked this to the fact that he was now a man. So maybe things were looking up for her.

Harry though, was a different matter. As far as she knew, he had never had a real relationship in school, but she knew he’d had one or two relationships at least, and had dabbled in the Muggle gay scene. She knew his first lover had been a Muggle called Derek and that Harry still saw him, had remained friends with him and his new lover. It had certainly helped her a bit to believe that she and Ron could retain a friendship through all this.

But Harry hadn’t talked about his most recent paramour. Hermione had supposed it was another Muggle that Harry had become involved with over the summer, as he had come back from the holidays glowing and happy, and had been going away every weekend since. His departures had caused a lot of jealousy in the common room, and mutters of ‘special treatment’, but as no one else had had anyone outside that they were missing, and that if anyone was to be given a privilege it was a bonus at least that it was a Gryffindor, the comments had soon stopped.

Now though, Harry was looking - what? Hermione considered. He looked fit and strong, she acknowledged, but there was – something off. He was studying all the time for a start. Not school books, but advanced magic books that he had had owl-delivered, or that Dumbledore had given him.

“You going to tell me what’s up, or keep it to yourself?”

Harry, blinking up from his book, mumbled, “What?”

“Well, I know I’ve been blind the last few weeks, but there’s something off about you.”

Harry sniffed his armpits. “Thanks,” he said sarcastically. “I’ll take a shower when I’m done.”

Hermione swatted his arm. “Prat. Keep your secrets, then. I’m here when you need me. I haven’t thanked you for being so good to me since –“

“Rubbish,” Harry stopped her. “I’m your friend.”

“Well, I’m yours. Doesn’t mean you have to tell me anything though. I can cope with the
Harry snorted, and settled his head back on the sofa, then twisted his neck round to look at Hermione.

“I did something really stupid, and I hurt someone.”

Oh. Can you be more specific?”

“Not really,” Harry sighed. “I don’t really want to talk about it.”

“Alright.” Hermione took a breath. “Tell me what you’re reading, then.”

Harry choked a laugh. “I’m glad I’ve got you, Mione,” he gave a small smile.

She crept along the sofa and hugged him.

“Always,” she whispered.

Now, in the Potions class, she was looking at Harry’s frozen face. He must be really in a worse way than she thought. Snape might not have spoken to him for weeks, but the comment he had made had been minor compared to the invective in the past, and yet Harry looked gutted. It really must be hard for Snape to know how to treat him, a mage in his class; nevertheless Hermione thought he had taken the wrong tack in saying nothing to Harry in lessons since Harry had helped him get his full magic and sealed down his Dark Mark. Alright, he wasn’t showering him with praise, but even the lack of his normal snide comments was noticeable, and he was probably right to start back on it if Harry wanted to keep his powers under wraps.

She’d talk to Harry about it later.

Over the weeks Dumbledore had been giving him twice weekly private lessons on gently stretching his magic and learning how to both conserve and to replenish it, and situations where using his staff, wand, or indeed both wands might be advantageous. Practical classes were interspersed with discussion.

On the Tuesday night of the third week, in his session with the Headmaster after his Remedial Magic class, Harry had asked Dumbledore the exact purpose of the Order of the Phoenix. He had been at a couple of poorly attended meetings the previous year, at Dumbledore’s suggestion, though his presence had obviously made the others uncomfortable, and he hadn’t felt that much was being achieved either.

“Ah yes. I wanted to discuss this with you,” the older wizard said, settling into an armchair beside the fire in his study. Harry took the opposite one, and tea and sandwiches had appeared.

“The Order has been established for several centuries. Its prime purpose is ensuring the security and harmony of the wizarding world.”

“Security and harmony? Those are rather vague objectives,” Harry said, his brow furrowing.

“Yes, I agree. Very open to interpretation, aren’t they? And I think that is a good thing. Each generation faces a different crisis, and has to decide what is important given the times.”
“How is that decision made? Do the members have voting rights?”

“They do, though the final say is with the Leader.”

“Isn’t that rather dangerous?”

“The Leader is elected by the other members, so in some ways it just means things actually get done. Otherwise the discussions would be endless, frankly, as I rather think you saw. I feel at this point I ought to stand down. With a mage in our midst, it is quite likely the members will wish to vote you in as the Leader.”

To Dumbledore’s surprise, Harry didn’t answer at once. He had expected an instant rejection of the idea, or at least the suggestion that the membership remain in the dark about his powers.

“I think it works better if you continue in Chair,” Harry said. “I do have some ideas, though. But as I’ve said before, I need your guidance and advice, and people may be too silly to realise that being a mage doesn’t make me a fount of all knowledge and just follow any suggestions I make, and that would be a very bad thing,” he smiled.

“Very well, although you must expect the membership to bring it up. I’m assuming that you are planning to reveal that you are a mage, Harry?”

“Yes, I think it’s necessary,” Harry said, putting his cup down and picking up another curried chicken sandwich. “I’d like the members to come at the weekend and test whether the potion works. And I’d like to propose that the members of my Remedial Magic class, including Ron and Hermione, join up.”

“They’re very young,” Dumbledore said cautiously.

“And expected to put their lives on the line as much as I,” Harry argued.

“I don’t think their parents would approve —”

“They’re all wizarding adults, Albus,” Harry used his mentor’s first name, although he had only just begun to do so. He could see that it equalized their footing, though, and he needed that at this moment. “Hermione and Ron have been with me through thick and thin already. I don’t want them hurt any more than you do, but these are all strong witches and wizards, they’ve chosen to be involved, and frankly, we need them.”

Albus felt his age. Harry was right, of course, but these young people...he wanted so very much to protect them.

“I don’t offer them lightly,” Harry said, as if reading his thoughts. “I’ll do my all to protect them, I promise. But the more they know, the safer they’ll be. I know you’ve felt the other way round is better, but I’ve been on the end of it, and it isn’t,” Harry said firmly.

“Very well,” Albus said. “I’ll call a meeting for this weekend, and ask the members then, but I don’t think they’ll agree.”

Harry leaned forward. “This is important, Albus. If they fuss, call me in. I’ll be waiting. And the others will be waiting too, because I want them to join in the testing.”

“What do you have in mind?” Albus inquired.

I want to have everyone on the quidditch pitch. Neville and I can apparate everyone onto the pitch,
and I want to hold an invisibility and a disturb-me-not spell the whole time. Can you be ready to take those over if I falter? I don’t want any hint of what we are doing to get out.”

“Very well,” Albus nodded, curious.

“Then, I’ll attempt to create a defensive shield to withstand curses.”

“What curses?”

“The curses I want everyone to be throwing at me. That’s why I want my class there. Apart from Severus, they won’t have used any before – or nothing much, anyway. The practice will be good for them. Then, when we find my breaking point, I’ll take the potion, and we’ll retest.”

“If we test to breaking, you could be injured.”

“Draco will be there, and I can go to Madam Pomfrey if it’s minor. I’m not going to stand and suffer, I’ll call it off the minute we hit that point, don’t worry!”
Please be warned, you may find this a difficult chapter, but it is essential. If you wish to have an outline before/instead of reading it, please contact me.

Severus Snape stood on the quidditch pitch, glad of the warming spell on his cloak and robes. The weather had turned frosty again, after several days of rain, and despite the fact that it was now mid-morning, the ground underfoot was still crunchy and white, whilst the air felt heavy with crispy particles of suspended rain.

He had already spent an hour at Grimmauld Place, listening to the shock and awe of the other members as they discovered that Harry Potter was a mage. It disgusted him. It was as if they now believed the boy could do anything, that they were safe and everything would be alright. And therefore there was certainly no need for the younger generation to join the order. Only the four Weasley brothers present had said otherwise.

He was even more disgusted when Potter joined them, and they all fell to their knees when he came in. Only he and Albus were left in their seats. And it pissed him off that Potter wouldn’t have it, and was so bloody humble and noble. And then Potter took them to task and told them exactly what he’d been thinking, that the little shit couldn’t do it on his own, and he needed the others, and of course they had all consented like bleeding lemmings.

And all the while Snape couldn’t help but notice how impassioned he was, vibrant and electric. He was pissed off with himself for noticing, because Harry Potter was nothing to him. The boy was respectfully dressed in wizarding robes but he’d worn them open, and the muscles on his thighs bulged against the tight fabric of his denims underneath as he sat on the edge of the table and his robe fell away. No hint of spare flesh spilled over his waistband, his body looking lean and taut. Not that he bloody gave a fuck!

Except that the little shit was driving him mad.

He’d thought he’d exorcised his demons in Italy.

And then one glance at the bastard and his traitorous body decided otherwise.

Every time he saw him his bloody body reacted against his will, like he was some sodding teenager himself. His libido was in overdrive and every night he had hideously erotic dreams featuring some cross between Potter and Alex in which he was taking his anger out on him in extremely bizarre ways which always ended in glorious, angry sex where he pounded Potter into the wall or floor or any bloody where, and they both were blown out of their fucking minds.

He woke up with dried come and anger until he’d finally told Dumbledore he was leaving the castle on Thursday night and he’d picked up some muscular stud in a bar because small dark men obviously did not do it for him. They’d fucked half the night and he was late for class because he’d had the bloody dream again anyway, so he pounded the man whose name he didn’t even know into the mattress to get rid of the images before dashing back for school.

And it hadn’t been planned, but it had given him immense satisfaction to see that bloody shocked look on Potter’s face when the bastard had smelt him, and known.

And now here they all were, and Potter’s power was so incredible that even he had to acknowledge
it, much as he begrudged doing so. All the kiddies were throwing hexes and curses at him, and even though most of them were using trifling juvenile stuff, there wasn’t a flicker in the wards that Potter had set, nor a hint of a curse hitting home. The adults were just now joining in, and despite the stronger stuff being cast, Potter was still impregnable.

And he had just apparated a whole group of them long distance from London straight through the wards as well, a feat which Longbottom also appeared able to manage with ease, whilst the Headmaster had declined, saying he thought it best that one of them stayed at full strength.

He hated to admit it, but Longbottom looked like he was turning out to be a pretty competent wizard.

Moody suddenly threw an Imperious at Potter, and his shield cracked. He held off the spell, but Potter allowed the shield to drop, still holding up the wards.

Really, twenty spells at once! As if that wasn’t enough!

They all clustered round. Potter flapped his robe, sweat on his forehead.

“Phew! Who knew magic generated so much heat?” he grinned.

“Are you alright, Harry?” Molly Weasley asked in a worried voice.

“Fine,” Harry smiled back, a hand on her arm. “This is excellent.”

“Well it seems very odd to me.”

“Shouldn’t you be using curses yourself, rather than just defending?” Kingsley Shacklebolt asked. “Surely that will be the real test? Not that I want to be on the receiving end,” he added.

“Not necessary. There’s only one curse I need to use,” Potter said quietly. “I just need to get near enough to Voldemort to do it.”

And Snape was furious again, because that was precisely his view. Voldemort mucked around torturing and taunting people. But Potter had only one objective, and he was focussed on achieving it.

Hermione stepped up and handed Harry the potion. “Ready to try it?”

Harry nodded, and downed it in one go.

“God, that was as bad as anything Sn – Madam Pomfey’s ever given me,” he grimaced. “How long does it take to work?”

“It should kick in within two or three minutes, then increase in efficiency over the next twenty. Then, hopefully, it should hold at that for a couple of hours and tail off as your body metabolizes it.”

“Right. Well, we might as well start, then. Why don’t you lot try using some of the curses the others come up with?” he said to the other students. “You’ve got to have a go at the nasty stuff—that’s what the Death Eaters will be doing. I’d avoid the Unforgivables, though.” He grinned at Moody. “Leave those to the experts.”

“I’ve got a copy of your consent slip in my pocket,” Moody said, tapping it firmly. “Don’t often get the chance to practice. Very enjoyable day, lad.”
Potter put up his shield again, and they once more started throwing curses at him, increasing in severity. Severus held back, listening to the burbles of praise pouring out of people’s mouths as the boy continued to hold off. Fucking Potter. If they knew what a nasty, mean little prick he was.....Severus felt his anger rising in him like a volcano bubbling up. Their damned saviour stood there looking magnificent, wielding his magic and looking so sodding innocent. He had used Snape. For the first time in years – in forever, it felt like, Snape had allowed himself to get close to someone, and had had it thrown back in his face. Potter had made him lust after him even in his Potter face, Snape at last acknowledging the times when he had found the boy attractive, provocative, arousing. And all the time, whilst he was trying to tamp down this inappropriate desire, the boy knew. How he must have laughed, whatever Longbottom said to the contrary. His anger was like a force inside him now.

“All together! Throw your curses all at once!” Moody shouted, “I can’t believe it, but I think this damn potion is going to do the trick!”

Of course the bloody potion would work first time. Everything worked for Harry fucking Potter.

Well fuck you! Severus thought, flinging out his hand.

In the centre of the pitch, Harry fell to his knees.

“The wards, Albus!” he croaked.

“Stop! Stop everyone!” Arthur Weasley was yelling quite unnecessarily, because everyone was running towards the boy, who was white in the face, swaying on his knees.

“I’ve got them,” Albus said quietly, a hand on Harry’s shoulder.

The boy nodded.

Draco dropped to his knees in front of Harry.

“What spell was it? Are you alright? Can I help?” His hand extended to Harry’s chest.

“No!” Harry almost shouted, making Draco rock back.

He stuck a hand on Draco’s shoulder, the grip biting into the other boy. “I’ll be fine in a moment,” he gritted.

What spell was it?

“Was it the combination?”

“Is he ok?”

The voices were muttering.


And met Snape’s, over Draco’s shoulder, across the expanse of frozen grass.

Snape felt a jolt hit him in the gut.

Had he -?
What had –?
He couldn’t have –
Harry’s head turned away.
Snape began to slowly walk forward.
Harry seemed to shake himself, though stayed perfectly still on his knees.
“Well done, everyone,” he said quietly. “Draco, Hermione, good work. Brilliant. Can you work on increasing the power?”
“We’ll be straight on it,” Draco said.
Harry nodded, and turned his head, searching. His throat worked, as if it was a struggle. “Nev? Can you get everyone back that needs to go?”
“Sure. Need any help yourself, Harry?” he asked gently.
Harry shook his head. “Just shaken up. I’ll see you all later.”
And he apparated.
“Can’t be too bad if he can apparate,” Tonks said cheerfully. “That was bloomin’ impressive, wasn’t it? Can’t lose now, can we?”
Everyone seemed to be in good spirits.
Neville began to herd people together, and took them off, a group at a time, to their individual destinations.
Snape reached the centre.
“That was lucky,” Hermione said to him.
“What?” Snape said. His brain was reeling.
“The potion working first time! I was sure we’d have to try several other plants before we were successful. The recipe was very unclear.”
Snape nodded absently, and looked at the ground where Potter had been kneeling.
The frosty grass was indented where his knees had hit the turf; behind, the silvering had been melted off by Harry’s feet during the session.
He was about to go when he spotted the small dark blob.
Hermione had turned to talk to Mrs Weasley, who was saying how much she missed her, and Draco was being grilled by Moody. Severus bent down and touched his finger to it.
Blood.
He straightened, then ignoring the others, strode off into the castle.
His heart was pounding in his chest, and on automatic pilot he reached his private workroom and began sorting through his stores. He picked up several vials and a salve, then made his way along
to the common room.

The room was full of students, the dull weather failing to entice anyone to leave the cozy interior, but the hubbub dropped as they noticed their Head of House at the door. Blaise Zabini looked up from his seat by the fire, where he was obviously working on some homework, and came over to Snape.

“All well, Sir. No problems at all.”

“Good. I’m afraid, however, that I must ask you to remain in charge a little longer: does that inconvenience your plans? Miss Parkinson could –“

“No problem, Sir, I’ve plenty of prep to get on with.”

“Thank you.”

Severus swept out, collected his cloak, left a brief but indeterminate message for Albus, and made his way down the drive.

Harry landed on the floor in the middle of his sitting room in Hogsmeade and slumped forward onto the coffee table. His breath came in pants. After a couple of tortured minutes, he slipped off his robe and carefully felt behind him, though he knew what he would find.

Blood.

He tried to stand, but the pain that lanced through him was agonising, and he dropped to his knees again. He thought about apparating himself up the stairs but didn’t know if he could manage. It had taken every last bit of the extra magic to get home. He wondered if splinching could leave him any less damaged than he felt right now. His breaths rasping, he dragged himself across the floor on his hands and knees, and hoisted himself slowly, slowly, up the stairs. He had to pause on the landing, his head hanging between his shoulders, dizziness blurring his vision, before he could make his way to his bedside drawers, where he knew he had a pain potion.

He pulled out the bottle and drank the lot, a triple dose. He slumped his top half over the bed, waiting for it to take effect. He could feel the blood trickling down his legs. The house must be a mess. He’d have to deal with it later. Eventually he felt the medication begin to kick in, and carefully knelt up again. Every movement was painful, but he could feel the sharp edges had been numbed by the potion. He undid his trouser button and released the zip, then carefully pushed them down. Using the bedside cabinet, he levered himself to standing and let the jeans slide down to his feet. Just lifting a leg to get them off was still agony, but he moved slowly and eventually was free of them.

He thought of his lessons with Albus, trying to recall something useful:

*When injured, wizards’ bodies expend magic trying to speed up the healing process.*

*Try to avoid the use of magic when injured.*

*When under pressure, use your brain: consider the use of the smallest amount of magic for the biggest effect.*

His brain wasn’t working very well, but he knew what he needed. Still holding on with one hand, he raised the other and summoned his staff. Its own magic and its intrinsic attachment to him meant
that very little effort was required. He heard it clattering through the house, hitting the banister as it came up the stairs, and then it was in his hand.

It wasn’t the use he would have envisaged for his mage’s staff, but leaning heavily on it, he made his way the few paces to the bathroom. He turned the shower on and stepped in, letting the warm water wash the blood and muck from his legs. He didn’t dare turn it to hot, it was already excruciating. The water swirling down the drain was pink, pink, pink.

After several minutes, he braced himself against the tiles and leant forward. His hand was shaking as it made its way between his cheeks, and withdrew quickly as he felt the wrongness of the arrangement of flesh. His stomach clenched, and he thought he might vomit. He took several deep breaths, trying to control it. He wouldn’t be able to get to the toilet, and he couldn’t bear the thought of vomiting in the shower on top of everything else.

His hand returned. The pain and feedback from his fingertips confirmed what he already knew.

Severus must hate him so much to have done this to him.

He leant his head against the tile, tears slipping down his face under the running water.

Severus Snape stood at the door of Alex Johnson’s cottage and knocked.

He waited.

Knocked again.

Would the wards still let him in?

He turned the handle and stepped in, shutting the door behind him.

He saw the robe pooled by the coffee table.

The trail of blood across the floor.

Up the stairs.

Heard the shower.

He headed up the stairs, avoiding the bright red smears that screamed accusation at him.

In the bedroom, he took in the potion bottle, the trousers –

Oh god.

His stomach heaving, he flicked his wand, cleaning the place, banishing the clothes. He took the few paces and knocked on the open bathroom door. The shower water still pounded.

He stood in front of the shower curtain.

“Potter!”

Nothing.

His stomach in his throat, he wrenched back the curtain.
Potter stood with his back to him, head against the tiles, the water cascading over him.

He was so relieved that his fear came out in anger.

“Potter! Your wards let me in! Anyone could’ve come in and killed you, you idiot!”

The shoulders straightened but the boy stayed where he was.

“I knew it was you. Have you come to kill me, and finish the job?”

Severus grabbed his arm and swung him round to face him.

The pain that shot across Harry’s face shocked him, but not as much as the tears still sliding down the pale cheeks.

“You’re hurt,” he said stupidly. His eyes suddenly noticed the pink water still trickling down the boy’s legs.

A choked laugh escaped Harry’s mouth. He leant back against the tile. He felt unable to support his own weight without the help, too shaky.

Snape couldn’t stop staring. The body he was familiar with, had touched and kissed and – he dragged his mind away. It didn’t seem such a shock to see Potter’s head on top of it as it had in the class. What was a shock was the utter defeat in the boy’s stature.

He pulled himself together.

“How badly are you injured?” he asked, voice brusque. He would not allow any emotion to show.

“If your objective was to make sure I never enjoyed being fucked again, you succeeded,” Harry said shortly.

Severus controlled the wince.

“You need to get out of there. You’re in shock,” he said calmly.

“What the fuck do you care?” the boy snarled. “Either finish me or get out. You’ve made your feelings perfectly clear.”

Severus couldn’t process it. Couldn’t deal with it. He stayed on the practical instead. “You need to see Madam Pomfrey.”

Harry snorted, his head rolling against the tiles. “You think I’m going to ask Madam Pomfrey to look at my arse?”

“She’s a medical professional –“

“Right. And when she sees that my arsehole is split open like a pear with a fist through it, how am I supposed to explain that?”

Severus did wince this time. So his spell had taken him literally.

“Is the injury purely external or -?”

“How the fuck should I know? I can’t bear to touch it.”
“I – I brought some numbing salve.”

“You’re too kind,” Harry ground out sarcastically.

“How much pain potion have you had?”

Instead of arguing, Harry just said, “Triple dose.”

“Anything else?”

“Not yet.”

“Right. I’ll go and make some stronger healing salve. Apply the numbing salve now, whilst the pain potion is working. It’ll start to kick in and by the time I get back you’ll be able to apply the healing salve.”

Harry just stood there. The water had run cold and he was shivering. Snape pulled him out of the shower, trying to ignore the groan that the boy tried to muffle. He gently placed a towel around his shoulders, and left.

When he returned, the boy was face down on the bed, the covers over him.

He started to sit on the edge, but even that movement made the boy gasp, so he knelt at the side.

“Harry, I’ve been thinking, and it really would be best if your saw Madam Pomfrey,” he said.

“Go to hell,” Harry mumbled. His face was turned away from Snape. “Or not. You don’t want to see me, and I’m already there.”

“Look, I’m not sure how bad the injury is, but you really need to have this ointment properly applied.”

“How?”

Snape took a breath. “Now, tonight and tomorrow morning, the numbing salve needs to be applied and half an hour later the ointment. By tomorrow evening, your external injuries should be sufficiently healed."

“Thank god for that!” Harry breathed.

“ – for the ointment to be inserted so that you can be sure that any internal damage is healed.”

“Inserted,” Harry said flatly.

“Madam Pomfrey shouldn’t need to use any equipment. Her fingers –“

“Sodding hell! You think I’m letting Madam Pomfrey do any of that? I’ll manage.”

Snape was silent a moment.

“Harry,” he said tentatively, “you need to be sure it’s done thoroughly or you could get ill. I could –“

“No! No fucking way!”
Silence.

“Without meaning to sound crude, I have had my fingers in your arse before.”

Harry turned his head on the pillow to face Severus.

“No. You had your fingers in Alex Johnson’s arse. You’ve made quite clear you wouldn’t have gone near Harry Potter’s with a bargepole – and that is an image that feels far too close to reality.” He took a deep breath, and continued, “I’m very grateful for the ointment. Please go.”

Snape stood up.

“You are being foolish.”

“Yeah, well you don’t have to worry about my stupidity any more. Now please, GO.”

Severus clinked the jar down on the bedside table.

“Snape.”

“Yes?”

“What was the spell you used?”

Severus was silent for a moment, and then said, warily, “It was wandless, wordless magic.”

“And?” Harry whispered.

Snape turned and faced the door. “I said ‘Fuck you’.”

There was a moment of silence and then a sound suspiciously like a sob, half hysterical, making Snape look back.

“What?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all. It’s just that I spent nearly four months looking forward to you doing that, but I got more than I bargained for, didn’t I?”

“I - I am sorry –” Snape faltered.

“No. You meant it. You couldn’t have done it if you hadn’t. Not with wordless.”

Harry seemed to shift into himself, pulling the cover tighter around himself.

Snape moved reluctantly to the door.

“Snape,” the boy called again. “I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I knew you didn’t like Harry Potter, and I was selfish. But I really liked the Snape Alex met in The Leaky Cauldron, and I didn’t want it to end. I thought you might grow to like me too. Stupid or what?” His hand crept up and rubbed over his cheek. His voice was faint as he continued. “I didn’t realise how much your morality meant to you, and I’m so sorry for – for compromising you.” He gulped, and turned his face away again.

Snape was turned away, his hand on the doorframe. He barely heard the last words.

“I didn’t realise how much you really hated me. But now I know.”

Snape’s grip on the frame tightened, then, without looking back, he was gone.
What Happened Next

The next morning Harry was determined to go to school.

Neville had come the previous afternoon to check that he was alright. Harry had woken from sleep to find Neville sitting in a chair in the corner of his bedroom, quietly reading.

He was never more grateful for his friend’s quiet, non-judgemental care. Neville asked nothing that he didn’t want to answer, just got Harry some soup and a drink, and then conjured a bottle so Harry could pee when he saw how much he was hurting just to turn on his side.

He helped Harry take some more pain potion, and stayed as he drifted off again.

Neville might not have asked questions, but he had looked at and smelt the medications on the beside table. He knew Harry must have some sort of injury. He also understood that Harry had seen enough of the infirmary to last a life-time. He didn’t know what had happened, but Snape had obviously cared enough to come and bring him potions and stuff, even if he hadn’t stayed.

Neville went back to school; Hermione and Draco were in the lab with Snape, discussing ways to improve the potion. Neville wasn’t sure what to make of anything at the moment. He was pretty sure that they didn’t know about Snape and Harry and therefore Snape wouldn’t be in a position to tell them Harry was ok. He was a little surprised Hermione wasn’t panicking about her friend.

They all looked up as he entered.

“Have you bought some more spindificus aroratea?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“No, I got delayed and it’s too dark to harvest it,” he said, noting the steel grey sky of the winter afternoon, the light fading fast into an early night, skipping twilight.

“But you knew we were hoping to work on the potion!” she said, her voice miffed.

“I thought you were discussing it today,” he said calmly. “I checked on Harry instead, and got delayed."

“Is he alright?” Draco said sharply.

Neville noticed Snape’s eyes watching him whilst he flicked through a book.

“He was sleeping. I stayed to make him eat some soup when he woke up.”

“Oh, well done Neville! All that magic must have burned up loads of energy. He must have been starving! We’ll have to take the tiredness into account, though, “ Hermione considered. “The potion needs to last longer. It won’t be much good if it doesn’t last long enough and then he conks out asleep. He’ll have no protection at all then.”

“I don’t think you need to take that into account,” Neville said quietly. “I expect the pain potion had sent him to sleep.”

“Pain potion?” Hermione squawked. “But – was he hurt? I thought he was just overloaded!”

“He’s a little – sore, I think. Stiff, maybe. He went back to sleep anyway.”

“Well thank goodness he has someone to take care of him,” Hermione exclaimed. She looked at
Neville sharply. “I didn’t know you knew where he lived at the weekends. Don’t tell me – it’s somewhere like New York, or San Francisco? Too far for any of the rest of us to think of apparating, where he can be Muggle and no-one knows him. Have you met his - friend, then?” she asked, carefully choosing her words and looking intently at Neville so that he didn’t mention Harry was gay in front of the Potions Master.

Deliberately not looking at Snape, Neville said, “I did meet his partner, but I don’t know if Harry is still seeing them. He was alone.”

“I knew something was wrong!” Hermione said, standing up. “Blast! He didn’t even tell me! I’ll give him the third degree when he gets back.”

“Well, I think he’ll be sleeping over tonight.”

Hermione nodded. “It would be silly to apparate a long way if his magic is run down. But he should have someone with him – Neville, can you take me there?”

Neville shook his head. “I’ve told him I’m going back,” he lied, though he had planned to go anyway. If Harry hadn’t invited Hermione to his house, it wasn’t his place to take her. “His wards won’t be set to accept you,” he added, seeing her about to protest, “and if he’s asleep I’m not waking him up just for that. And he shouldn’t be working unnecessary magic.”

“Ok, that makes sense, but tell him I wanted to come and mother him, won’t you?”

Draco snorted, but Snape was strangely silent, still riffling through the spellbook, ignoring the conversation.

“Sure thing,” Neville agreed.

“Right, can you wait whilst I go and get his hot water bottle?”

“His what?” Draco asked.

Hermione grinned. “Hot water bottle. It’s a Muggle thing – good for aches and pains. You put boiling water in, so it’s not worth the danger of transfiguring one. I got him one for Christmas one year after he tried mine out. Don’t look at me as if I’ve grown two heads! Loads of Muggle women use them for relief of period pains; they’re a well known non-chemical muscle relaxant.”

Neville got up. “I’ll come up with you, I want to collect some clothes for us both.”

“Oh, good. And will you be able to get the plant samples tomorrow?”

“Yes, I’ll go at lunch.”

“Fine. Draco, Professor, is that ok? To work on it tomorrow afternoon? I’ve last period off so I can start on the preparation.”

The two men nodded, and Hermione preceded Neville out of the room.

Draco looked at Snape.

“Doesn’t she know Potter’s gay?”

Neville, who had caught the comment, stuck his head back around the door. “She does. She just didn’t know that Severus knew, so she was protecting her friend’s privacy,” and with a sharp look at Snape, he left.
The next morning, Harry’s careful explorations of his injuries as he applied the salve showed that his body really had healed a great deal in the twenty hours since the curse. He was able to stand and walk stiffly, though he still needed the pain relief potion, and was grateful that Snape had left him extra supplies, although they had had a brief note attached to say that he could only use double the normal dosage if he wished to take it more than twice a day.

Deciding that solid food was not advisable, he knew nevertheless that he needed to eat to rebuild his strength after the outpouring of magic.

Whilst Harry was fiddling painfully in the bathroom, Neville made him a mug of warm milk infused with honey and herbs from the garden, which was surprisingly delicious, and helped stop the shaking he was experiencing.

“Are you fit to go to school?” Neville said worriedly. “Don’t you think you ought to stay in bed?”

“I’d like to,” Harry said honestly, “but I really need to show my face. I don’t want the Headmaster turning up checking up on me, for starters.”

“Do a half day then,” Neville suggested. “If you seem ok but then say you’re tired, you’ll have covered all bases. I expect you must be knackered anyway after using all that energy.”

“Too drained to feel knackered, “Harry grinned. “It’s a plan, Nev. You’ve been a really good friend – thanks.”

“You’d do the same for me,” Neville shrugged off the comment. “Anyway, it was nice to get out of school. Hermione thinks we’re in the States.”

“What?!”

Neville explained, making Harry laugh.

“I must ask her and Ron round,” he said. “It’s just – it was sort of private for me and Severus, before, but now...”

“Maybe he’s softening,” Neville suggested.

At Harry’s scoff he went on, “I recognised his handwriting on your potions.”

Harry turned away, hobbling across the room to get his cloak. “No,” he said. “You can be sure that Snape does not have any tender feelings towards Harry Potter. We’d better go.”

“I’m going to apparate us both in,” Neville said firmly. “Conserve your magic, Harry; you know I don’t find it hard. And if you need me to shift you about during the day, get your elf friend to come and get me, alright?”

Neville’s idea turned out to be sensible. Harry barely got through till lunch break.

They had apparated right into the castle, into a small empty room just near the Great Hall. Harry gave Neville a look.

“The wards are fine – I strengthened them a bit, actually,” Neville admitted sheepishly, “it’s just the castle seems to like me. I sort of talked to it after it bounced me when I tried to return from
Australia.”

Harry grinned back. “I did the same. I ‘d wondered if being told it wasn’t possible to apparate was the protection, that people just didn’t even try, but they do feel firm, don’t they? Just that you can feel the castle, and it responds...”

Neville nodded. “Yeah. Even though I can apparate in and out now, it somehow makes me feel much more safe and secure than I ever did before.”

They walked into the Great Hall, where the tail end of breakfast was going on. Harry noticed the collective relief as the Order members at the staff table noticed him. Albus inclined his head and gave him a smile. Snape, he noted, returned to his tea after one glance.

At the Gryffindor table Ron shifted to make some space.

“Nah, mate, I’ll stand,” Harry said. There was no way he was going to be able to swing his leg over the bench. “I only want some pumpkin juice anyway. Had some breakfast already.”

“Are you alright, Harry?” Hermione asked, her face worried. “Are you still stiff?”

Perfect!

“Yeah, my back’s really tight.”

“You overdone it on the weights?” Dean asked.

The gym was open to all the students, and Dean was a frequent user. He had fixed up a magical version of his Walkman, and used it as he worked away, often singing odd bits at the top of his voice, to the amusement of the other Muggle-borns and the bafflement of the Purebloods.

“Yes, I did something, anyway,” Harry prevaricated, giving his back a rub.

“I’ll give you a massage, Harry!” one of Ginny Weasley’s friends offered, to a gaggle of giggles.

Ron rolled his eyes at his friend.

“Uh, thanks, but – no thanks?” Harry smiled at the girl.

“Spoilsport,” one of the other girls chirruped.

Ron grabbed a last piece of toast and stood up.

“Let’s get out of here. Some people don’t think of anything but sex,” he said loudly, glaring at the girls.

There was a moment’s silence, and then Seamus said, “Well if that ain’t the pot calling the kettle black...”

There was an eruption of laughter. Ron turned bright red, and then suddenly began to grin too. He met Hermione’s eyes across the table, and even she was smiling, and suddenly, just like that, it was alright between them, and they were friends again.

Unfortunately, that was the most successful part of the day. Harry had Transfiguration first. After fifteen minutes of sitting perched on one cheek on the edge of his seat, he pleaded a stiff back and asked to stand. McGonagall, looking at him sharply, agreed in her usual curt manner. By the end of the lesson Harry was aching all over, and exhausted, but not prepared to give in. He took a pain
potion top-up out in the corridor. Hermione and Ron looked at him with concern, whilst Neville, thank god, just said, “You staying for Herbology?”

“I want to do at least lunch break,” Harry gritted.

“Okay. I’ll whizz you down,” Neville said, and with Hermione and Ron keeping watch, he apparated Harry down to the quiet potting area at the end of Greenhouse 5.

“Good gracious!” Madam Sprout said, spilling her mid-morning tea.

“Sorry, Pomona,” Neville said cheerfully. Although not a member of the Order, Pomona Sprout knew Neville very well indeed. Hours and hours spent together over the years, and their shared love of the plant world, had fostered a relationship between them that yielded benefits for both sides. Pomona, recognising that whilst a lovely witch when you got to know her, Minerva McGonagall had the same severe manner as the intrepid Mrs Longbottom, was happy to offer a softer mentor to the shy young boy with such a keen interest in her subject. As Neville had grown up into the fine young man who now stood before her, she had come to appreciate his skills and opinions, knowing that his abilities were far beyond her own.

Standing as he was with Harry Potter, she had no idea which of them had apparated them within the grounds; she trusted Neville enough to know that whatever the reason, he would not have done so just to show off.

“Harry’s a bit under the weather but wanted to come to class,” he smiled apologetically.

“Does Professor Dumbledore know you can do that?” she asked, wiggling a hand in their direction as she topped up her cup.

“He does,” Harry said. “But it’s pretty much under wraps.” He looked at Professor Sprout with some anxiety.

“You don’t need to worry about Pomona, she’s completely trustworthy,” Neville said, touching his arm.

“Thank you, dear,” she said. She cocked her head. “I am on Albus’ side, you know,” she told Harry. “Same as you. I may not be the strongest of witches, but if I can help, you have only to ask.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “I didn’t mean to be offensive –“

“Not at all. I remember the war – all the ‘loose talk costs lives’ posters the Muggles had everywhere. And too true too! But is there a problem with Hogwarts security, if you can do that? What does Albus say?”

“Don’t worry about the wards, Neville and I have both strengthened them.”

“Have you?” she said, looking at them over the rim of her glasses.

She took a sip and then said, “There’s three minutes before the rest of the class arrive. Help yourself to a cup if you want.”

Harry found the hot brew, added to the pain potion kicking in, helped revive him. Unfortunately, he was jostled in all the moving around in the class, so that by lunch time he was on his last legs. Neville whipped him across to the little room by the Great Hall again.

Lunchtime was rather like breakfast, a more relaxed and flexible meal than supper, which started at
a set time. Students came in and took what they wanted from the steaming containers on the table, without having to wait for the High Table party, and could eat over a two hour range, so those with free periods before lunch could start early if they wanted.

The Hall had a smattering of students, but it was easy for Harry and Neville to take seats at the very end of the table nearest the doors, so that Harry didn’t have to walk far and was able to perch on the end of the bench.

Harry, who was feeling slightly sick, managed to swallow down some soup and have his presence witnessed by Draco and a clutch of Slytherins before the main tranch of students appeared. Professor McGonagall and Severus had come in, chatting.

Ron and Hermione ambled in, chatting like it was the old days, and slid into seats beside them.

“You look a bit better,” Hermione said, looking carefully at Harry. “I wonder why it made your back hurt? Do you think one of the curses got through? We ought to ask Padma –“

“No! No need,” Harry said, getting up quickly, wondering with horror if Padma did know what spell had done him in. At least she wouldn’t know who had done it, and hopefully, with so many spells flying, it had all been too muddled.

“Have a rest, mate,” Ron advised. “I’ll wake you up for supper.”

“From food to food,” Hermione sighed. “We all know what’s important in your life, Ron.”

There was a moment of awkward silence.

“Alright, alright! All the appetites, I know, I know! I’m over it, move on,” she said, and selecting a hefty sausage, cut it into neat slices on her plate.

There was wincing and laughter, and Harry slipped out with Neville, who apparated him up to his room, handed him some pain potion and left him to it.

Snape, at the High Table, wondered sourly whether Longbottom was moving in on Harry, now that he was out of the picture.

By lunchtime on Tuesday, Harry felt less stiff, and was able to sit. He had continued with the treatments, having used the ointment internally as well, as Snape had told him to do. The first time he had been terrified to even attempt to insert a finger, but his torn flesh at his entrance had already healed over, as Severus had predicted, and it had been bearable, if not full of the pleasurable sensations such explorations had aroused in the past.

He wondered at a wizard’s capacity to heal. He was sure it was faster than a normal human’s, though how much was the potions and how much his wizard nature he did not know. It would have been useful if his extra powers had enabled him to be able to heal himself, but it appeared that wasn’t the case, more’s the pity. His stomach had felt odd that morning, and he was terrified that despite his liquid diet he would need to use the loo. A moment’s reflection had led him to use the pre-sex cleaning spell that was a boon to gay wizards everywhere, and he had felt a great deal lighter and better afterwards.

Unfortunately, by that evening the stomach ache was back; he used the spell again, and it helped,
but he still felt tender. He had reduced the pain potion in the day, but had obviously moved too fast.

He cancelled his Remedial Magic class.

By Wednesday evening, Harry was feeling really rough. His head ached, he felt a bit sick and hot, and his stomach hurt at the slightest touch. He took himself to bed early, applied the numbing potion and ointment with special care, took a triple dose of pain potion and went to sleep.

“Harry! Wake up! You’ll be late for breakfast!”

Ron’s touch catapulted Harry from deepest sleep to the horridest reality in a fraction of an aeon.

Harry leant over the side of the bed and threw up.

“Uuugh!” Ron exclaimed, leaping back.

He pointed his wand at the curtains to draw them so he could get a look at his friend in the light. Harry was still retching.

Ron shoved the waste paper bin in the target range and vanished the existing sick in one go.

“All right there, Harry?” he said, gently placing a hand on Harry’s back as he squatted down beside the bed.

“You’re dripping in sweat, mate,” he frowned, feeling the soaked pyjama top.

He went into the bathroom and ran Harry’s flannel under the cold water, rung it out and came back. Harry had turned over in the bed, his arm over his face.

Ron carefully moved the arm away and wiped the cloth over the sweaty brow, shoving it into Harry’s hand. Harry wiped his cheeks, the cloth cooling him beautifully.

“Thanks Ron,” he croaked, his mouth vile from the vomit.

Ron went back into the bathroom and filled him a glass of water.

“Sip this,” he said. “Don’t drink it all or it’ll come straight back up. Right, you stay there and I’ll go and get Madam Pomfrey.”

“No!”

“Don’t be daft, you’re obviously rough, mate. She can give you some anti-nausea stuff. It’s going round. She’s already been along to a clutch of girls in Ginny’s dormitory and dosed them all up, and Ernie was saying last night when we played chess that some Hufflepuffs had been chucking up too.”

Harry, in a haze of fever, breathed a sigh of relief. “Can you just go get the potion off her then?” he asked. “Tell her I’ll come and see her later if I’m still bad. No point bothering her if she’s overloaded.”
So Harry took yet another potion, and having missed breakfast (for which he had no desire anyway) he made it along to his morning classes. It was Potions that afternoon, and he was determined to go, to show Severus that he wasn’t sulking or childish and that he could move on from what had happened between them.

By lunchtime, though, he was feeling much worse. Ron looked at him as Harry sat at the table, sipping some water.

“Didn’t that nausea potion work?“

Ginny looked up. “Have you had the bug too, Harry? I’ve just checked on Gwen and Felicity and they’re absolutely fine now, just using it as an excuse to have a day of fun in the dorm.”

“Maybe you should have stayed in bed,” Ron said.

Mione and Neville walked in with Dean, and came and sat down.

“Wassup?” Dean asked, helping himself to casserole.

Even the smell made Harry’s stomach roll, but he couldn’t even bear to touch it. He could feel the sweat dripping down his back. He needed some more pain potion.

“Harry’s had that chucking bug,” Ron said, his mouth stuffed full of potato.

Neville and Hermione both looked sharply at him.

“Why aren’t you in bed?” Hermione scolded.

“You should see Madam Pomfrey,” Neville said, looking at Harry carefully. “You look like you’ve got a temperature.”

“Yeah, he was disgusting in bed this morning,” Ron agreed.

“Good thing I know you’re as straight as a ruler, Ron, or a man could take that the wrong way,” Dean laughed.

“Yeah, yeah,” Ron rolled his eyes. “Shove us over that casserole, it looks good.”

“Harry,” Hermione cut across them, “why don’t you go back to bed? ”

“I’ll go after Potions.”

“Shit, Harry,” Dean exclaimed, “what’s up with you? You have a real excuse to miss your least favourite subject and you still want to go? Don’t be daft, man!”

“Maybe you didn’t have enough nausea potion,” Ginny suggested. “I’m sure you should be fine by now.”

Harry very carefully got himself up. The pain was excruciating. “Loo,” he said, as they looked at him, and walked carefully out.

“I’ll just check him,” Neville said, getting up.

“I’ll be in Potions and keep my eye on him,” Hermione said. “Then we make sure he goes to bed.”
Harry took a triple dose, then splashed his face with cold water.

He looked up from the sinks to see Neville waiting patiently.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it? It’s not just a bug.”

“Yeah, I think so,” Harry whispered.

“You need some help. Let me take you to Madam Pomfrey.”

I’ll go after Potions,” Harry said doggedly. “I’ve got to face Severus, Nev.”

Neville sighed.

Harry breathed in deeply. The pain potion was taking affect and he stood up straighter. “See? Better already.”

“Right,” Neville said, disbelievingly. “Shall I get you down there?”

Harry shook his head. There was no safe hidden place to apparate to, and Neville knew it too.

Hermione was waiting along the corridor though, and they both walked with Harry, Neville peeling off to go to History of Magic, which for some reason he was still taking.

“I’ll come and pick you up outside the class, alright? Wait for me,” Neville called suddenly, across the entrance hall.

“Fine,” Harry nodded.

Snape, coming out of the Great Hall, stiffened. Longbottom wasted no time, did he?

Half an hour into the lesson Harry knew he had made a mistake. Despite the potion, he was feeling appalling. It hurt to move, and he felt sick and dizzy. His hands shook as he tried to cut up his ingredients, and he kept his back turned to Snape.

He looked at the recipe. Next was the pickled grindylow brains. He’d have to walk by Severus’ desk to get them.

Bracing himself, he was relieved when Hermione shoved a jar into his hands.

He looked at it with relief, and mouthed his thanks at his friend.

“No communication in class, Potter!” Snape barked. “You are expected to work alone and not seek the assistance of your colleagues. Five points from Gryffindor.”

Harry turned away. So Snape was back to picking him up on every minor misdemeanour, was he?

He opened the jar and the smell made him reel back.

His hand grasped over his mouth.

“I don’t expect final year students to be exhibiting juvenile behaviour, Potter,” Snape drawled sarcastically. “Another five points.”

Snape admitted that the pickling solution actually smelt vile – and just wait till the boy chopped
the brains, he thought maliciously. He was angry again with Potter – angry that he seemed to have dismissed what had happened at the weekend, despite the appalling thing he had done to him, angry that he seemed to be already cosying up with Longbottom, who was fit and powerful and dammit, kind; angry that despite what Potter had said, he seemed to have dismissed him. And angry that it made him angry.

The next moment Potter was throwing up.

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake, boy,” Snape snarled, going over.

“Leave him alone!” Hermione snapped, to a shocked (and gleeful) exclamation from the classmates. She went over to Harry, who was leaning holding onto the desk, head bent over, gasping.

“He’s got that stomach bug! He threw up this morning, but the nausea potion doesn’t seem to have worked,” she explained more calmly.

Draco was watching intently, and most of the students had lowered the flames on their cauldrons so that they could watch the byplay.

Hermione vanished the vomit, and put a hand on Harry’s heaving shoulders. She could feel the heat rolling off him even through his robes.

“Harry!” she said sharply. She slid a hand along the back of his neck. “You’re burning up!”

Snape strode forward and pushed her out of the way, lifting Harry’s chin with a forceful hand.

Harry couldn’t suppress the groan at the sudden movement. His head was reeling and he thought he might –

“Sick,” he got out, as he turned his head away and retched again.

“Eeew, not again!” someone called out.

“Merlin, you’re disgusting, Potter,” Pansy Parkinson jeered.

“People can’t help being ill,” Draco snapped at her, making her gasp in surprise.

“Hey, it’s Potter. He’s not a person,” she retorted.

“Silence! Get on with your work!” Snape barked.

Potter seemed to have finished. There was obviously very little in his stomach. Granger had ignored him and was holding onto Potter’s arm, offering him support.

Severus took hold of his shoulders and turned the boy to face him. Potter’s head lolled back on his shoulders and his eyes were glazed. Severus could feel the heat radiating from him.

Everything snapped into place.

“You stupid idiot!” he gritted. He turned to Granger. “Get him up to Madam Pomfrey at once.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Hermione accompanied Harry from the class. Out in the corridor, Harry leant against the wall. His breathing was too fast, his stomach was on fire from the pain of the muscle spasms of retching.
Even the brush of his robes seemed to hurt it.

“Shall I go and get Neville to help you?” Hermione asked gently.

Harry tried to get his mind around what he needed to do.

“What time is it?”

“Nearly three. He won’t mind missing a bit of Binns, Harry. Will you be okay here if I run up and get him?”

Harry took a few breaths.

“I’ll apparate myself,” he said. He quickly bent forward and kissed Hermione’s cheek.


And apparated.

Hermione stood in the empty corridor, rubbing her cheek gently. She couldn’t return to Potions. Harry obviously didn’t want her holding his hand in the infirmary. He always hated a fuss. She decided to go to the library; she wasn’t sure that the first batch of increased strength potion they had brewed had the ingredients in the right proportions; she was sure she had read a text somewhere about…and she would visit Harry in the infirmary a little later, when Madam Pomfrey had had time to make him comfortable.

In the classroom, Snape was pacing. His heart was thumping heavily in his chest and his fists were clenched. He looked angry as hell, Draco thought.

Snape was angry, but the most overpowering emotion he was feeling was fear.

Coming to a decision, he spoke up in a crisp voice, “Mr Malfoy, Miss Parkinson, I am leaving you in charge of the class. Pray make sure everyone finishes the assignments and leaves the class in pristine condition.”

“Where can we find you if there’s a problem, Professor?” Pansy asked.

“I am trusting you sufficiently that there shouldn’t be any, Miss Parkinson,” Snape said severely. “However, should you need me, I will be in my workroom. Madam Pomfrey informed me at breakfast that she had dealt with a number of cases of sickness in the last twenty four hours, but the cases up to that point had not developed fever. We have insufficient stocks of Fever Reducing Potion for a major outbreak; I will brew some more directly, before we have half the school throwing up in classrooms and making spectacles of themselves,” he said disdainfully.

“I could assist you with that, Sir,” Pansy offered quickly.

She never fails to take advantage of any opportunity to ingratiate herself, Draco thought sourly. She wasn’t even particularly good at Potions.

“Kind though your offer is, Miss Parkinson, you need to complete your own potion to obtain the marks required to pass this course, and as I am sure you are all aware from having brewed it in fifth year, Fever Reducing Potion is extremely simple, merely time consuming.”

And with that dismissal, he left.
An hour or so later, Neville hovered outside the class for Harry. He was a moment or two late, and
the stream of students were already heading down the corridor in the other direction from the back
entrance he had used.

Eventually there was no one left. Where were Harry and Hermione? And he hadn’t noticed Draco’s
blond head in the rabble.

He could hear voices. He popped his head around the door, to see Pansy Parkinson cleaning the
blackboard and Draco sitting at Snape’s desk writing something.

It’s likely to explode, knowing you.”

“I was looking for Harry and Mione,” he said calmly.

“Potter was sick,” Draco said, giving Neville a quick glance.

“He threw up everywhere. It was disgusting,” Pansy pulled a face.

“Where is he now?” Neville asked sharply.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Pansy snapped. "Where do you think he is, stupid?”

“Snape sent Granger to the infirmary with him,” Draco said coolly. “He left his bag behind. Take
it, will you? Professor Snape wants this room sparkling.”

“Where is Snape?” Neville’s brows drew together.

“Mind your own business,” Pansy retorted. “Fuck off, Longbottom, you’re not wanted down here.”

Draco gave Neville a quick glance, before Neville strode off.

“Do you have to be so fucking hostile all the time, Pans?” he grated.

“What? It’s a bloody Gryffindor – and the most stupid berk in the school. Even Greg and Vince
have more magic than him.”

Draco laughed.

Severus stepped through the floo into the infirmary, carrying a special potions basket.

“Severus! More Anti-Nausea Potion? Excellent! I’ve had fifteen cases now,” Madam Pomfrey said
chattily from behind her desk.

“I’ll bring you some more of that later. This is Fever Reducing Potion and a very potent Infection
Annihilator Potion.”

Poppy swung round in her seat as Severus began to unload the basket.

“I’m always grateful for everything you make, Severus, as you know, but – why those, now? I’m
over-run with vomiting and diarrhoea!”
Severus turned quickly to face the mediwitch.

“What did you diagnose Potter with?” he demanded. “You’re usually on the ball.”

Poppy’s eyebrows drew together. “Harry? I sent him an Anti-Nausea Potion this morning. Ron Weasley took it, I was inundated then. He said he’d contact me if it wasn’t strong enough. Why? Has he developed a fever?”

“He didn’t come to you? I sent him up from my lesson.” Severus’ voice was urgent.

Neville walked in.

“Is he ok?” Snape demanded.

“What?” Neville looked bewildered.

“Potter! Is he worse?”

“I haven’t seen him – I’ve just come from your class. I was due to meet him after –”

“Your love life is no concern of mine!” Snape snapped. “Potter was ill in my lesson, and I sent him here with Granger. They did not arrive, apparently.”

Neville said with quiet dignity, “Harry’s not been right all week. I was due to bring him to see Madam Pomfrey after class. He wasn’t keen to come. I’ll check the Tower. He may be in bed in his room.” He turned to walk away.

“Longbottom! It’s urgent,” Snape said.

Neville took one look at him, and apparated to his own room, then ran down the corridor to Harry’s. There was no sign of him, or that he’d been there. Neville shot down the stairs.

“Anyone seen Hermione or Harry?”

“I’ve been here all afternoon and they’ve not been through,” a girl in pyjamas and a dressing gown piped up. Neville recognised her as the sick Gwen, friend of Ginny.

“Thanks.” He ran out of the portrait hole and up the corridors to the library. He couldn’t risk apparating there.

Hermione was in her usual place.

“Hermione? Where’s Harry?” he gasped from the running.

“Oh, Neville, I’m sorry! I forgot you were coming to pick him up! He was sick in class and I had to take him to the infirmary.”

“But you never went there!”

“Harry apparated from the corridor,” Hermione said. “He didn’t arrive?” her mind was quickly assessing the unspoken.

Neville shook his head.

“His room?”
“No, I’ve just checked.”

“Shit!”

“I need to get back to the infirmary. Snape’s really worried,” he whispered.

Hermione took his hand and dragged him over to Madam Pince.

“We need to get to the infirmary. It’s urgent.”

The old witch’s sharp eyes took them in, the urgency about them, and she nodded. They tumbled out of the floo into the mediwitch’s office.

“Well?” Snape was in Neville’s face before he’d even straightened.

“He’s not there.”

“Where is he, Miss Granger? I left him in your care!”

“He apparated,” Hermione said, flushing. “I thought he was too ill to walk. I was going to come up once Madam Pomfrey had the chance to settle him.”

“His house,” Neville suggested.

Snape turned quickly. “Yes.” He grabbed a couple of bottles. “Take me there now, Mr Longbottom,” he demanded.

Neville looked at him. “I don’t know if he wants—“

“This isn’t a matter of wanting. This is a matter of life and death. Now, please!”

“What on earth is going on?” Poppy demanded.

“There isn’t time to explain. Be prepared for a patient with a high fever and severe infection. We’ll bring him straight back.”

Neville held Snape’s biceps, and apparated them both.
Derek Summers turned the key in the lock and he and Andy fell through.

“God! Want you so much!” Andy groaned, his mouth reaching up for Derek’s.

They kissed long and hard, before Andy slithered down to his knees, his fingers at Derek’s zip.

He took a deep breath. He loved the smell of Derek.

His nose twitched. He turned his head to the side, and sniffed.

”Derek? Can you smell something?” his voice was quiet, his hand suddenly tense on his lover’s thigh.

The bigger man leant against the wall, about to make a comment about having been out all day and he thought his lover liked him natural anyway, when his brain took in the disquiet in Andy’s voice. He sniffed, trying to do it quietly.

And then wondered why he was being so cautious.

He pulled Andy up, put him behind him, and switched on the light.

Nothing out of the ordinary.

Keeping Andy behind him, he walked quietly towards the kitchen, on the right, and flicked the light switch.

The usual clean tiling and neat order confronted him.

Tension easing a fraction, he walked ahead and switched on the sitting room light.

“Shit!”

“Alex?”

Their friend was lying on his side on the sofa, fast asleep. There was vomit on the upholstery and around his mouth. He appeared to be wrapped in a black rug.

“It’s not like Alex to get drunk,” Andy said, as they headed towards the sofa.

Derek squatted down beside the young man, and shook him.

“Alex! Wake up! Welcome home, man, but did you have to chuck on the new sofa?” he infused the warmth he felt for the young man, and exasperation for his actions, into his tone.

Alex rolled back, but didn’t wake.

“Alex!”

Andy touched a hand to the blotchy forehead. Alex was boiling hot, and dry as a bone.

Andy shook him, urgently. The body just flopped at his touch.

“Dial 999! Derek, quick!”
Andy was already checking Alex’s vitals.

“Do it!”

Andy was an ambulance driver, so Derek didn’t hesitate.

Whilst they were waiting for it to arrive, and Andy was stripping open Alex’ clothes and running a cooling cloth over him, he explained, "He’s burning up and unconscious. We haven’t seen him for months and he turns up sick as a parrot. We’re back later than usual – we would have been in hours ago if we hadn’t gone to the flicks on the way home. God, I hope he’s going to be alright!"

“Is it bad?” Derek asked, panicking.

He’d got another tea towel and was helping cool the burning, dry skin.

“His temperature’s off the scale, I should think. Dehydrated. His stomach’s tense, I can feel it. There’s something really bad going on here.”

In Hogsmeade, Neville and Snape landed in Harry’s back garden. Neville put his hand to the door and it let him in. They both rushed up to the bedroom.

There was no sign of Harry. It took only a couple more minutes to check the whole house and the garden.

“He didn’t come here,” Severus said blankly.

“No sign of it,” Neville agreed.

“Would he have gone to St Mungo’s?” Snape pondered.

“I think we need facts, Professor Snape, however unpleasant. It’s gone outside the school now. We need to involve the Headmaster.”

Severus looked at the stern young man in front of him.

He took a deep breath, and nodded.

“There’s no time to waste,” he said quietly.

“We’d better collect Hermione. She might have some idea of where Harry might have gone. Maybe Madam Pomfrey.”

Snape just nodded, and moments later they were back in the infirmary.

“He’s not there,” Neville said, pre-empting the questions. “We need to see Professor Dumbledore.”

Ron Weasley had also joined the party, having heard about Harry being taken ill in class and come up to the infirmary himself to see what was going on.

Poppy went straight to the floo and moments later they were all in the Headmaster’s office.
“Harry’s missing,” Neville said, still taking charge. “Professor Snape thinks he may be very ill.”

Dumbledore’s brows drew together. “Poppy?”

“I haven’t seen him, Albus, I’ve no idea what’s going on. Mr Weasley here informed me he was sick this morning and asked for an Anti-Nausea Potion; I gave it to him without seeing Harry, because it’s going round the school and he’s a sensible boy; he was at lunch, so –“

“He’s not been right all week,” Hermione cut in. “I don’t think it had anything to do with the bug.”

“Miss Granger is right,” Severus said. “We do not have time to waste here! I believe he is critically ill. Can we please check St Mungo’s at once!”

“Of course, Severus, but why should you think that? What do you imagine is wrong with him?”

Severus drew himself up, and took a deep breath. “The curse I used during the testing of the potion hit home.”

“But he must be alright. He never came to me,” Poppy said, bewildered. She knew that something had been going on and had been on standby all Sunday.

“He didn’t want to see you. I made him the necessary treatments. I am led to believe by today’s situation that they were incorrectly applied.”

“But Severus,” Poppy protested, “if there was a possibility of incorrect procedure why would you leave it in a student’s hands? I know you don’t like Harry much, but –“

Severus made a horrible sound that had all eyes turning back to him.

“Severus, what was the curse?” Albus asked quietly.

Severus turned away. “It was wandless, wordless, not a known curse,” he said. “It is the outcome that is at issue. If my belief is correct, Potter is mortally injured. We must find him!”

“What the fuck!” Ron roared.

Poppy strode to the fire. “I’ll contact St Mungo’s.”

“Wait!” Dumbledore ordered. “If you enquire about Harry Potter it will hit the press within the hour, confidentiality clauses or not, that ‘The Saviour of the Wizarding World’ is seriously ill. Voldemort may well take his chance. Is he likely to have gone in his own face?”

Severus sighed. “He may well be using his glamour, if he has strength enough to do so.” He rubbed his hand over his face.

“Why don’t you tell me what you expect is wrong?” Poppy asked. “I have friends there, and can ask if anyone has been admitted with those symptoms in the last hour or two.”

Severus walked to the window. “I believe he may have a perforated bowel, with consequent infection.”

Poppy’s mouth was open in shock. “I’ll want more details in a moment. If you’re right, it could indeed be fatal.” She turned to the fire and put through the call, asking her friend to contact her back as a priority. She believed a student was very seriously at risk, and would have given a false name and potentially used a glamour. She indicated the probable condition. Irena Amaldini had known Poppy since they had trained together fifty years earlier, and appreciated the necessity for
confidentiality in such a case, particularly occurring in a school. She would get back to her at once.

“What in hell did you do to him to cause that?” Pomfrey screeched, turning back to Severus.

For once, the man’s calm seemed to have deserted him. Hermione noted with surprise that the fingers he ran through his hair were trembling.

“The words I used acted – literally,” Snape said haltingly, his head turned away. “I was angry,” he whispered.

“What the fuck did you say? Think?” Ron yelled.

Severus’ head came up. “Exactly what you said,” he snarled.

“What?”

“I thought, ‘Fuck you!’ And the spell did.”

A complete silence met this statement.

It was Hermione who lost it. One moment she was a statue, the next she was pounding Snape’s chest with her small fists.

“You bastard! You bastard!” she was sobbing, “How could you?”

It was Neville that dragged the termagant from Snape, who stood there, accepting the beating.

Ron was still standing with his mouth open, unable to believe what he was hearing or seeing.

“Stop it, Hermione!” Neville wrapped his arms around her from behind. “Stop it right now!” his voice was hard, another first, and the witch came to a grinding halt and pulled herself away from Neville.

“How can you take his side? After he’s done that? How can you? I knew he’d always hated Harry, but that...did you know Harry was gay?” She whipped round to look at Severus, “Is that why you did it? To stop him ever having any pleasure in his life? You despicable, vile –“

“Mione, that’s enough!” Neville snapped. “Snape had good reason –“

“Good reason to do that to Harry? Are you out of your mind?”

“No, but Harry must have been.”

“What are you on about? What has Harry ever done to Snape? Tell me that!”

“I will,” Neville said determinedly. “Harry met Snape wearing a glamour. He never told Snape. Snape found out by accident.”

“So he pulled a trick on him,” Ron said. “I can understand being pissed, but – but what he did,” he nodded at Snape “ – that was personal.”

“What Harry did to him was personal!” Neville retorted.

Severus looked at Neville. “Forget it, Mr Longbottom. Amazed as I am at your words, I have no honour to defend.” He turned and walked to the window, looking out over the quidditch pitch where this nightmare had begun.
“Explain.” Hermione said, arms crossing over her chest. “You can’t stop there.”

Neville looked to Snape, but he stood looking out with his back to them.

“Harry’s boyfriend? That he’s been seeing every weekend and Wednesdays and whatever?”

“What about him?”

Neville just glanced across at Snape.

Silence.

“No way!” Ron exploded.

“Harry was having a relationship with— with— you?” Hermione asked the Professor.

“I believed I was having a relationship with a man called Alex Johnson,” Snape said coldly.

“But he was a student,” Ron got out.

Severus turned round, eyes blazing. “Alex Johnson was not a student! He was a man I believed to be in his twenties, with his own house, a job, –”

“I compounded the difficulty,” Dumbledore admitted, “by vouching for Alex as a member of the Order.”

Hermione sat down suddenly.

The fire blazed to life.

No record of anyone with such injuries had entered St Mungo’s that day.

“Where could he be?” Snape gritted his teeth. “Poppy, he could have gone to a hospital abroad. Can you contact them all? Start with the nearest. I can’t believe he managed to apparate anywhere in that condition, but he obviously did.”

“What about a Muggle hospital or doctor?” Ron said quietly

Hermione looked up. “Yes, good idea!” Her face fell. “There are loads of them, though.”

“Surely he might have gone to his family?” Albus suggested. Despite what Harry had said at the start of term, family usually pulled their weight when it came to it.

“I don’t think so,” Hermione said, with finality.

“We need to narrow the search,” Ron said, applying himself to the problem. “Don’t Muggles have their own doctors? I thought you went to one once, Mione?”

“GPs,” she nodded. “That’d be near the Dursley’s. It should be on his school record, or medical notes,” she said hopefully, then added, “but I’d be surprised if he went there.”

Albus summoned a rather thick file from a cabinet behind him, and waved a quick spell over it.

“No GP listed, I’m afraid.”
“I’ll go and check my records,” Poppy said, “and contact the other Wizarding hospitals. What was that name again? That he’s been using with a glamour?”

“Alex Johnson,” Snape answered.

Poppy looked at him. “Whatever the provocation, Severus, I am horrified,” she said quietly. “I just hope you don’t have his death on your conscience.”

“How many Muggle hospitals are there, then?” Ron asked.

“Hundreds,” Hermione said.

“You’re kidding!”

She shook her head.

“Right. Really narrow the search.” Ron thought for a moment. “I suggest we check any near here first - it would be the least distance to apparate. Then London – that might be an option because of the anonymity. Then near the Dursley’s. And where did Harry live in the summers?”

“Brighton, but apart from the foreign wizarding hospitals that’s the furthest away.”

“He was on his knees,” Ron said worriedly. “Let’s do local first. Nev, can you apparate there?”

“I can, but I don’t know anything about Muggle hospitals or medicine,” Neville said anxiously. “I can take Hermione, though,” he added.

“Good plan,” Ron said approvingly.

“No, it’ll take too long. We need to use a phone.”

“Albus, you have a phone,” Snape said.

“It’s only linked to the Muggle government, I’m afraid,” the old man shook his head.

Hermione looked at Neville. “There’s public ones in all the Muggle towns and cities. And internet cafes – I can look up hospitals there. Can you take me to Edinburgh, or somewhere?”

“Cafes? Cafes?” Snape practically shouted. “How can you think of cafes at a time like this?”

“It’s not what you think,” Hermione said calmly. “They’re a Muggle place to get information fast.”

Poppy’s head came back through the fire.

“No record of a GP here either,” she reported.

“I suggest you go to the hospital in Edinburgh, and if you have no success, use one of the cafes,” Albus suggested. “I will, in the meantime, see if I can rustle up a telephone here.”

Hermione nodded. “Ron, why don’t you ask Dean. He’s got a mobile with him even though it won’t work here. He’s been able to get his Walkman to go, so maybe the phone will work, but you’ll need to do something to allow the signal through.”

“I didn’t understand a word of that, apart from Dean has something,” Ron looked anxiously at her.
“Look, we can’t waste time! Tell Dean the Headmaster is seeing whether the use of mobiles might be permissible here – he’ll lend it to you. Take it to Eloise Midgen. She’s brilliant in Arithmancy and might have the right sort of brain to help. Then Professor Dumbledore can check whether it’s ok to use in Hogwarts or not, ok? Right, Neville, let’s go.”

“I’m coming with you,” Snape said firmly.

Neville took hold of them both, and apparated them into Edinburgh.

Derek and Andy sat holding hands in the Accident and Emergency waiting area. The post-eleven rush had been and gone – the minor accidents that occurred under the influence of alcohol – a woman who had tripped down a curb in her high heels and sprained her ankle, a youth who had to have his stomach pumped, a flurry of people injured in a car accident when the driver hadn’t allowed for the icy weather after coming out of the warm pub.

They were both in shock.

Derek had ridden in the ambulance, with Andy following on his motor bike. As the ambulance had arrived at the hospital, Alex’s heart had stopped.

Their last sight of him had been with a whole crew around him, defibrillators charging his chest, as the trolley was rushed into the crash area. From there he had been taken to theatre.

A triage nurse had come to take details – they had told her all they could, patchy as it was.

They were cradling the warmth of Styrofoam cups containing tasteless coffee from the machine, when a receptionist came over, and said that the doctor would like a word.

Hearts pounding, they were taken into a small room, and a few minutes later a sandy haired doctor came in.

“How is he?” Derek asked, rising to his feet.

“He’s in recovery,” the man, who introduced himself as Dr Matthews, said. “I need to ask you a few questions.”

“But he’s going to be alright?” Andy asked.

“He is very poorly, but we are hopeful that we can get the infection under control.”

“What’s wrong with him? What sort of infection?” Andy went on.

“If you’ll answer some questions for me, we might get there,” the Doctor said seriously.

“Sorry,” Derek said, “we were just worried sick when we saw him like that.”

The doctor nodded in acknowledgement, although his manner was rather cold. “I’m afraid the questions I need to ask are very personal,” he began.

“We’ll answer whatever we can, but I don’t know if we’ll be able to help,” Derek said, looking perplexedly at Andy.

“I saw you holding hands, so am I correct in assuming you are in a gay relationship?”
“Yes,” Derek said firmly. “What’s that got to do with Alex?”

“Is Alex gay too?”

“Is this some sort of HIV thing?” Andy said in shock. “But Alex is a real believer in safe sex.”

“He is a sexual partner of yours, then?” the doctor said stiffly.

“Not for what – fifteen, sixteen months?” Derek said, looking to Andy.

“Longer. I met you at the end of August the year before last and that was the end of your relationship with Alex.” He turned to the doctor. “But he’s still a really good friend. He has a room in our flat, though he’s away most of the year. We haven’t seen him since the end of last August. We expected him for Christmas, but he said he couldn’t make it.”

The doctor seemed to soften considerably. “I hate to ask this of you, but do you know if Alex was into violent sex?”

Derek leant forward. “Look, just because I’m six feet five and he’s a little thing, doesn’t mean he wanted rough sex. He didn’t. I didn’t. Why would you ask that?”

“I was trying to determine whether Alex’ condition was the result of some rough sex gone wrong, or whether he had been raped.”

“What?”

“Oh god, no!”

“I’m sorry to tell you like this. You obviously care for him, and usually men don’t want their family to be asked this sort of question.”

“He hasn’t got any family – not parents anyway, only an aunt he doesn’t get on with,” Derek said.

“We really ought to inform his next of kin,” the doctor said gently.

“I don’t know the address,” Derek shrugged.

“Why do you think he’s been raped?” Andy whispered.

“His infection was caused by a perforated bowel. There’s evidence that his anus was severely damaged, but that it has very recently healed. He –“ he paused, looking away. Derek wondered how much worse it could be, to embarrass the man after all he’d already said. “He may have been penetrated with some sort of blunt instrument, to have caused the sort of damage we encountered. Whatever it was, it must have been violently done. And we can’t quite work out the timelines – the external healing feels much too fast for the state of his internal organs. Nevertheless, he’s very lucky to be alive, frankly.”

“Dear god,” Derek groaned again. “The poor little sod!” He turned to Andy. “He did come to us for help.”

“Did you find any – forensic evidence?” Andy asked.

The doctor shook his head. “I believe he had tried to clean out anything. The bowel was surprisingly empty. He must have been in a very great deal of pain,” the doctor continued. “Was he able to tell you anything?”
Derek shook his head. “He was unconscious when we found him.”

“Well, at least he wasn’t suffering in that state,” the doctor said, “and you got him here in time. When he is able to talk to you, you might want to discuss whether he wants to talk to the police about this. Male rape is just as unacceptable as female rape.”

“I don’t know if you’d find a jury who believed that,” Andy snorted. “Gay guys – we’re all asking for it, aren’t we?” he said sarcastically.

“Look, I’m sorry if I implied that –“

Derek put his hand on Andy’s arm to hold him back. “You weren’t to know. I know I look a rough sort. Thank you for all you’ve done for him. Can we see him now?”

“You can, but he’s unconscious. We’re going to put him into a side ward – a room on his own. He doesn’t want to be having to answer questions from all the other patients.”

“Thank you, Doctor. How long is he likely to be in here?”

“Two or three weeks? Possibly more? Unfortunately, we’ve had to perform a temporary colostomy –“

“A what?” Derek asked.

“It’s a bag on his stomach,” Andy said.

“What? Oh god, no! No, no, no!”

“Look, he’ll need your support with this,” Doctor Matthews said. “Try not to act shocked about it. It is temporary, we hope – just until the infected part of his colon heals. Then we’ll be able to reconnect it and he’ll just have a small scar. Actually, his tattoo hides it quite well.”

“Oh god,” Derek groaned again.

Severus and Neville had watched in amazement as Hermione had pulled up hospital addresses and phone numbers for all their search areas. Edinburgh alone had a vast swathe of hospitals. Hermione had eliminated a number of them – the specialist ones in dental care, orthopaedic work, etc, but there were still too many to visit. Hermione used a card from her purse to use the pay phone, and began to work down the list. It was extremely time consuming. Hospitals were reluctant to give out information and Hermione honed her lies until she had a smooth patter.

Snape would never have believed it of her. Neville had departed back to Hogwarts as, if they weren’t apparating anywhere, there was little he could do. He was to return every half hour.

After the seventh call, Hermione rested her head against the phone booth.

“We’re doing this wrong,” she said.

“What!” Snape burst out. “But I thought that machine had given you all the information –“

“Yes, but that’s not the point. If Harry’s in a hospital, we don’t have to worry. Not desperately. It’s if he hasn’t made it to one that we need to be panicking. I should have thought of this earlier,” she sighed. She turned to Snape. “Wherever it is you spent your time when you were together, did you have other friends that Harry might have gone to see?”
Snape was silent, and then said, “I don’t think Harry will be seeking refuge with Lucius Malfoy, somehow.”

Hermione jerked round. “You took – Harry went –“

“He is a foolhardy idiot,” snapped Snape.

“You’re not kidding!” Hermione gasped. After a moment’s contemplation, she added, “there’s no one, no where else? You’ve checked his home thoroughly?”

“No, and yes.”

Hermione looked at her list of hospitals. “I’m going to jump London and try the Brighton ones. I know Harry lived there in his holidays, but I don’t know his address - he used a post box number for security,” she explained.

The phone calls to the two Brighton hospitals yielded no results.

Hermione was not to know that due to the time Harry spent comatose in the flat, her earlier phone calls had all been wasted, and that just as she was phoning to enquire about the possible admission of a man with a fever and potential pelvic infection, a young man was at that very moment being admitted. His name was not known to the receptionist at that point, and when, later, the name of Johnson rang a bell, she noted on the card that the patient was the victim of a cardiac arrest, and thought no more of it.

Neville returned them to Hogwarts an hour later, when Professor Flitwick, Eloise, Neville and Dumbledore between them had been able to make the mobile phone work without disrupting the wards.

Revived by some tea, Hermione sat in the Headmaster’s office and continued ringing hospital after hospital. Snape paced around the room, whilst Albus sat at his desk. Hermione had sheets of paper from the computer printouts spread in front of her, and ticked off each hospital, logging the time of call as she did so.

Ron was dozing. Neville sat quietly, hands held between his knees.

Poppy had come up blank with all the major wizarding hospitals.

In the small hours of the morning, they had exhausted their lists.

Hermione’s throat was sore from talking, her mind from the constant act she employed. She had tried several tactics – outright asking whether Alex Johnson had been admitted, to the more subtle ‘could the operator please check which ward Alex Johnson was on, she’d forgotten to write it down’. She’d noted which tack she had taken against each hospital.

“I can start again,” she said. “Ask to be put straight through to the medical ward, and ask them if Alex Johnson is up for visiting. Or I could ask them all about Harry Potter.”

The decision had been taken that it was too risky to use Harry’s name – that Harry himself had used a false name and glamour for getting on for two years and would be especially likely to protect his identity when he was weakened. The fact that he could have chosen any name, and may
well have done so to elude them, was a further anxiety.

Dumbledore looked at them wearily. “I believe we have done all we can. I won’t put Harry further at risk. It may be that Severus’ fears are unfounded, after all.”

“Then why would he have disappeared?” Snape demanded.

“Perhaps vomiting in front of you was the final humiliation?” Dumbledore said with a steely voice. “The lad may only wish to have a little privacy to nurse his wounds.”

“His wounds are real, not metaphorical, Albus!” Snape almost shouted.

“I am sure they are both,” Albus said. “Nevertheless, we have a school to run in just a few hours. I do not want any hint that anything is amiss with Harry, apart from the fact that he appears to be resistant to the Anti-Nausea Potion for the current tummy bug, and is therefore spending another day in his chambers. I will leave Dobby on guard. When he is ready to contact us, he will.”

Snape slammed the door as he left the room.

“He’s worried sick,” Neville said, into the silence.

Ron, who had been woken up by the heated voices, said, “Yeah, well, killing off the Boy-Who-Lived is not going to go down well with the Wizengamot, is it?”

Neville stood up. “I think that is the least of his worries,” he said quietly. “I’m off to bed, then. Professor,” he addressed Dumbledore, “if you need me to go anywhere, wake me at once, please.”

“I will, Mr Longbottom, thank you.”

They trudged silently to Gryffindor Tower with heavy hearts.

It was late that afternoon when Harry finally came round.

“Alex,” Derek smiled warmly at him, rubbing his hand gently.

Harry looked around, trying to make sense of where he was.

“You’re in hospital. You’re going to be ok. We found you on our sofa unconscious. You’ll be feeling woozy from the anaesthetic, and the drugs, but you’re in good hands here, don’t worry, love.”

“Brighton?” Harry mumbled behind the oxygen mask.

“That’s right, sweetheart,” Derek stroked his brow, leaning over him. “You came to us for help.”

Harry nodded, and drifted off again. His eyes opened again a few moments later. “Derek?” his voice croaked.

“That’s right,” the man said softly, “I’m here. We’ll take care of you now, don’t you worry about anything.”

“Water?” Harry asked, his tongue moistening chapped lips.

A nurse came bustling up – Derek had pressed the call button.
“Ah, awake at last, Alex,” he smiled.

“He’s thirsty,” Derek said, still holding the small hand.

The nurse slipped off the mask and held Harry whilst putting some ice chips into his mouth.

The cool fluid soothed its way round his mouth, down his dry throat.

Carefully settling him back again, the nurse said, “I’m John. How’re you feeling, Alex?”

Harry didn’t know how he felt. Hardly there and too solid all at once, somehow.

“Muddled,” he whispered. “My throat’s sore.”

“You’ve had a tube down it, that’s why, it’ll ease up soon. I’ll get the doctor to prescribe some pain meds in a moment. Do you know if you are allergic to any drugs?”

Harry tried to shake his head, but the tiniest movement made him feel - “Sick!” he got out.

The nurse had been there before. The kidney shaped dish was under his chin catching the small amount of water as it came back up.

Harry felt tears sting his eyes, out of nowhere.

He tried to turn his head away, slowly.

“Hey, don’t you worry about those,” Derek said, carefully wiping the tears away. “You cry your heart out if you want, love. You’ve had a very rough time, I know,” his voice choked.

Harry wallowed in the care of his first lover, uncomplicated and warm, and let the tears flow.

The nurse moved quietly in the background, checking the heart monitor, catheter, etc, then taking Harry’s temperature, inserting the instrument gently into his ear. He went away to tell the doctor the patient was awake and give the update.

“Andy?” Harry asked.

“He was here. I’ve sent him home for a sleep, he has to work tonight. He didn’t want to, but they’re really short-staffed at the moment. He was here all night.”

“What day is it?”

“Friday afternoon. You’ve been here since yesterday evening.”

Harry lay there, trying to take everything in. At least the pain in his stomach seemed to have gone. His hand slid carefully to touch.

And encountered –

His eyes shot to Derek’s, his pulse rate shooting up.

“No, don’t panic, mate,” Derek said quickly. “It’s temporary, to help. Look, here’s the doctor, he’ll explain.”

Although the doctor talked to Harry, Harry found it harder and harder to grasp. Mid-sentence, he slid back into sleep.
The next time he woke, it was very quiet, and the lights dim. He looked around carefully. A camp bed had been set up in the room. He could tell it was Derek, by the amount of feet and leg hanging over the end.

He tried to collect his thoughts, but his brain felt odd. He was in hospital, in Brighton. He was alive. He’d had an operation. They’d – he had a bag on his stomach. God! Had they sewn up his arse? Would he never have sex again? There seemed to be lots of tubes and equipment attached to him. He recognised the heart monitor – was that standard procedure after operations?

He was alive, which he supposed was what mattered. He wondered what day it was – Derek had said Friday. Was it still Friday?

A nurse – female this time, came in.

“You’re awake,” she said in a bright whisper, trying not to disturb Derek. “I’ve come to check you over,” she added, sticking the thermometer in his ear again. “How are you feeling? Any pain? Hungry? Thirsty?”

“Thirsty,” Harry nodded, and realised the oxygen mask had gone.

The nurse helped him sip through a straw.

Harry couldn’t believe what an effort everything was.

“Your friend’s a sweetie, isn’t he?” the nurse chatted. “He hasn’t left once, you know. Your other friend has been back and brought him a change of clothes, but he won’t leave you. This is the first time he’s slept, so I’m trying not to wake him.”

“Didn’t succeed,” said a gruff voice.

Harry’s eyes smiled at the nurse.

There was a boinging noise, a “Bugger!” and then Derek looking very tousled was standing there smiling at him.

“Sorry,” Derek said to the nurse, “I don’t think that bed is designed for seventeen stone.”

She laughed. “I won’t tell Sister if you won’t.”

“Deal,” he smiled. “Hey, how’re you doing?” he asked Harry.

“Much better, I think,” Harry smiled. “Got a quarter of my brain back.”

“Blimey, mate, you don’t want to go using all of that! Put the rest of us to shame!” Derek joked.

Harry realised for the first time that Derek was a bit like Hagrid – a giant man, with a giant heart. Not that he fancied Hagrid, he thought with a shudder.

“You cold? I’m sure there’s more blankets –“

“No, just a thought,” Harry whispered. It was late and dark, his throat still rough: whispering felt part of how it should be.

“Well, don’t go having too many of those.”

The nurse checked Harry’s medication and slipped out.
“You’re wonderful, Derek,” Harry gripped his friend’s hand. “Thank you.”

“Don’t be daft. We’re glad you came to us.”

“You should be at home with Andy. I’m fine now.”

“He’s on the nightshift. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“Well, you’d better go home tomorrow. Is it Saturday tomorrow? You’ve missed work!”

“Bugger that! There’s got to be an advantage to being your own boss, eh?”

“Yes, you’ve more to lose if you don’t go in.”

“Stop fussing. It’s the weekend now anyway.”

“You’ve always worked Saturdays.”

“Shut it. Think I’d leave you alone? You nearly died!”

“I did?”

“Had a bleedin’ heart attack!”

“What!”

“No, no, don’t panic! Just a little one, when they were bringing you in. Scared the shit out of me though. You’ll be fine, they said, young man like you.”

Harry gripped Derek’s hand, realising what an absolute idiot he had been. He’d nearly died. He’d pushed his body way beyond its limits, and he’d known something was wrong. Just to show Severus.

Severus! Shit! Hogwarts.

How to get in touch?

He thought.

“Derek, I need to contact some friends, they’ll be wondering where I am. Have you got your mobile?”

“Not allowed to use it in here, love, they set off the equipment, apparently. And Andy took it home for me to charge it.”

“Oh. Would you mind going and using the payphone for me, then? Except I haven’t even got any money....”

“Right. Like I give a shit. Give me the number and I’ll go ring.”

“Thanks.” Harry gave him the number. “It’s a Mr and Mrs Granger – they’re the parents of my friend Hermione – I’ve mentioned her.”

“Brainy lass? Got an article printed in some scientific journal?”

“Yeah, that’s her. Can you ask her parents to let her know that Harry’s alright?”
“Harry?”

“She thought my face looked like Prince Harry at one point,” Harry lied. “It sort of stuck. She’ll know it’s really me though if you say that.”

“Why don’t you ring her direct?”

“You can’t always get through, but her parents are dentists and have an answerphone.”

“She teach with you?”

“How did you work that out, clever clogs?”

“She’s had an article published and you teach - Andy said that black cloth you were wrapped up in was some university gown, or something. You want me to call a woman rather than a man,” Derek grinned, “so I assume she’s a colleague.”

“Yeah, but she’s a really good friend too,” Harry said. “Known her for seven years. Trust her with my life.”

Derek looked serious. “You didn’t trust her with this, though, did you? You came to us. Who hurt you, love? Someone you know, or was it a stranger?”

Harry looked away.

“I’m not going to judge you, Alex, just want to help. The doctor asked me if you liked rough sex.”

Harry’s head whipped back, a motion which he regretted.

“He thought it was that or rape. Wants me to ask you whether you want to call in the police.”

“God no. Isn’t this bad enough?”

“I know, love. But – if there’s someone out there doing this to gays....”

Harry turned his head away again. “I don’t want the police. Please.”

“Ok, don’t even think about it, alright? I’m going to go and ring this number for you, and I’ll be right back.”

It was unfortunate for Harry’s anxious friends that Mr and Mrs Granger were in Paris, celebrating their wedding anniversary, and didn’t get the message till their return on Sunday evening.

“Where’s Harry?” Seamus asked Ron at breakfast Monday morning in the Great Hall.

“Mmmph?” Ron said, round a mouthful of bacon and scrambled egg. Anxious he might be, but a boy still needed to eat.

“Isn’t he back from his weekend?” Dean whispered. “He’ll be in deep shit with McGonagall.”

Ron looked to Hermione, not knowing how to answer. How long could they keep up the idea that Harry still had a tummy bug? The dorm obviously thought he had recovered and moved on already.
At that moment, the post arrived, a large owl from the postal office at Hogsmeade presenting its leg to Hermione. She untied the letter, whilst Ron gave the bird a bit of his bacon.

“That’s your Mum’s writing, isn’t it?” he asked.

“Yes – oh shit, it was their wedding anniversary and I forgot to send a card! They’re probably checking I’m alright.”

Hermione opened the letter and after a quick read shoved it at Ron.

_Dear Hermione_

_We do hope you are well. Don’t worry about forgetting our wedding anniversary – it wasn’t a big one! We had a lovely weekend in Paris. When we came back there was a rather odd message from a man called Derek Summers. It’s a bit peculiar so I’ll quote; he said, ‘Alex says to tell Hermione that Harry is alright.’ I hope this makes sense to you and that poor boy hasn’t been getting himself into trouble again._

_Do let us know you are fine – of course I don’t mind you not sending a card but it just made me a little worried because normally you are so good at remembering._

_Much love_

_Mum (and Dad sends his love too, of course) xxxx_

Hermione looked across at Neville whilst Ron was reading it. “Mum’s found that whatsit I lost,” she commented casually, then took the letter back from Ron and stood up.

“I need a word with Professor Dumbledore, meet me in five?” she looked at the two of them, then strode to the High Table.

“Miss Granger?” the Headmaster said, looking at her sharply.

Conscious that the students nearest the High Table could hear, Hermione said, “I’m sorry to trouble you, Sir, but I’ve just had a letter from my parents, and I need to get in touch with them,” and she handed him the letter.

Dumbledore read it quickly.

“Of course, Miss Granger. Do come with me.”

He was halfway across the platform to the side door when he turned back and said casually, “Oh, Severus, I forgot! If you have a moment when you’ve finished, could I have a word about the fourth year curriculum? I’ve received an interesting suggestion from a parent.”

Severus took one look at Hermione and said, with his normal sarcasm, within hearing of his Slytherins, “I’m always open to suggestions on how to teach my classes, of course, Sir. I will come to your office directly.” And he returned to drinking his tea.

Several young Slytherins sniggered.

Draco Malfoy looked from Granger to Dumbledore to Snape, and got very little information.
However, back at the Gryffindor table, Weasley and Longbottom were also getting up to leave. And Potter was still absent. Something was going on.

Five minutes later, Snape, Hermione, Ron and Neville were all in the Headmaster’s office, and had looked at the letter.

Severus sat down heavily in one of the armchairs.

It was the closest to an admission of relief that Hermione had ever seen.

“Is the mobile still working, Sir? If I ring my parents on their mobile, there’s a slight chance that they can trace the number of this call. Probably unlikely if there’s been others in since.”

Dumbledore reached in his drawer and handed her the phone.

Rather embarrassed, Hermione rang her mother’s mobile.

“Mum? It’s Hermione – yes, I’m fine. Yes, I’m at school – no, this phone has been set up specially. Can you do something urgently? Was the message about Harry the last? Yes? Oh, Mum, can you do a last number check quick? It’s really important. Yes, I’ll wait.”

There was a pause. Everyone remained silent. “Oh, Mum, you’re wonderful. Look, I’ll write tonight. I’m fine, ok? Don’t worry! Yes, love you too – no, really nothing to worry about. Bye!”

She looked at the others, held up a finger and dialled the number. It rang and rang.

“Hello? Is that Derek Summers?” she asked urgently. “Oh.”

She shook her head at everyone, feeling everyone’s hopes droop.

“It’s where? The Royal Sussex County Hospital? Can you tell me the ward – oh, thank you so much! Yes, yes, sorry to have bothered you, but thank you!”

She looked up at the others. “I think we’ve got him! Hold on, where are my lists?”

Dumbledore handed her the lists, which had been in the drawer with the phone. She dialled again.

“Oh, good morning. Could you put me through to Netherfield Ward, please? Thank you.” There was a silence, then, “Oh, good morning. I’m sorry to trouble you so early; could you tell me how Alex Johnson is this morning, please? Yes, I’m his sister Hermione, I’m afraid I’ve been away and Derek Summer’s message has only just reached me....What?” Hermione grasped the chair arm, and sank into it. The tension in the room rose instantly. “But – have you got the right person? He’s only young – oh god. He’s alright? Yes, yes I would like to speak to the doctor, thank you very much...hello? Oh, hello, Doctor. Yes, Alex is an orphan, your records are right – there must be a mix up, Derek left me a message on my answerphone – he probably thought next of kin was parents, partner – yes, I appreciate patient confidentiality – look, can I visit? I’ll come at once. Yes, thank you. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She put the phone down, and swallowed.

“Can I have a cup of tea?” she asked Dumbledore.
“What’s wrong?” Snape snapped. “Tell us at once, for Merlin’s sake!”

Hermione looked up, her eyes huge.

“He’s had a heart attack,” she whispered.

Dumbledore shoved a cup into her hands. They shook so much that the tea spilled in the saucer. Hermione bent her head and sipped it.

“The nurse said it, but then the doctor wouldn’t talk – they’re supposed to keep patients’ information confidential, unless the patient had given you as their contact person or something. Oh god. Can I go and see him now?” she asked.

“I’ll take you,” Neville said at once.

The Headmaster looked at the people in the room: Ronald Weasley, kicking a log aggressively into the fire, fists clenched; Neville Longbottom, who had surprisingly moved to stand beside Hermione, a hand on her shoulder; and Severus, his face a mask, staring out of the window.

“Professor Snape will take Miss Granger,” he said firmly, and hoped that he had made the right decision.

“No way!” Ron shouted. “He almost killed Harry!”

“Miss Granger cannot go without the escort of a member of staff. No other staff are aware of the situation and I’m sure Harry does not want the details known – he was not even prepared to have Madam Pomfrey treat him. Severus, you will not make your presence known to Mr Potter unless he specifically makes such a wish clear to Miss Granger. Are we understood?”

The atmosphere was tense. Snape said not a word.

Neville stood up, and said, “Come on, Ron. Mione, let us know how he is as soon as you get back? And give him our best wishes.”

“Neville –“ Ron started, “you can’t think this is right? He hurt Harry.”

“Harry can look after himself,” Neville said surprisingly. “Let’s go, or we’ll be late for Transfigurations. If we’re all absent from classes there’ll be even more speculation. We’re cover, Ron.”

With a nod, Neville opened the door for his disgruntled friend, and they exited.

Hermione looked at Professor Snape. “Professor Dumbledore is right. I don’t know if you’re sorry for what you’ve done, whether you felt it was justified, or what. Harry’s had a heart attack. No stress for him. If he doesn’t want to see you, you stay out.”

“I am at your command, Miss Granger,” Snape said, with not a hint of mockery.

They made their way along the corridors, Snape’s nose twitching at the smell of antiseptic and strong cleaners.

As they approached the ward, Hermione said, “I’ll go in first, ok? You stay outside unless Harry says otherwise.”
Snape merely nodded.

Hermione made her way, Snape behind her, and asked for Alex at the nurses’ station.

“You are?” the Sister asked.

“His sister. I spoke to someone this morning.”

“Oh yes, I’m sorry if we were abrupt, but we have to take confidentiality seriously. I’ve told Alex you phoned and he seemed very pleased. Has Derek told you anything?” she asked carefully.

“No, I just got a message on the answerphone.”

“Oh.” The woman looked at Snape. “And this is?”

“A work colleague.”

“Well, Alex might not be strong enough to see you both,” she said tactfully. “He’s been very poorly and still is. Perhaps you’d like to go in first, dear. If he wants to see you,” she looked at Snape, “for a few minutes, that must be his decision. Please don’t be disappointed if he’s not up to it.”

They both walked along the corridor and Hermione peeped through the glass in the door and stepped in.

There was a large – no, enormous – man sitting next to the bed holding the hand of a young man, with black curly hair. It was not Harry’s face. She looked to Snape, who peered in, and nodded in confirmation. This was Alex Johnson. He was asleep. Hermione was shocked with how tiny and frail he looked. Was that really Harry’s body?

The man rose to his feet, carefully putting down Harry’s hand. Harry stirred, but didn’t open his eyes.

“Derek?”

The man nodded.

“Hermione? I’m so glad you’re here at last.”

He motioned her to the chair he had been sitting in, and pulled up a plastic chair for himself.

Hermione gently stroked fingers down Harry’s arm, looking carefully at her friend.

Severus watched through the door.

Who was the damn giant, holding Harry’s hand?

“I only got your message this morning,” Hermione explained in a whisper. “My parents were on holiday.”

“Ah. Alex was fretting a bit that you’d be worried.”

“I’ve been worried sick – we all have,” she said. Her head turned towards the door.

She thought it would be alright for Snape to come in whilst Harry was asleep.

Derek looked round. “Who’s that?”
“Severus. He and Harry – they used to be –“

“Ah. Why doesn’t he come in then?”

“Nurse wasn’t sure about too many people.”

Derek got up and opened the door, inviting Severus in.

“He’s asleep,” he said quietly. ”Can’t tire him out, can we?”

Derek motioned to another plastic chair, but Severus shook his head, and stood leaning against the wall. Like Hermione, he was horrified at how frail Harry looked. His skin appeared paper thin, and he looked so small...

“He’s slept a lot,” Derek said. “I think it’s the painkillers, or the anaesthetic, or something.”

“Anaesthetic?” Hermione’s brow crunched. “They’ve had to operate?”

Derek looked at her carefully, then at Severus.

“Do you know what happened?”

“A little. He’s been ill for a few days Couldn’t they get the infection under control? It was an infection, wasn’t it?”

“He’s having intravenous antibiotics,” Derek nodded towards the drip. “It seems to be working. Do you know...why...what...god, I don’t know what to say here,” he wiped a hand over his face, embarrassed.

“We know Harry very well,” she said gently. “And we’re not blabbermouths.”

“They think...they think...he’s been raped,” he choked. “Maybe with some sort of – god, I can’t say this,” he stumbled. He took a breath. “With some sort of thing.”

Snape stood, still as a statue, against the wall.

“They asked me if he enjoyed violent sex,” Derek continued. “Can you believe it? Dear heaven, who would want to be ripped up like that! I told them of course he didn’t, he’s a sweet and lovely – just because I’m so big, they jumped to these awful conclusions...”

This man was Harry’s lover? Snape thought. This giant? This man Harry had run to? Had Harry spent Christmas with him?

“He won’t talk about it,” Derek went on. “They wanted to call the police, but he won’t have it. It makes me think it must be someone he knows, not a stranger. Do you have any idea who it could be?”

Not knowing what to say, Hermione floundered. “If he’d wanted the police to know, surely –“

“Fuck the police! “ Derek snarled. “If I find the bastard who did this I’m going to twist his nuts off with my bare hands and shove them down his fucking throat!”

Harry stirred.

Derek subsided into the chair, and Hermione moved to sit on the edge of the bed.
“Harry?”

His eyelashes fluttered.

“Mione?”

“Yup, that’s me,” she said cheerily.

Harry squeezed her hand, and tried to sit up. Derek was behind him giving a hand in two seconds flat, settling Harry against the pillows.

“Drink, love?”

“Snape.” Harry saw the man against the wall.

Derek passed him the water, which he could now manage without a straw. His eyes stayed on the potions master.

Derek took the glass from him, and slid his hand down Harry’s cheek, smiling.

“Temperature’s stayed down, I think,” he said encouragingly.

“How are you feeling?” Hermione asked. She had resumed holding Harry’s hand.

Bloody people pawing him, Snape thought irritably.

“Truth?”

She nodded.

“Weak as a kitten.” He glanced at Snape. “Nice not to want to throw up, though.”

“Are you eating?”

“Not much. I’ve not been hungry. And – and-“

“You’re worried about it coming out of the other end?” she said sympathetically.

Harry’s hand slid to the bag on his stomach. “Not any more,” he said bitterly, turning his face away.

Derek slipped his hand under the blanket and placed his on top of Harry’s on the bag, showing his young friend his acceptance of everything Alex was.

What in fuck was that man doing having his hand on Harry under the covers! Snape thought angrily. How dare they! Harry was deliberately taunting him, after he’d been worried sick....

“It’s only temporary, chicken,” Derek said. He looked at Hermione, checking with a glance at Harry.

“He’s got a bag.”

“A catheter bag? That’s pretty common –“

Harry turned to his friend, ignoring Snape. “Oh, I had one of them too. They took it out this morning, thank god. They’ve done a colostomy,” he added.
“A – oh Harry!”

“Come on, love. Soon as you’re all healed they’ll sew you back together. And the doctor said this morning he can’t believe how fast you’re healing. Give it another couple of weeks or so and it will all be over.”

“A couple of weeks?” Severus said in astonishment. He couldn’t understand the words that he was hearing. He knew the etymology of the language, but couldn’t see what it would actually mean. What had they done to Harry’s colon?

Hermione turned round. “I suspect that’s pretty fast for that sort of surgery,” she said the latter word heavily.

She looked at Harry. “Do you want Severus to go?” she asked quietly but clearly.

Harry looked at the man. He hadn’t said anything, apart from the scoff about Muggle timescales. Well, he could see Harry was alive. He could stop worrying about the consequences, both personal and in the bigger picture. He looked away.

“Yes.”

Snape stood straight and walked out of the door.

Derek looked at the strained young man, and at Hermione. But his heart also felt for the severe chap outside. He could understand Alex being embarrassed, but it would be easier if his friends knew. And he sympathised with Severus, who appeared to be shocked past words. Which was exactly how he had felt at first, but Alex had been unconscious so he didn’t need to say anything. He had had time to adjust.

He got up. “I’m going to get a coffee. Shall I bring you one back?” he asked Hermione.

Realising a deliberate move to give them privacy, Hermione accepted and thanked Derek.

Alone at last, she leant up and gave Harry a little hug.

“Idiot,” she said gently. “We’ve been out of our minds trying to work out where you went. Why didn’t you tell us what was wrong?”

“Embarrassing, wasn’t it?”

His brain tried to draw all the strands together. Last time he saw Hermione, she hadn’t known about Snape.

“How did you find out? About Snape?”

“Snape was worried sick about you –“

Harry snorted.

“He was –“

“Right. That’s why he was shouting at me again in class.”

“The minute he realised you hadn’t gone to the infirmary he went ballistic. Said it was a matter of life and death. When you couldn’t be found he spilled the beans about what he’d done to you straight away. I tried to beat him up -”
“What?” Harry grinned.

Hermione blushed. “Er, yes. Right in front of Professor Dumbledore too. He let me as well. Then Neville dragged me off and said that – that Snape had been your boyfr– lover - all this time and no wonder he was pissed off, because he hadn’t known it was you. And I couldn’t believe it, but I could because it all made twisted sense.”

Harry sank even deeper into the pillows. “It’s true. True that I’m the biggest idiot in the world.”

Hermione was quiet. “You care about him.”

Harry turned away, tears welling in his eyes again. “Yeah. And now he hates me for me rather than my father.”

Derek had scooped Severus, who was sitting in a chair in the corridor, head leaning back against the wall, along to the coffee lounge at the end of the ward.

There weren’t many men who made Snape feel small, but this man was one of them: he was wide as well as tall, all solid muscle. The thought of Harry lying beneath this man made his blood boil. Nevertheless, he went. He had spent 20 years getting to know every detail about his greatest enemy, to find his weaknesses. He was not going to pass up the opportunity closer to home.

Severus was still furious with Harry, but ever since his curse has laid into the man, he had had to admit one thing: he cared. He was angry because he cared; he had lost control because he cared; he was terrified because he cared; and when Harry disappeared....

He had not expected another lover on the scene. The thought of Harry going straight to this man lit the fire of his anger again. The sane part of his brain told him this man might be a former, rather than recent lover – but Harry had turned to him, and the man obviously still doted on Harry.

Derek set the kettle to boil, and reached for milk from the fridge; He popped a couple of coins into the cup for donations, and then coffee into two clean cups. The room could be used by patients or visitors, but usually it was empty; he and Andy preferred to get a drink here rather than the cafeteria, as he didn’t like to leave Alex.

He sat down on one of the rather scruffy armchairs, and pushed a coffee across the low table to Severus.

“Get that inside you. Want some sugar? You look like you could do with something for the shock.”

Snape looked sharply at him. Was the man trying to be kind? To him?

Apparently he was.

“I couldn’t speak either, at first. When I knew what had happened,” Derek said. “Hits you right in the guts, doesn’t it?”

Snape nodded, but couldn’t say anything.

He had done a lot of unpleasant things as a Death Eater, but sitting here talking to this man who did not know that he was talking to the person who had done those terrible things was......

He grimaced.
“Yeah, the coffee’s rough, I know, but at least it’s hot,” Derek rambled on, trying to make this rather severe man comfortable. Alex obviously liked older guys.

“I’m sorry,” Severus said at last, “I didn’t understand about the surgery.”

“The colostomy? Right mouthful that word, isn’t it? A nightmare for anyone, but for a gay guy – but it’s temporary, they say, if he heals properly.”

Severus looked at him, allowing his incomprehension to show.

Derek leant forward to explain. “His colon – you know – in his bowels – was split, or torn, or damaged, or something. I didn’t really ask for details. That caused the infection – stuff leaks into your stomach cavity. They were surprised at how clean it was, actually, but it was enough for an infection. And then obviously you’ve got lots of bugs up your arse, so it’s hard to get the damaged bit to heal, especially once the infection had set in. Anyway, they’ve cut off his colon above the damaged bit and brought it out through his stomach. It all goes into a bag. Horrible. I’ve been trying to make him feel alright about it, but you can understand why he’d be upset, can’t you, poor sod.”

Severus was in shock.

Horrified.

“He let them do that to him?”

“Didn’t have any choice, did he? He was unconscious when we found him and they had to do it to save his life.”

Andy walked along the corridor, a couple of sandwiches in his hand. He was on an early lunch, and had come along to spend it with Alex and Derek. He peeped through the pane in the door in case Alex was in the middle of any medical business, but smiled when he saw a young woman in with their friend. Hermione had got the message then. He expected Derek was down in the coffee lounge, giving them a bit of privacy. He was about to pop his head round the door to say hello, when he caught the emotional tone of Alex’s voice, and paused.

“He’ll get over it,” Hermione soothed, although she was not at all certain of that herself.

“No. Severus couldn’t have done this to me if he didn’t hate me,” Alex whispered, “and it’s my fault. I’m so stupid.”

Andy heard the sob, and the shift of cloth and murmuring. A quick glance confirmed that the young woman was comforting him. Alex must really trust her, to have told her all this. Maybe it was because she was a woman. But he had a name now.

He went down the corridor to find Derek, and was not surprised to see him chatting to another man. Derek would talk to anyone: relatives of other patients, doctors, nurses.

He came in and went to hand a sandwich over to his lover.

“Andy!” Derek’s face lit with pleasure at seeing him. “This is a friend of Alex’s.”

Severus stood to shake the offered hand.
“Severus, this is Andy.”

Andy’s fist sliced under Severus’ jaw and the blow knocked him back, Severus tumbling over the chair.

“Andy! What the hell?” Derek began.

Severus was getting himself up.

“It’s him! He’s the fucking wanker that hurt Alex!”

“What’s going on in here?” The Charge Nurse stood in the doorway, looking every bit as fierce as anyone who had ever watched a Carry On movie knew Matron Hattie Jacques could be.

A stony silence followed.

“He slipped,” Derek said. “Sorry for the noise, Sister. We’ll just go outside.”

One huge white man and a shorter but even more muscular black guy marched either side of Snape down the corridor.

Hermione heard the footsteps and something about their rhythm had her running to the door. She bolted into the corridor and stood in their way, blocking their path.

Snape had a split lip, and blood was oozing down his pale face.

“What’s going on?”

“Nothing, Hermione. Just going to talk to Severus outside,” Derek said.

“I think not,” Hermione responded, drawing herself up to her whole five feet four.

A light bulb seemed to click in Derek’s head. “Did you know? Did you know and you still brought him here?” his voice was thunderous.

“Step out of the way, Miss Granger,” Snape said in his normal authoritative tone.

“To let you men go and fight in the yard, like brawling school boys? Certainly not.”

“Stop it,” a quiet voice said.

Harry was standing by his door, holding on to the drip stand, his face white but determined. He was wearing only trousers, and the stickers from the heart monitor were visible on his chest, and the marks from the defibrillator; the needle for the IV line was plastered to his arm.

“For god’s sake, what are you doing out of bed?” Derek stepped forward.

“Stopping a murder, I imagine. A wrongful one,” Harry said severely.

“Let’s get you back into bed,” Derek said quickly.

Two nurses had appeared. “Alex Johnson! What are you doing? Back into bed at once! You’ve set the alarms off in the nurses’ station, you know –“

They tried to hustle Harry back to bed, but the diminutive man stood firm.

“One moment,” he said firmly.
“You don’t need any stress,” one of the nurses said. “I think it’s time all your friends left you to sleep.”

“I’ll have more stress if I don’t sort this out.” He looked at Derek and Severus.

“Come in. Please. I’m too tired to stand here, but I will if I have to.”

That galvanised them.

Derek shoved Severus in in front of him, and Harry allowed himself to be led to the bed. He lay back, exhausted, as the nurses rearranged him, checked his vitals and reattached the heart monitor ‘just in case’.

“Five minutes, and they go,” one said fiercely. “Even you, Derek,” she said, looking disapprovingly at the man who hadn’t left Alex’ side.

Harry could hardly find the strength to talk, but knew he must.

“Andy overheard something,” he said at last.

“I was going to pop my head in but you were talking. And crying,” Andy said, staring aggressively at Snape.

“I’m too knackered to go into it,” Harry said quietly. “You misunderstood, alright? Please take my word for it,” he asked the two men.

Derek came over and took his hand again. “I’m sorry, love, but I don’t trust him. You’re covering something up.”

Harry laughed. It hurt his chest and he curled forward, holding his hands against his heart.

“Jesus!” Derek paled. “I’ll get the nurse –“

“Stop fussing,” Harry hissed. “It’s just the laughing.”

Nevertheless, Harry’s pain stopped them all in their tracks.

“There’s lots about me you don’t know, and I’ve done some really stupid things,” he said quietly to Derek. “But Severus has spent years getting me out of trouble, and I trust him with my life, alright?”

Alright,” Derek agreed, rubbing Harry’s hand gently.

“Good. Bugger off then. Go to work. No point me investing in a business if the boss is always dossing,” Harry smiled at him. He looked across at Andy. “Good to see you, Andy. But now, I just want a quick word with Severus before you all go and I sleep the day away. No, don’t fuss,” he interrupted Derek.

Andy came and gave him a quick kiss, and stroked his hand down Harry’s cheek.

“I’ll be outside,” Derek said pointedly, as he stood, looking at Severus.

“Derek.” Harry called. He took the man’s hand and pulled him close, then whispered in his ear, “Don’t even think of hurting him, please?”

Derek looked at the young face beseeching him. Oh shit! Alex cared about the bastard!
“Sure,” Derek said, and he and Andy left the room.

“Give us a minute, Hermione,” Harry said. “Thanks for coming.”

She gave him a quick hug and kiss on the cheek, and left.

Alone in the room at last, Snape looked at Harry. He was full of mixed feelings. Horror at the condition the boy was in. Anger that Harry had let himself get into this state, and had then sought Muggle help when their methods were so primitive.

Anger with himself for not watching more closely to check that the boy was recovering properly. Disgust with himself that he had done this. And more immediately, he was angry at the way Harry had let that man paw him, had whispered in his ear; Harry had so obviously placed his trust in him. And where the hell did the other guy fit into the scheme of things?

“Thank you for coming, Professor,” Harry said, and his voice sounded as if he was a hundred. And he was calling him Professor.

“I am glad that you are alive, if not yet well,” Severus said. What did the boy want to talk to him about?

“Yeah, would have messed up the kill-Voldemort problem, wouldn’t it?” Harry snorted harshly.

“Potter –”

Harry turned to look at him. “I don’t know if you do,” he cut Snape off, “but just in case, don’t feel guilty about this. As usual, I was stupid. I’m the only one to blame for me being here.”

“It was my curse,” Snape said.

“Yeah, but if I hadn’t been a wuss about seeing Madam Pomfrey I wouldn’t be here. Now I have strange men and women looking at my arse and – “ he faltered. “Anyway, more embarrassment than any man likes to deal with. So you’ll be glad I had my comeuppance.”

Snape opened his mouth.

“Don’t. I’m too tired. I just wanted to say I’m sorry. Sorry for what I did in the first place and sorry if this stupidity of mine has brought more trouble down on your head. And I wanted you to know – I mean, you hated having had sex with a school boy - but I wasn’t innocent. Derek – outside – was my first lover. And he’s with Andy now, but he met Andy when we had a threesome together. So don’t go feeling guilty for seducing an innocent. You didn’t. I wasn’t. Now, when I come back, can we draw a line under this? I know you’ll always hate me, I understand that now, but we both want to defeat Voldemort and we need to focus on that.”

A male nurse came in with the meds trolley. “You need to leave, now, Sir,” he said to Snape. “Charge Nurse’s orders.”

“I’m done,” Harry said. “Goodbye, Professor.”

And he shut his eyes, settling on to his side, small hands pulling the cover over himself, even as the nurse checked the drip and bustled around him.

Snape left the room, his mind reeling.
There was no sign of anyone. He walked to the lifts.

As he rounded the corner, he was grabbed and pinned to the wall by Derek.

“Alex wants me to leave you alone,” he ground out in Snape’s face, “and I won’t upset him. But if I ever find you’ve hurt him again you’ll be buried in concrete underneath the foundations of a fifteen storey block of flats and I don’t give a fuck whether anyone ever finds your sorry arse or not!”
The next day Madam Pomfrey visited Harry. She did not change her usual garb, and the regular staff gaped as she sailed down the corridor, the wings of her hat flapping. But Mr Humphries, the consultant on the ward, who was nearing retirement age, was transported back to the early days of his studies, and charmed by her matter-of-fact approach and her acute enquiries about her patient. The young man obviously knew her well, and was delighted to see her, though embarrassed when she scolded him for all the fuss he had caused, whilst at the same time making him comfortable and assessing him so swiftly that she demanded to know why his sodium had been allowed to drop to a level where his proper cell activity was destabilized.

He agreed Alex could be relinquished into her care at the specialist facility she represented the following day, given a whole list of provisos. He even asked for her personal phone number, so that he could ascertain that all was well; Madam Pomfrey told him he was a cheeky young man, and she knew his game, much to the awe of the team of house doctors whose ward rounds she had interrupted.

Mr Humphries was delighted to receive, several days later, a letter on deliciously heavy parchment in a beautiful hand that looked just as if it could have been written with a quill, thanking him for his services to her young colleague, who was mending well, and wondering whether he enjoyed the opera, as she happened to have two seats to a forthcoming performance of Aida. She was unable to receive his response, but should he be interested, she would be at the Royal Opera House on said date wearing a ruby-coloured gown, and would be delighted to share the enjoyment of the occasion with him.

Mr Humphries, who had been widowed seven years earlier, had spend a great deal of time thinking about the elusive lady, and had decided that she was working for a secret military hospital, as he had seen staff in a naval hospital wearing starched and old fashioned uniforms in recent years himself. Her letter confirmed this assumption, and he treated himself to a new white silk bow tie for the occasion.

Derek and Andy were not at all pleased, later that day, to find that Alex was being moved. Andy wanted to know what ambulance service was doing the run, and whether he could come along as extra crew. How long was the journey? Why was he going?

Derek looked sternly at Alex and asked if that shit Severus was going to be at the place he was going to.

But mostly they were concerned that he was not well enough to be transferred anywhere.

Alex wondered what he could tell his friends. They had saved his life, and cared about him, yet he had kept so much from them. Could he tell them? Should he? Would they believe him? Would it put them at risk?

“Look,” he said quietly, “the place where I teach – it’s not a normal sort of place. I can’t really discuss it. But they have medical stuff that can really help me that isn’t available elsewhere.”

Derek took his hand and nodded at him.
“Is it dangerous?” he asked, his eyes down, just looking at the hand he was rubbing.

“What?”

“The life you lead. Is it dangerous?”

Harry reached out a hand and stroked Derek’s hair. He loved this man, both of them, in the way that he loved Hermione – friends that were absolutely solid. “Yeah. Not all the time, but it has been, and unfortunately there’s more to come. I have to be ready for it.”

Derek nodded again. “We’re always here for you,” he whispered. “You know, if you need to get away. Don’t have to tell us nothing. Just come.”

Harry blinked away tears, and hugged the big man tight. “Thanks,” he whispered into his neck. Andy patted his shoulder, and Harry squeezed his hand, meeting his worried eyes.

“Thank you for everything. Saving me – being there.”

“Ah, shut it! You can pay for the cleaning bill next time you come, though – chucking up on our brand new sofa! Couldn’t find a bucket, could you?”

Harry laughed and apologised, knowing the ribbing for what it was. He promised to visit as soon as he could.

Three days later, Harry’s first class back was Friday morning Potions.

“Mr Potter,” Snape drawled, “how good of you to grace us with your presence. Do try to restrain yourself from any more projectile vomiting, if you please.”

Pansy Parkinson sniggered, but Harry was pleased that Snape at least acknowledged his presence. In fact, although he employed his normal sarcastic manner, Snape indicated what Harry needed to do to catch up, and then left him to it. Harry felt it was almost an offer of truce.

Harry had spent two days in the infirmary before being allowed back into the swing of things. Madam Pomfrey had soon sorted his internal injuries and reattached his colon.

She had given him a muscle repair potion to correct any damage to his heart.

She had sat beside his bed and had very firm words with him about the fact that the service she provided was utterly confidential, and that she was thoroughly trained to deal with sexual matters. She was disappointed that he hadn’t felt able to come to her, although she could understand why. However, she had treated many gay wizards and witches, both in her career before she had come to Hogwarts and at the school, and also had had some small experience of working with victims of domestic violence. She hoped that he wouldn’t feel reluctant to approach her in future, whoever his partner was and whatever his problem was. Although Professor Snape had brewed the muscle repair potion on this occasion, as he was in this instance aware of Harry’s difficulties, in future, unless Harry specified otherwise, she would maintain his confidentiality by seeking any unusual treatments from other suppliers outside of the school.

And lastly, she gave him the name and direction of a mediwizard whom she held in the highest regard, should he prefer to seek treatment elsewhere.
Harry’s Gryffindor housemates accepted Harry’s week-long absence from the common room with their usual aplomb – welcoming him back and teasing him for getting out of classes.

Ron and Draco both presented Harry with difficulties, although not at the same time. And in the end, both were far easier to deal with than Harry had expected.

Harry’s first day back in classes was a Friday, and with no reason to go to his home in Hogsmeade for the weekend, Harry found himself playing several games of chess with a distracted Ron.

After his fifth defeat, Harry said, with a smile, “I think that’s enough losses for my fragile spirit to bear. I suppose I’ll have to give in and catch up on my homework.”

Ron looked out of the window. “The weather’s not bad – we could fly if you like.”

A moment’s thrill at the prospect was replaced by more practical thoughts. “Nah, I don’t think my arse is up to it yet. Maybe next week?”

Ron went bright red.

Harry leant forward. The common room was quite quiet as the weather had indeed induced a number of the younger students outside to burn off some energy.

“Ron, are you embarrassed about me being gay? I thought you were alright with it – what with Charlie and all.”

“It’s not that – exactly,” Ron mumbled.

“What then?”

Ron looked up at Harry, then around the room. No-one was within ear-shot.

“It’s just – him,” he got out. “I keep thinking about it. About you two together. Eeeww! I just don’t understand.”

Harry sat back and thought about it.

“Do you need to?”

“What?”

“Understand. I don’t understand how you can fancy Millicent Bulstode, but apparently you do.”

“Did, mate, did! Once was enough, I can tell you.”

“Don’t tell me! I really, really don’t want to know. And that’s the point, isn’t it? You don’t have to understand. Even if we were still together. But anyway, it’s over. Move on. I have to.”

Ron looked at him.

“Yeah, alright mate.”

And that was it.
Draco approached him in the library, where he was working with Hermione catching up on missed work. Snape had set Hermione and Draco an authentic joint project in Potions class, which provided cover for them to be seen together working.

Malfoy slung his bag down and threw himself into a chair.

“Had a good holiday?” he asked Harry sarcastically.

“Wish it was,” Harry retorted.

Draco looked at him.

“Were you in St Mungo’s?”

“No.”

Draco reached down and got a book out of his bag and buried his nose in it. “Fair enough. You don’t trust me. I can understand that a Malfoy oath of allegiance counts for nothing.”

Harry’s eyes met Hermione’s over Draco’s head.

He sighed. “I didn’t trust anyone in the wizarding world, Draco. I’ve been in a Muggle hospital.”

Draco’s head shot up. “Why on earth didn’t you come to me?” he said, contradicting his earlier statement.

“Look, I was too embarrassed to go to anyone I knew, right?”

“Why? Because the hero of the wizarding world threw up?”

“Because I had a problem with my arse, alright?”

“What?”

“You heard.”

Draco thought back. “Snape knew.”

“Yeah, he guessed, but there was no way I was going to Madam Pomfrey –“

“She’s tough but she’s alright –“

“Draco, would you want her putting her fingers up your arse? And commenting on your sex life?”

Draco opened his mouth, and then shut it again. “Good point.”

“Thank you. We get there at last.”

“Perhaps I could’ve helped you –“

“Yeah, right. I couldn’t bring myself to even say what the problem was. If the cure had meant that you had to – do that – I don’t think either of us would have wanted to go there. Unless you feel differently about me than I thought, sweetie,” he batted his eyelashes at the blond.

“How very right you were to seek treatment elsewhere, Potter,” Draco glanced at Hermione, and saw her grinning. He gave in, and smirked too.
The next couple of weeks were deliciously peaceful. Severus attended Harry’s class, confirming the sense of truce. The potions project was heading towards testing stage again, and it was decided that Neville would be the object of it this time, as Madam Pomfrey put her foot down at the first wind of hearing that Harry might be putting himself at risk so soon.

Rather than defence, Neville chose to grow things. He took a cutting of the rare plant that only flowered every 45 years, and concentrated his magic on enhancing it, then took the potion and tried again.

“It’s definitely made a difference,” he said, pleased. “I know it’s not exactly a proper test without a decent control frame, but it was more useful. Didn’t get it as far as I would have liked, though. We’ve got enough to make one more batch, quadruple strength. I’ll keep trying to enhance this with my own magic, but I have to say it’s very resistant.”

Harry was quietly thrilled that he had, more than once, caught Severus looking at him. And it wasn’t necessarily a disgusted look. It wasn’t exactly warm, or even lustful either, more assessing. It gave Harry a tiny spark of hope in the desolation of his interior landscape that Severus might not entirely hate him.

The experiences had not cooled Harry’s feelings for Snape at all. He had, in fact, been forced to examine them. Snape was an extremely complex man, contradictory even, but all the more intriguing because of it.

Two weeks after his return Harry felt that it was time his group did something less focussed and more developmental. Eloise and Ernie had been finding that their combined magic not only was more powerful than their individual magics, but appeared to have different qualities. Harry wondered what would happen if you tried to link a larger group. It might not be at all successful – Neville had seen a compatibility in Eli and Ernie’s magic - but it could be interesting to see the effects of trying to combine other types.

He had been out for a fly with the Gryffindor team; he didn’t play for them anymore, but they often had a fun session after practice and he liked joining in. He was heading back from the pitch with Ron, to whom he’d already outlined the idea, when he saw Malfoy coming from the greenhouses.

“I’ll meet you upstairs, Ron. I’ll see if Draco’s free this weekend.”

Ron tolerated Malfoy but had no desire to spend any extra time with him. He knew the Slytherin was no longer a threat to Harry, so nodded, and headed up.

“Malfoy, I wanted to do another special event this weekend,” Harry began.

“And you expect me to just say yes? After being chained to the wall? Having to pee in a hole? No food or water? Dangerous animals–“

“Yeah, yeah, you loved it, admit it.”

“Potter, I would ask what they did to you in the Muggle hospital but – hey! – your brain was fried before then! Are you barking?”
“Come on! No nasty stuff this time. I don’t think, anyway,” Harry added honestly.

“Well, that does sound promising, but unfortunately I have to decline.”

“Since when was cowardice a Slytherin trait – oh, I forgot – whenever it was expeditious?”

“Potter, have you consumed a dictionary? I bet Granger told you that word.”

“She did. Or rather, she used it, and then had to explain it to me,” Harry grinned. He rather enjoyed taking the wind out of Malfoy’s sails.

“Well, pretentious vocabulary or not, I’m afraid I have a prior engagement.”

“A date? All weekend?” Harry said, wiggling his eyebrows.

“Sadly, not. It’s the Malfoy Hilary Ball. It would really arouse suspicion if I failed to attend, especially after not going home at Christmas.”

Harry frowned. “What about the danger?” he asked seriously, as they made their way up the front steps. “Who’s going to be there?”

“Well, the Dark Lord has never yet put in an appearance in evening dress, but you never know. But yes, there will be a whole gamut of my father’s intimate friends, of all political persuasions.”

“I’m worried for you,” Harry said frankly as they entered the front hall.

Draco stopped and looked at him in surprise. The glib words he was about to say died in is throat. Instead, he went for a more practical approach. “There’ll be several hundred people there. Not to mention my mother. And Severus always comes – I hope he brings his partner; I know Father’s invited him – he said he was a very interesting young man, which means he likes him. I’m dying to see him!”

Lordy, lordy, thought Harry. Interesting indeed! If he went – if- how would Lucius act around him with his son there? And did he dare go? Draco said he was invited – which meant that Severus hadn’t told Lucius that their relationship had ended – it perhaps hadn’t come up, or Severus hadn’t seen Malfoy, he reminded himself so he didn’t get his hopes up. And the financial advisor Sebastian Flight was likely to be there, and Harry was keen to build on the relationship with him, not to mention the opportunity for listening in to all sorts of conversations, and just getting the tone of feeling among this community in a way that he had no other opportunity to do. He would not have to act as if he was with Severus if Severus didn’t want him to, it sounded like he was invited anyway....

“Right, well, have a good time, then,” Harry said. “Maybe we’ll have a longer session Tuesday evening if people can make it.”

“I can do that,” Draco nodded, and headed off to the dungeons.

Draco had found life easier than he had expected – various teachers had set joint projects this term, and as all the classes were mixed, most Slytherins found themselves paired with members from other houses at times. There was surprisingly little complaint about this in the common room, and as his housemates’ search for amorous encounters also extended beyond the incestuous feeling of having relationships with people who had been close friends for seven years, there was considerably more inter-house mingling than ever before, and Draco’s chats with other houses'
members passed without comment, on the whole.

Draco also suspected that some of the other Slytherins were also considering their futures out of school, and that included considering whether they wished to support Voldemort or not. Many of them were watching Potter, he knew, and although, to his disappointment, Harry had not come out and announced that he was a mage, there was a quiet confidence about his use of magic that had not been there before, and that was obvious to anyone who looked. In fact, Potter had been very serious since before the Christmas break, and his demeanour perhaps spooked some of his peers. He was obviously shaping up to be a powerful and assured wizard, as everyone had always expected him to be; he could almost feel the vacillation amongst the other students whose families he knew to be supporters of Voldemort.

He found himself wishing that he could reveal Potter’s true abilities to Greg and Vince, who might not be bright but who had been undeniably loyal to him throughout: they deserved his help in return. He needed to think about that, and perhaps broach it with Harry. Blaise Zabini was another person who he’d hate to see go down, and who could be very useful to them. Pans, he knew, was an ardent supporter, and so was Theo; he had no hope of ‘saving’ them – and when had he ever cared about ‘saving’ people? But Potter was planning on finishing it, and it hurt to think of what this would mean to people he had known. And as for his father...his father was clever. If he could get out of any trouble, Draco didn’t doubt that he would. And he would vouch for his mother, himself.

Harry apparated the next evening into the grounds of Malfoy Manor, to the same spot he had come with Severus before.

Even the gardens were swarming with people. Sparkling lights had been placed in the trees, and a warming charm set on the area as people queued for admission on the grand staircase leading up to the Manor’s main entrance. Two elves wearing elaborate livery were checking the invitations and casting revealing spells over the arrivals; Harry wondered whether the uniforms were regarded as furniture or some such, and not as clothes.

And speaking of clothes, to Harry’s amazement the guests were all wearing Muggle style white tie evening dress. Harry, who had put on his best formal wizarding robes, and assumed he would be properly attired, decided to brazen it out. The other guests appeared to be far too posh to stare.

Unfortunately, this was not the reaction of the liveried elves.

Having reached the front of the queue, the elf asked for his invitation.

“I’m sorry, I don’t have it with me. You can check with Lucius that I’m invited.”

The elf looked him up and down over his long curled nose. He nudged his compatriot, and they both obviously came to the same conclusion, moving together to block his path.

“You obviously didn’t gets one, or you be knowing how to dress,” the elf scoffed.

“And if Sir’d ever been to the Hilary Ball,” the other muttered.

“I didn’t see the invitation because it was sent to my partner,” Harry reasoned. He hadn’t wanted to bring Snape into it, but it looked like he’d have to.

“And who woulds that be being?” the older of the two elves sneered. The people behind were beginning to murmur about the delay.
“Severus Snape.”

“Professor Snape is being here already, and he never be mentioning anyone else just turning up,” said the younger elf triumphantly. “Clears you off, now, before Twiggle and me’s - ”

“Please check with Mr Malfoy,” Harry interrupted firmly, and the authority in his voice made the elf pause a fraction, before he shook it off and said, “Mr Malfoy is having better things to do than dealing with wicked time wasters.”

“Is there a problem?” Lucius Malfoy’s cool tones slid down the steps, followed by the man himself looking exceedingly suave.

“Lucius. Your door-elves are offended by my robes and my lack of invitation. I was insisting that you would be pleased to see me,” Harry said, his voice smooth and slightly suggestive.

Malfoy nodded a greeting at the people waiting behind him and the elves let them through at once. He then stood, a step above Harry, and looked down at the young man.

“I wouldn’t normally dream of mentioning it, but you are rather – underdressed - for a white tie affair,” he drawled in amusement. “I’m surprised you didn’t transfigure your robe into a formal jacket,” he raised an eyebrow inquiringly.

Harry leant in a little, his breath stroking Lucius ear. “I could have done, of course, but I didn’t want to shock your guests. I’m – traditionally dressed,” Harry purred.

As in naked under his robe.

Harry could see Lucius’ eyes widen and then darken at the realisation.

Harry looked to the side, where stone urns along the wide banisters were overflowing with alternating white and red roses.

He plucked a white rose bud, slid it under his nose to enjoy the scent, all the time with his eyes on Lucius, and then, passing his hand over the velvety petals, transfigured it wandlessly into a white silk bow tie.

“A nice little display,” Lucius murmured, eyes watching every move.

Harry undid his top two robe buttons, revealing bare skin, and slid the silk around his neck.

“I’ve only one problem,” he looked up through his lashes at Malfoy. “I’m not very good at tying them.”

Lucius stepped closer, his body brushing against Harry’s, and took hold of the ends.

It was really a vulnerable position for Harry, but what he actually felt was a huge sense of power. And he had seen something else...

Severus was at the top of the steps, having stepped outside with Narcissa who was looking for her husband.

The long blond hair was easy to spot – and –damn him! How dare he?

How dare he!
The stupid boy! And he was – more than flirting with Lucius! Well, if he thought that he was going to winkle information out of Lucius Malfoy through a bit of – he was not!

He felt Narcissa stiffen beside him.

And there was no way he was going to allow Narcissa to be upset.

Certainly not!

“Severus, don’t – ” she felt him stiffen.

“Oh, I will! He’s teasing me, Ciss, and he’s not bloody well going to get away with it!”

He stormed down the steps.

“Lucius, you must be busy with your guests. Let me,” and he literally pulled the tie ends out of Lucius’ hands, and pulled Alex towards him.

Harry’s heart was pounding as he looked up into the dark and enraged eyes.

And the next moment, Severus had yanked him forward with the ends, and was kissing him furiously.

Harry felt the world disappear. There was only Snape, Snape’s mouth tasting of alcohol and heat, the smell of Snape in his nostrils, and the fierce urgency of Snape’s taut body against him.

God, it was heaven!

He moaned into Snape’s mouth, and his body curved itself into the other man. One of Severus’ hands dropped from the bow tie to the small of his back, sliding him against him.

Harry was wild with want and need.

“Severus, dear, do you think you could let our guests past? And perhaps introduce us?” Narcissa’s amused voice cut through the haze.

Reluctantly Harry let Severus withdraw, unable to stop his tongue chasing after the other’s, tip touching in the cold air even as it left his mouth.

Severus was looking down at him, from what seemed a long way above, as Severus was a step higher.

Acceptance passed between them.

Harry felt his knees go weak with delight and relief and hope.

Severus turned him and pulled him onto the same step, so that he was in the circle of his arms, back to Severus’ front, as the potions master said, ”Ciss, may I introduce Alex Johnson? Alex,” his hand slid down his hip, holding him possessively against his body, ”allow me the honour of introducing Narcissa Malfoy.”

Harry shook the delicate hand extended to him. Lucius stood at his wife’s side, her arm linked through his.

“Delighted to meet you at last,” Harry said, and he was very pleased. But also rather distracted.
Because Severus was subtly rocking against him. And he was hard. Gloriously, deliciously hard. Harry had to fight the urge to shut his eyes and press back into that wonderful length. He had to work just to will away his own desire.

"Severus, you naughty thing!" You never even mentioned that Alex would be coming!"

"Coming? Oh please, yes! Harry thought, but what he said was,"It’s my fault, and I do beg your pardon. Here I am, unexpected and in the wrong dress! I thought I wouldn’t be able to get here, but at the last moment I was able to get away. I hope it’s alright?"

"Of course it is," Narcissa smiled at him. “I’m delighted to welcome anyone who can have such an effect on Severus. He’s normally so shy.”

Harry turned his head to look into the dark eyes, feeling Severus thrust against him just a fraction of an inch. "I’m sorry if we embarrassed you," he said, not looking away from Severus. “I’ve missed him,” he whispered.

"Well, you’ll have to restrain yourselves for a little longer. Do come and join the party," Narcissa smiled. “Lucius, I came to find you. Minister Baskins wanted a word.”

"Then let us all repair to the ballroom," Lucius murmured, apparently unruffled.

Upstairs, Harry was stunned by the crush of people.

"Good lord, is this normal?" he asked Severus, as they tried to move through the throng.

"For a Malfoy function? Certainly."

Severus had taken hold of his hand to pull him through. Harry delighted in it.

A waiter passed with drinks – a rather beautiful young man this time, although he was wearing the same livery – and Harry looked at Snape before helping them both to a glass.

“I don’t think it’s doctored," Snape murmured, hot in his ear, “no point at an event like this. Alcohol alone will loosen tongues. Don’t have more than two.”

Harry nodded. He didn’t know where they were going, but they had bumped into someone who knew Snape; he was introduced, and they conversed for several minutes.

This happened several more times; they met Sebastian Flight enough to say hello, and Catismore.

Eventually they washed up against a column, a slight protection from the swill of humanity. They had deposited their glasses some time back on a passing tray.

“I ought to take you home and spank you,” Severus growled, but his body was right in Harry’s personal space and there was only tension, not aggression, in his tone.

Harry moved a fraction closer. He leaned in. “I definitely like the idea of being spread out over your lap," he murmured, voice low. “Not sure about the spanking. Can we save that for another time?”

He felt the intake of Severus’ breath, and felt utterly intoxicated with the man. His head was muzzy with desire.

“How long do we need to stay?” he got out.
Severus laughed, a deep rumble.

“Impatient,” he teased.

“Yes,” Harry admitted.

Severus’ face grew taut with want. “We could –“

He was distracted by something across the room.

“What?” Harry asked, starting to turn round.

Severus reached out a hand and pulled him into his body, preventing it.

Harry revelled in the touch, despite the adrenalin that was starting to pump. He trusted Snape to deal with whatever had aroused his interest.

“We’re going to make our way across the room,” Severus whispered in his ear, nipping the lobe to add to the picture of intimacy. Harry knew he should feel used, but the pleasure was too much. He bent his head into Snape’s neck.

“Lucius, Rookwood and the Minister are heading somewhere - Lucius’ study, I should think,” Snape said into his ear. “Come on.”

He kept hold of Harry’s hand, taking him round the other side of the column. The crush thinned as they made their way out of the ballroom and along the corridor. Severus carefully turned the handle of a door and they slipped inside. It appeared to be a surprisingly small sitting room, though it was dark, only a small fire in the grate giving any illumination.

Severus laid a finger over his lips in warning not to speak, and slipped quietly across the room, Harry following.

A closed doorway obviously led to another room. Leaning down to the keyhole, Severus listened.

Harry stood above him. He could just hear the voices. He wished he had Extendable Ears with him, and then rethought. With a wordless spell, the sound waves were amplified and they could hear.

Severus just looked at him and rose to his feet. They stood close, just listening.

“The Ministry is being ridiculous!” a voice snapped. Harry presumed it was Rookwood as it didn’t sound like Malfoy.

“Don’t you take that tone with me!” the Minister snapped.

“And why not?” Rookwood laughed. “What will you do, Baskins? It really isn’t the time to –fuss – you know, not when your daughter is so close to her delivery!”

“You leave my daughter out of it!”

“My dear Albert,” Rookwood sneered, “what sort of father-in-law would I be if I failed to be concerned about my poor daughter-in-law? Pregnancy really doesn’t suit her, you know. She looks as if a feather could – blow her away.”

“Is that a threat? If you so much as harm –“

Rookwood laughed. “Albert, really! As if I would touch a hair on her pretty little head. It’s hardly
my fault that she has developed an unfortunate addiction to—"

“Gentlemen,” Lucius’ smooth voice cut in authoritatively, “enchanting as these family tales are, we have other matters to discuss. Mr Baskins, do let me get you a brandy. I believe you were about to tell us why the Ministry is objecting to Rookwood Industries’ research into—"

Harry and Snape had only been listening for a couple of minutes when someone opened the outer door, said, “Oops, not the cloakroom!” and shut it again.

Severus and Harry looked at each other for a fraction of a second, as the silence from next door registered.

The next moment, Severus had dragged Harry to his feet and had him across the room, pinned to the door into the corridor, kissing him hard. Harry slung his arms around Severus’ neck and responded vigorously.

The quiet click of the inner door was the only warning that the inhabitants of the study were in the room.

Acting now was their only hope.

Thank Merlin it didn’t need much in the way of acting skills.

Severus thought better of having his back to Malfoy, and thrust Harry round again, his own back to the wall.

Harry might be between them, but he could see better over the smaller man than the other way round. And he could be ruthless if he needed to be; he didn’t know if Harry would hesitate. Malfoy hadn’t cursed them yet, although Severus knew he could be fast off the mark. The man was fascinated with Alex – he’d give him an eyeful, then. With a yank, he ripped open Alex’ robes, using a tiny hint of wandless magic to make sure it worked. The ripping sound was very satisfactory. His mouth still working on Harry’s, he thrust the robe over Harry’s biceps.

Harry slipped his arms out, not wanting to be hampered, and tightened them around Severus’ neck again. Despite the danger, the feel of Severus’ hands gliding down his naked back made him moan with pleasure, and he thrust his hips against Severus’ groin, groaning again as he felt Severus’ erection.

One of their watchers made the slightest of noises. Severus still had his eyes closed, looking oblivious, using his hearing alone.

The front of Harry’s robe was bunched between them, but at the back the robe was slipping dangerously low.

Malfoy, wand still raised, stood and watched the firelight play over the smooth muscles and flawless skin on Alex Johnson’s back. The minister had slipped out of the door into the corridor from his study and back to the party at the first hint of trouble, but Rookwood stood beside him.

He could almost smell the man’s arousal.

Severus and Alex were hot, there was no doubt about that. Severus had been a gifted lover even all those years ago, and he obviously had not lost his talents, to attract and keep this sensual young man. Lucius noted the thrust of the man’s hips, rubbing into Severus, and felt his own cock pulsing with desire. The robe hung low, and Alex was indeed traditionally dressed – completely naked under his robe. The swell of his firm buttocks and the hint of cleft made Lucius’ mouth water.
Severus’ hand soothed down over the ridges of Alex’ spine and then a single finger played at the top of the cleft. Only Alex’s moan and shift of feet as he spread his legs and pressed further against the older man drowned the guttural sound that came from Rookwood’s throat.

Harry was wondering, through the fog of his desire, how far the floor show would have to go. He’d heard a grunt, and was pretty sure it wasn’t Lucius. Two on two were good odds, but he’d prefer to get out of this without coming to that.

Suddenly, Snape had curled a hand round his head, detached his mouth, and was pushing him down.

He stared into the shadowed face: did Severus really want him to suck him off with an audience?

The dark eyes said Trust me! and Harry did, slithering down Snape’s body and rubbing his cheek over the bulge in Severus’ trousers, loving the feel of him and inhaling the musky scent with delight.

Severus obviously had his audience worked out, because Rookwood groaned too loudly to ignore. Severus stilled, making a display of reaching for his wand; Harry, for good measure to end this, shoved against Snape as he scrabbled to his feet, knocking him into a small table. The vase on it wobbled, teetered, and crashed to the floor, smashing noisily on the oak boards.

“Fuck!” Harry exclaimed, leaping up.

Malfyoy took charge, flaring the candles in their wall sconces into light with his wand.

“Fuck!” repeated Harry again, as if shocked to see them.

His hand had his robe clutched to his middle. Malfoy’s eyes slid briefly over his chest before Harry said, “‘Scuse me!” and turned away to button his robe, using his wand very obviously pointed at himself to repair the damage.

“I apologise for disturbing you, Severus,” Malfoy drawled, watching his old friend carefully.

“Rookwood and I were enjoying a brandy,” he held up the glass still in his hand in silent salute, ”and a moment’s quiet, and heard a noise. We have –what – thirty three guest rooms in the manor – you had only to ask, dear friend.”

Severus coolly brushed a hand down his front, picking a speck of lint off his clothes. He ignored the prominent erection tenting his evening trousers. “My sincere apologies, Lucius. I have not seen Alex for some time. We had hoped only to steal a kiss without causing offence to your guests.”

Malfoy had to admire his cool. The man was heavily aroused, had been caught in the most compromising of positions – and damn Rookwood for his lack of restraint! He would have thoroughly enjoyed seeing Alex’s mouth stretched around a thick shaft, even if it wasn’t his own on this occasion.

He could wait.

Alex obviously found him attractive; he merely needed to show him the advantages that a liaison with a Malfyoy could bring. In the meantime, this little tableau had reminded him of the pleasures to be found with another hard body and hard cock. Narcissa was an attractive woman and very acceptable in bed, but sometimes one fancied something – more.

Alex, meanwhile, was looking every inch the young ingénue, his face flushed and his eyes taking in the broken vase. He really was quite adorable, Malfoy thought. Not to mention that supple, lithe
body.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry mumbled, and pointing his wand at the pieces, muttered,”Reparo!”

The vase shards flew together and melded again into a single entity, hovering in front of the young man. He plucked it out of the air. “Oh blast!” he said in surprise, “the surface is all cracked! Let me try again.”

Malfoy’s delighted laugh made him look up. It was utterly genuine, and for once Harry could see how hard it would be for Draco to give up his family.

“Dear boy, it’s taken seven centuries of aging to achieve that finish. Pray don’t attempt to ‘fix’ it!”

Rookwood laughed too, and Harry grinned sheepishly.

“I’m really sorry I broke it. Shall I see if I can find a replacement? Unbroken?”

“It’s a vase,” Malfoy dismissed the valuable piece. “When I was a child I always wondered if the crazing was because some wizard centuries ago had repaired it and not done a very good job. How very droll that you thought so too.”

It was odd to be sharing reminiscences with Lucius Malfoy.

Not as odd as nearly giving Snape a blow-job in front of him, of course.

“I think I ought to return to the party, before Narcissa demands to know why I am ignoring my guests,” Malfoy smiled apologetically. “You are most welcome to stay the night,” he invited Alex and Severus.

I have just the room; I haven’t used that two-way mirror since the Dark Lord came and I wanted to see what exactly his dependence on Nagini was. Not that that did me much good. He invited me in to see for myself. There are things one prefers to not know, after all.

“I rather think we must take our leave,” Severus said, straightening his cuffs.

“I will arrange another small soiree,” Malfoy said, bowing in acquiescence.

“Thank you for an enjoyable evening,” Alex smiled shyly at his host.

Malfoy laughed. “I don’t have to be a Diviner to guess that your enjoyment is only just beginning! Don’t bother finding Narcissa,” he said to Snape, “I will pass on your thanks. Get thee gone!”

With a smile and a bow, they left.

Rookwood took a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

“Who knew Severus was like that? He looks so straight-laced,” he commented in a shocked voice. “Nearest bathroom, Malfoy?”

Harry and Snape made their way out of the Manor and down the steps to the apparition point. Harry stood in front of Snape. “My cottage?” he asked.

Snape nodded.
Harry took hold of his arms and apparated them both into his sitting room.

Snape looked at him, and moved away

Harry’s heart began to thump. Had everything been an act? It wasn’t – punishment, or retribution, was it?

“Make some coffee, if you have it,” Severus said, his hand on the mantel.

Harry lit the fire, and cast a warming charm. He hadn’t been in the house for a while.

And then went to put the kettle on.
Snape’s first question was not what Harry had expected at all.

“What if there are others with Neville’s talent?”

However, it filled Harry with delighted hope, because eight words told him a whole armoury of things, but most importantly:

• Snape cared about him;
• Snape was considering future times of Harry in the Alex guise.

He handed Severus the steaming dark coffee that Severus liked, and watched as the other man sipped, before answering.

“That’s a possibility, I suppose, but in reality the likelihood is minimal: everyone has implied that it’s a very rare talent; very few people have Neville’s magical power – although I don’t know whether the power level is needed for the talent, or whether that’s irrelevant. And very few of the people I’m likely to meet as Alex have actually met Harry Potter, to recognise the same signature, and even if they did, you can just claim that you were fooled by the disguise, they’re bound to believe you, only the –“

“I’m not worried for myself!” Snape roared, slopping coffee.

And then there was silence.

Harry put his own cup down and stepped forward.

“I know there are risks,” he said quietly. “You take them all the time and I worry about you too.”

Snape stared at him, and then said, out of the blue, “The Dark Lord has been quiet for months. I thought it might be to do with my link being shut down, but I spoke to several reasonably favoured people at the party tonight, and none of them had been called either. There’s either something wrong, or something big going on that he doesn’t trust most of us with. That’s not necessarily new – he vacillates between boasting and keeping things close to his chest.”

Harry sat down. It was good to talk to Severus, even if that was all the other man was really willing to share with him.

“We need to be prepared to act at any time. But I’d rather we had a plan in place to attack, on our turf, rather than just react if he strikes first, as I’ve said before.”

Severus nodded. “The potion is the problem. I’ve been working on alternatives using more easily obtainable ingredients, but I am impressed with the work of Miss Granger, Draco and Neville.”

Harry beamed with pleasure, both at what Severus had been doing and at the praise. Interesting too that Snape used Neville’s first name as standard now. The praise for Hermione made Harry want to smile.

“No need to smirk, Mr Potter,” Snape drawled, “I taught them after all.”

Harry laughed.

“So you did,” he agreed. He so wanted to be there when Snape found out Hermione had had a
“I think we ought to call a meeting of the Order,” Harry said. “A policy meeting. How do you go about doing it?”

“Tell Albus. He will arrange it if he sees fit. I’m sure he will for you.”

Harry leaned back in his chair. “Does it bother you that I’m a mage?”

Severus looked at him briefly and looked away. “It did when Albus told me I ought to be honoured that you had chosen me.”

“What?” Harry leapt up. “He didn’t!” He stared at Severus, whose mouth was twisting. “He did! The bastard! How could he?! When he knew how I felt about the continuum of magic. God, he’s a sod.”

Severus had straightened. “Do you want to explain what you mean about the continuum of magic?”

“Can we talk about this in bed?” the words came out of Harry’s mouth.

Severus’ head snapped up. Face bright red, Harry said, “We always talked about stuff in bed. It felt good. Easy to talk. I’m sorry; I didn’t mean to offend you again. Sit down, please.” He hovered by a seat.

Severus stayed standing.

What had possessed him? Harry thought. But he missed Severus so much!

“I recall we always did the talking after a thorough bout of activity first. Or after. Or both,” Severus mused.

The husky depth of his voice went straight to Harry’s cock.

“Please don’t tease me,” he whispered.

Severus stood there looking at him for several moments, and then, as if coming to a decision, came to stand in front of Harry.

“But I like teasing you,” he said.

Harry shakily stood up straight. Snape didn’t move back.

“Please, Severus, don’t,” he got out.

“Don’t tease you? Don’t want you? Don’t touch you?” Severus’ body was almost touching his.

Harry gulped, his mouth dry, unable to find words.

“I’m afraid I find myself unable to stop wanting to do all of those, Mr Potter,” he said, dark eyes staring into Harry’s, but not a single part of their bodies touching.

“Please,” Harry whispered again.

“Please what? Please go away? Please stay? For one night? For the foreseeable future? I need to know what you want of me, Harry. I won’t go into this blinkered again.”
Harry’s heart was so loud in his chest he was sure Severus must be able to hear it. On impulse, he took Severus’ hand. “This is what you do to me,” he whispered, placing that hand over his heart. “I’ve missed you so much. My life feels a wasteland without you. The future is only duty without you. I can’t promise you years or even months. I don’t know what time I have – we have. All I know is that if I can have whatever time there is with you in it, that will be the best life I could possibly wish for.”

Severus looked at him seriously, and then bent down and brushed his lips across Harry’s, the gentlest stroke of soft, firm skin.

“Do you want this of me?” he murmured.

Harry’s head was craning forward for more.

“God, yes!”

Severus’ hands came to his face, holding it, his eyes locking with Harry’s before fluttering shut. His mouth came down again, still gentle, but this time his tongue slid along Harry’s lips, coaxing it open, just dipping inside.

Harry was panting with want.

“Do you want this of me?” Severus asked again.

“Oh, please, yes!” Harry begged.

Severus leant back a little.

“Take the glamour off.”

Surprised, but hopeful, Harry did so, and stood there in his own face, heart pounding, hoping Severus would not now change his mind.

Severus looked at him carefully, then brushed his cheek against Harry’s, feeling him.

“This is a more attractive face,” Severus admitted.

“You like it?” Harry asked hopefully.

“I daresay I could grow used to it.”

Severus slid a finger down his cheek, under his chin, down to the neck of his gown. He pulled at the silk tie. “Let’s get rid of this,” he demanded, pulling the ends and whipping the tie off, throwing it on the sofa.

“I find myself getting unexpectedly jealous,” he commented, nipping under Harry’s jaw.

“Endeavour to restrain your flirting.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” Harry gasped.

“Good. You’re not having them,” Severus said firmly.

Harry chuckled.

Severus leant back and held Harry by the arms. “I mean it,” he said. “If you want someone else, do me the courtesy of finishing with me first. I’ve no wish to be cuckolded. If you are tempted by an
interesting activity, rather than person, however, ask me: I am open to your suggestions, Mr Potter.”

“Good! Can I suggest we go to bed, then? Now?” Harry said urgently.

“To discuss the magic continuum?”

“To do some practical magic,” Harry was at last touching Snape, his hands sliding up his chest, undoing the buttons of his waistcoat, sliding underneath.

“Really?” Snape purred, his fingers working at Harry's buttons also.

“Yes. I want to see if I can send you to heaven and back. Willing to let me practice?”

“I hope your practical skills are better than your linguistic ones, Mr Potter,” Severus said, sliding the robe off Harry so that he stood there, naked in a puddle of cloth and boots. “That was dreadful.”

Harry vanished the lot away. “I’m distracted. And not good with words like you. I’m better at the physical stuff – I hope, anyway. At least, I’ll try very hard, I promise,” he offered, leaning in to take Snape’s nipple between his teeth through the fine linen of his shirt.

“I suppose I had better accommodate you, then,” Snape said with a hiss as Harry gave a tug.

Harry, naked, led Severus up the stairs.

It really was a most erotic sight, Snape thought. Despite recent events, Harry seemed to have filled out even more, smooth skin over broadening shoulders tapering down to narrow hips, and deliciously curved buttocks. His thigh and calf muscles shifted and bulged as he stepped up the treads.

On the top step Harry turned round, sliding his arms around Snape’s shoulders.

“I’m almost your height like this,” he gave a shy smile, and leant forward to kiss Severus.

The position reminded Snape of the first night they were together, on the stairs of the Leaky Cauldron. That night he had felt interest, and lust for the young man in front of him. The prospect of a one-night stand had been delicious. His feelings now were much more complex, but he felt no regret with this current development.

That feeling changed as they moved through the door into Harry’s room. Harry was behind him, tugging his snug-fitting jacket from his shoulders. He cast a quick lumos, but as the room came into view he remembered it with bloodstains spotting the carpet, Harry’s bloodstained trousers in a heap, the sight of Harry weeping in the shower.

He stopped abruptly.

Harry, feeling the stiffening of Severus’ body, looked past him and saw the bed.

With a sigh, his hand slid regretfully down Snape’s back.

“We don’t have to do anything. I’m sorry, I pushed it. I hadn’t meant to.”

Snape shrugged the jacket back up over his shoulders and walked into the room.
His hand rubbed wearily over his jaw.

Harry came and sat on the end of the bed. Despite the cool cloth brushing his backside, his erection began to wilt.

Severus turned from his contemplation of the wall to look at him.

So responsive. So naked. Harry’s thighs were spread, to allow room for his sensitive balls. Snape could see the dark flesh against the white of Harry’s counterpane, the dark wiry hair from which his cock rose, now beginning to curve down again. The intriguing tattoo. Taut stomach muscles, dark nipples, biceps braced as he leant back on his hands.

“Is it the student thing again?” Harry asked quietly.

Snape shook his head. “No. Unbelievably, I have come to accept Albus’ argument on that in the last couple of weeks.”

Harry quirked his head. “What argument?”

“He said we were both teachers. I laughed at him. But upon consideration, I have learnt more from you in a term that I suspect you have learnt from me in seven years. My conscience has found it expedient to accept that argument.”

“You were furious about it before,” Harry said, and then wished he hadn’t.

Severus took a deep breath. “I was particularly angry because - ” he paused.

“What? You can say anything, Severus.” A horrid thought occurred to him. “Have you had a relationship with a student before?”

“No!” Snape exploded.

With a sigh, he came and sat next to Harry. The bed dipped, rolling Harry towards him, but Snape shuffled a little away. Harry was horribly conscious of being naked whilst Snape was fully dressed, and yet couldn’t help feeling there was something erotic about his naked thigh next to Snape’s trouser-clad one. His hand wanted to stretch out and run up that leg.

Harry turned and lit the fire in the grate, the glow instantly soothing, somehow.

“I have never had a relationship with a student – never considered it. That abuse of power – it is abhorrent to me. However, much as I do not wish to inflate your ego further,” Snape cast a look at Harry under his lashes, making Harry’s heart drum harder again, “since the start of this year, I had found myself noticing Harry Potter. In a sexual way. I was disgusted with myself. I wasn’t sure whether I was attracted to the power, which worried me – I already had two men that I had followed due to their power; or whether it was because, for the first time in many years, I was involved in a regular and –” he gave Harry a slight smirk, “- active sexual relationship, and therefore was more alert to sexual nuances in others. Nevertheless, I was determined that it would not lead to anything, and I had no doubt that I would be able to control any such urges. Imagine my delight at discovering that I had been giving in to them all along,” he said bitterly.

Harry sat forward, hands on his knees, then summoned his dressing gown from the back of the bathroom door, which he put on quickly.

“This is the crux of everything, isn’t it? I don’t want to say the wrong thing, so – just hear me out, alright?”
Snape nodded.

Harry shifted so that he was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the bed. Snape had his back to him, but that was alright. You could tell a lot from Snape’s back.

“Firstly,” Harry said, “when I met you that night, in the Leaky Cauldron, it was – alright, not exactly like two strangers meeting. I knew who you were – but that’s the point, in a way – I didn’t. The Snape I met that night – he wasn’t the Snape I knew. Not the teacher who hated me. You were real, and funny, and so hot!”

He saw the twitch in Snape’s shoulders.

“I mean it. I was hard at that table, eating pudding and listening to your voice saying suggestive, sexual things. And no, I hadn’t had a school boy crush on you. I hadn’t drooled over you in Potions lessons. My sex life up until then had been purely with Muggles – I’d sort of dissociated my sex life from the wizarding world - in term time, there was only my right hand.”

“And in the holidays you slept with the giant and the muscle man.”

Harry laughed. “Derek was my first lover. And yes, he’s a big guy. Not as big as Andy, who is hung,” he grinned.

Snape’s head snapped round, and Harry nodded, and blushed. “Really. Derek was a wonderful first lover for me – patient, gentle – everything you could want. He made me feel safe, too, which at that point in my life - after Sirius had died, and Voldemort was back, and the events at the Ministry – well, I needed it. I was working for him, and he offered me a room in his flat, and it progressed from there.”

“He took advantage of you?” Snape asked sharply.

“No. I wanted it, and he was generous and kind. He introduced me to the scene in Brighton – it’s one of the biggest gay areas outside of London, I should think – and we met Andy at this club. We’d been exclusive for almost a couple of months – it was near the end of the summer holidays. Anyway, Andy came home with us. I’d never done a threesome before, but I was willing to try things - Derek and I liked each other, but it was never love. Anyway, it was – interesting. But Derek and Andy really hit it off, and they’ve been together ever since.”

“You still see them.”

“Yes. I love them both – as good friends. They’re good people. Derek had a business opportunity come up – he’s in the building trade – and he was remortgaging his flat to get money – anyway, to cut a long story short, I’ve got loads of dosh in Gringotts; I put up some money for the business and bought half the flat. So now I always have somewhere to stay, and also the business has actually been a good investment.”

“Andy doesn’t mind you in the flat?”

“No, I can cook, and they like it when I come, I think. I hope. We all get on really well, go out together. Usually I go every holidays, do labouring on the building site. I like physical work. And they’re like family for me. It’s good. And they don’t mind me bringing home other men. I’m not innocent, Severus, I told you that. So the sex thing – fancying a student? This year, I was aware of you – the man who drove me to distraction? Made me come harder than I’ve ever known? So, probably, you were picking up the vibes from me, because I was more sexually self conscious around you. You can’t blame yourself for that. And certainly not for abusing your power over a
student. It just doesn’t fit the picture here, does it? The abuse was on my part,” he said quietly. “I was too selfish to give you up. To look and know that not only would you be angry with me when you found out that you’d been doing the dirty with Harry Potter, but angry with yourself. I hadn’t thought of that, so you’d be right about me being immature. I can’t say anything in my defence on that that won’t make it worse – only that I’m truly sorry; and forewarn you that however old I get I don’t doubt that I’ll still do stupid things, however much I wish otherwise.”

Snape snorted, and turned round to sit on the bed, cross-legged too.

“The power thing,” Harry said. “Maybe you are attracted to powerful wizards. Is that so terrible?” he quirked his head at Snape. “I mean, you’re hugely powerful yourself – much more powerful than Voldemort, if he wasn’t using all his followers, and equal to Albus. Maybe it’s just a like attracting like thing. You’re just putting yourself down because you’ve never valued yourself for the incredible wizard you are.”

“Flattering as you are being,” Snape said, “you are a mage. It is hardly the same.”

“We’re full circle to the magic continuum on that,” Harry said. “It’s like inappropriate excessive reverence. We all have magic – all wizarding folk. I have access to more. You have access to more than Flitwick. Do you despise him for having less? I hope not. The man has made real use of what he has and made excellent advances in Charms. Molly Weasley probably uses more magic in a day than me or you or Albus put together – have you ever seen her? - cooking, washing up, cleaning charms – she’s amazing. Her actual power level is average, but her knowledge of how to use it to best effect to enhance her life – wow! Most of the time none of us need to use a fraction of what we have. What will I need to use my magic for after I defeat Voldemort? I’m really happy working on that building site. If I hadn’t had my Hogwarts letter I could happily have lived as a Muggle building things all my life. Do you see what I mean? I’m no different from anyone else. I have the same basic needs, and wants. We all have things to offer in this life, we’re all special, or ordinary, depending on how you want to see it.”

“Most people would give their right arm for the power you have,” Snape commented.

“Look, I like having it,” Harry said, “don’t think it isn’t - incredible – fantastic. But having any sort of magic is. The day I learnt I was a wizard – when Hagrid told me just before I came here – it was the greatest gift. It still is. But it’s still the same thing. Not something separate – just the same magic other wizards feel.”

“Just more,” Severus smiled, copying his words.

Harry grinned. “Yes.” His hand reached out to Snape’s, waiting a moment to see if the older man would pull away. He didn’t.

Harry lifted the hand, and rubbed his cheek against the back.

“I can live without you, Severus,” he said quietly. “I know all about being alone; doing things alone. But I’d rather have you by my side.”

The older man stroked the hand down Harry’s cheek, then slowly trailed it across to Harry’s lips. Harry’s breath caught, letting Severus lead this.

The finger brushed across the seam of his mouth again, and Harry couldn’t help parting them. His tongue went to moisten his lips, and met Severus’ finger tip.

Even that taste was enough to force the breath from Harry’s lungs.
Snape didn’t pull his finger away, and Harry tentatively reached out, stroking his tongue over it.

“So good,” he murmured quietly.

Severus slipped it into his mouth. Harry leaned closer to take it all in, lips closing around it, tongue stroking it.

Severus’ eyes had been on that finger, that mouth, but they now rose, dark and hot, to meet Harry’s.

Harry slid down the bed, still with the finger in his mouth, until his head rested on Severus’ thigh. Severus shifted, so that he was half reclining, one leg under Harry’s head and the other bent at right angles to his body. His hand tangled in Harry’s hair.

It was permission.

Harry shifted closer, his nose nuzzling into Severus’ groin. “You smell so good,” he said, his hand moving to the buttons of Severus’ trousers. He could feel Severus’ cock hardening against the back of his fingers as he popped then open, then he knelt up and pulled trousers and underwear down together. Severus’ shoes got in the way. Harry slid off the end of the bed and undid the laces, easing the silk socks off of Snape’s long thin feet. His fingers caressed the underside of the arch, causing Snape to shiver. Harry looked up at him and smiled, and pulled the trousers the rest of the way off.

Snape returned to his original position.

“You look incredibly decadent,” Harry grinned, taking in the tail coat, the undone waistcoat, the shirt with bow tie still in place, and the long, long naked legs. The ends of Severus’ shirt were parted, his dark erection rising through the gap, his heavy balls lying against his leg.

Harry licked his lips with pleasure.

He slid up between Snape’s legs, licking his inner thigh, his tongue leaving a hot then cool trail. He nuzzled the luscious balls, loving the musky scent, licking their crinkled texture before moving up to pay attention to the now rampant cock. He slid his lips up the side, before grasping the base and licking across the head, tasting the precome pooled in the slit.

“So delicious,” he murmured, before sliding the whole head into his mouth, lapping at the frenulum with his tongue.

They both groaned.

Harry spent several minutes worshipping that beautiful organ, his hands roving restlessly over Severus’ thighs, stomach, hips.

“Harry,” Snape’s guttural utterance a warning as he started to thrust.

Harry held him tighter, taking him as far into his throat as he could, and hummed.

Harry swallowed every drop as Severus pulsed into his throat, then slowly allowed the sensitized flesh to slip from his mouth. He licked his lips, collecting everything.

Severus pulled him up, held him tight against him, Harry’s face buried in his neck, his hand stroking Harry’s back. Then he pulled away a little, his eyes warm, and kissed Harry gently, tasting himself in Harry’s mouth.

Severus didn’t pull his finger away, and Harry tentatively reached out, stroking his tongue over it.

“So good,” he murmured quietly.

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Severus pulled him up, held him tight against him, Harry’s face buried in his neck, his hand stroking Harry’s back. Then he pulled away a little, his eyes warm, and kissed Harry gently, tasting himself in Harry’s mouth.
His hand found the belt of Harry’s robe, pulling it open, tangling their naked legs together.

Slowly they took off their clothes, Harry drawing the silk bow tie from Severus’ neck and with a wicked look, tying it around his softened prick.

“Idiot,” Snape growled, but he hadn’t stopped him, and he looked incredible, lying there like that whilst Harry undid his shirt and slid his hands inside, fingers stroking over his nipples, tangling in the hair between.

Harry climbed over him, pulling Snape into kneeling up so that he could pull off the jacket, waistcoat and shirt, then slid his hand round Snape from behind, his hands roving over taut belly till they came down and undid the bow, sliding the silk over Severus as he removed it.

“Now whenever I see evening dress, I’m going to think of you like that,” Harry whispered into his ear.

“If it has the same effect on you that it has now,” Snape said, pressing back into the erection against his buttocks, “that might prove a little trying.”

“Worth it,” Harry smiled against his neck. “It’s bound to be some boring function. Much rather picture you looking so hot. Even if I do have to sneak off to the gents.”

“You don’t need to sneak off to the gents right now,” Snape said, pressing back again. “You could put that to more mutual use.”

Harry stilled. Snape couldn’t be suggesting –

“I presume you have lube as well as pain potions in your drawers?”

Harry’s hands tightened around Snape’s middle, and then he swung around in front of him.

“Severus? Are you serious? You want me to –“

“Are you averse to the idea?”

“God, no!”

Harry’s own penis had gone so hard it felt as if his skin could split.

“I always assumed – that is - if we ever –“

“Succinct as ever, I see,” Snape drawled. The very fact of it made Harry even more aroused. His head was buzzing with it. “I believe we were leaving this aspect until I knew your identity. And now I do.”

“But I thought –“

“If you wish me to bugger you and not the other way round, you will have to wait.”

Harry looked down at Snape’s groin. He might be older, but his interest was returning fast.

Snape caught his look. “It is not the physical aspect.” He looked away.

“Severus?” Harry said, turning the older man’s head towards him.

“I find myself anxious about – breeching you, given what I did – surely you cannot even
“contemplate it?”

Harry sat back on his heels, wilting a bit.

“I’m nervous,” he agreed.

Snape moved to the edge of the bed.

“This was probably not a good idea. Another lover –“

Harry slung himself across the bed and swung his legs around, trapping Severus as he straddled his lap.

“I don’t want another lover, idiot! I’m trying to be honest here – it feels all healed, but I’m – apprehensive, all right? Not because it’s you - it’s got to be you, okay? Just – just physically.” He rested his head on Severus’ shoulder.

Severus allowed his hand to come back up, to slowly stroke Harry’s back once more.

“Are you sure?” he swallowed.

Harry nodded into his collar bone.

“Do you ever bottom?” Harry asked.

“I have done.”

“You prefer to top?” Harry sought clarification.

“I am willing to try –“

“Severus.” Harry pulled his chin up and carefully kissed him. “I prefer to bottom. I enjoy topping too, just – there’s something about bottoming that makes me feel - cared for,” he admitted.

Snape’s hand barely paused as he continued to soothe down the flexed spine.

“Then tonight let me care for you,” he said. “We will save penetrative sex for another day. For now – I think I can find something to do that you might like.”

And he did.

Oh, he did!
Harry woke to the scents of sweaty armpit and sex, to the warmth of strong arms enclosing him, and several long inches pressed delightfully against his rear.

He snuggled back happily.

“Awake?” the deep voice rumbled in his ear.

“No, I’m having a lovely dream,” Harry smiled into his arm, wiggling some more.

“I could make it reality,” Severus said suggestively.

“Mmm. How would you go about that?” Harry invited.

Long lean fingers slid from his stomach, over his hip and along his thigh, then lifted said leg forward. Severus slid in even closer behind him; Harry felt the hand between them, and then Severus’ length sliding against his skin to nudge into his balls. Severus brought Harry’s leg back down, trapping his cock in the tight heat. He gave a gentle thrust.

“Oooh! Feels lovely,” Harry mumbled, turning his head. Severus leant forward to capture his mouth, rocking forward and backward slowly, mimicking the action with his tongue.

“Morning breath?” Harry gasped, as Severus pulled away for a moment.

“Who the fuck cares?” the older man growled, and Harry saw that he was reaching for the lubricant, which was now on the top of the bedside table. Severus knocked the lid off and slid his fingers in. Even that gollopy slurp was erotic, Harry thought. He brought his hand back, and without removing the one still under Harry, used his fingers to coat his palm, and then slid it under the covers, taking Harry’s erection in hand.

“Mmmmph,” Harry moaned; he turned his head into Severus’ arm, licking the salty taste.

They moved together slowly, languidly, Severus doing all the work, Harry just lying there and loving every minute. Severus said he would take care of him, and he had, making love to him for hours during the course of the night. He didn’t know if he had ever felt as happy as he did at this moment. Warm, content, aroused, cared for, fully giving himself over in trust to Severus.

Lying there in the aftermath some time later, head buried in Snape’s chest, he came suddenly to attention.

“Garden wards breeched,” he explained.

Severus was out of bed and at the window, wand in hand, in a second.

“Neville,” he said, relaxing.

Harry stretched.

Severus watched the feline movement appreciatively.

Harry slid to the edge of the bed and stood up.

“Shower?” he held out his hand invitingly.
Half an hour later, Alex stepped out into the garden.

“Morning Neville,” he said cheerfully. “Fancy some brunch?”

“Do you have enough?” Neville stood up, brushing his hands down his trousers.

“Just had a quick owl delivery sent in when I saw you,” Harry nodded.

Neville followed Harry into the kitchen, pausing only for the slightest moment on the threshold as he took in the sight of Severus Snape turning bacon rashers in a sizzling pan.

“Morning, Professor,” he said calmly, as he took off his boots. A quick glance at Harry was returned with a nod and a shy smile.

“If I’m to call you Neville, you may call me Severus whilst we are here,” Snape said. “How do you like your eggs?”

“Runny, please, Severus. Hey, there’s mushrooms in the garden – want me to get some?”

“As long as they’re not poisonous,” Harry said.

Neville gave him a look, strode over to slip his boots back on, and disappeared out.

Harry came up behind Snape and linked his arms round his stomach, kissing the side of his neck.

“This is nice,” he said.

“Me doing the cooking?” Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry chuckled. “You know I don’t mind cooking. Just – being here – being open, casual with our friends about it. Well, friend.”

“I have developed a surprising respect for Mr Longbottom,” Snape said.

“That’s good to know,” Neville said, back at the door. “The feeling is mutual, especially now that I don’t have to do Potions anymore,” he grinned.

Harry stepped away from Snape, and poured tea whilst Neville washed his own hands and rubbed the mushrooms, handing them to Snape.

“You don’t hold it against me - what I did to – Harry?”

“He was a prick,” Neville said, making Harry splutter the sip of tea he had just taken.

“Thanks, mate,” he gasped sarcastically, as Neville thumped him on the back to clear his lungs.

“Well, of course Severus was pissed,” Neville said. He looked at Snape. “I hope any future – retribution - will be less – violent - though,” he said seriously.

Snape nodded, serving up plates of food and putting them on the table.

“You need have no worries,” he said quietly.

Neville nodded, and Harry sat there, amazed at the bizarreness of Neville warning Snape off, and Snape accepting it.
Sunday evening found Harry sitting in the common room by the fire, flipping through a quidditch magazine that someone had abandoned. Neville was sitting in one of the armchairs, making notations in a seed catalogue, and Parvati and Padma were sitting across the room at a small table opposite each other, conjuring make-up effects and hairstyles, to much laughter from the group of girls around them.

The portrait door opened and Hermione came in, bag thumping against her side. She slung it on the floor and slumped down beside Harry.

Neville took one look at her and summoned a pot of tea and jug of milk, poured a cup, and handed it over to her, saying, “It’s not herbal, but you look like you need it. Want one, Harry?”

“No, I fancied one anyway,” Neville said deprecatingly.

“Whassup?” Harry asked, after they’d allowed her to get half the cup inside her.

“Oh, I don’t know. I think I’m working too hard,” Hermione sighed.

Stunned silence met this observation. Harry and Neville exchanged glances. Harry leant forward and felt Hermione’s forehead.

“Yeah, yeah,” she grimaced at him, knocking his hand away.

Harry started massaging her feet.

“Ooh, that’s good,” she wiggled her toes.

Harry glanced at Neville and gave a slight shrug of bemusement. Hermione settled her head into the corner of the sofa.

“God, we’re a sad bunch,” she muttered.

“Hermione, do you need some chocolate, or something?” Harry said tentatively.

“Love some, but need – what – Harry Potter, a girl can have an opinion without it being because her hormones are getting her worked up!” she snapped, drawing her feet away and sitting with her legs hunched up, her robe wrapped around her legs for decency. “Honestly!”

“Sorry, sorry, but it’s not like you to be down,” Harry offered.

Hermione looked away from him, obviously still miffed, and looked around the room.

“Look at this place,” she commented. “Only us sad gits in here.”

Harry and Neville glanced round. The few older students present all looked happy and content.

“Is this about Ron?” Neville suggested bravely.

“No! Well, sort of,” Hermione agreed reluctantly.

“I thought you were over him? Just friends?” Harry put a tentative hand on Hermione’s knee.
“I am! It’s just – it’s just – well, here we are, sitting here all prim and proper, and he’s out there shagging yet another Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff or whatever, happy as Larry.”

Yet again Harry and Neville exchanged glances.

“What?” Hermione snapped, seeing the look.

“You’re jealous of Ron shagging those girls?” Harry said.

“I’m not jealous of Ron shagging those girls,” she said in exasperation, “I’m jealous of his shagging, alright? And don’t you dare exchange another look,” she hissed. “I miss sex, ok?”

Harry and Neville couldn’t help but stare at each other.

“What? Just because I’m a girl I’m not allowed to feel sexual? Don’t tell me you don’t miss it, Harry.”

An electric silence fell when Harry and Neville definitely didn’t look at each other.

“What now?” She turned to Harry with dawning understanding. “Harry! Have you found someone else? Since when? You wicked little slut,” she grinned. “Spill.”

“No one new,” Harry mumbled, face red.

“What? What! Are you and – are you?” she demanded.

Harry nodded.

“But – holy shit! You lucky bastard.”

Neville nearly dropped his cup. They both stared at her.

“What? He’s hot! I bet you look hot togeth – that is, not that I’ve ever thought about it, of course!”

“Hermione Granger!” Harry laughed. “Look, keep it quiet, alright?”

“Of course I will. Nev knows, though?”

“I seem to make a habit of walking in on them,” Neville blushed.

“Oh my god! Tell me more! Not really, literally walked in –?”

“Nev, we were cooking breakfast! Nothing odd about that,” Harry said hastily.

Neville looked at Harry, his face still red.

“Oh my. There is more! Come on, Nev!”

“Certainly not,” Neville said, “I know how to keep secrets.”

“Bugger,” Hermione sank back. “Have you got some chocolate, then?” she asked Harry after a moment, when Neville was not forthcoming.

He fished some out of his bag. It was always useful for his class, because of the high energy drain of the magic.

They all munched some.
“So,” Hermione asked, dropping her voice, “talking of buggering, I take it everything is alright down there?” she nodded vaguely at Harry’s nether regions.

Harry choked on the chocolate.

“I am not discussing that! For heaven’s sake!” he got out at last, licking over his teeth to remove bits of the melted treat.

“Spoilsport,” Hermione commented. “Just wanted to check you were ok,” she added gently.

Harry looked away. “Gay men do do things apart from rampant arse sports, you know,” he said.

Hermione giggled at the term, but her hand touched his knee in a friendly way. “Sorry, Harry, I didn’t mean to pry. Well, I did,” she grinned, “but not if it makes you uncomfortable. You’re happy?”

Harry nodded. “Very.”

“Just you and me the sad losers, then, Nev,” Hermione said, popping another bit of chocolate in her mouth.

Neville looked at her a moment, and said quietly, “Why should you assume that? You’ve never asked me if there’s anyone in my life. I’ve always been that fat twerp Neville, and I still am, aren’t I? Neville who can’t possibly have had sex or sexual feelings.” He stood up. “I think I’ll go to bed. A nice quiet room and my right hand. What more could I hope for?” he said bitterly, and was up the stairs and out of sight in a second.

Hermione’s mouth was still open. Harry leant forward and shut her jaw with his finger.

“I – I never meant – “she began. “I upset Neville,” she said, horrified. He was always so even tempered. “Is he - is he seeing someone?”

Harry was frowning. “Not that he’s ever mentioned, or that I’ve seen,” he said. “I don’t know why, though. He’s really hot.”

Hermione spluttered.

“What?” Harry turned to look at her. “Have you looked at him recently, Hermione? His body is great. I was worried about – my partner – being interested in him.”

“Harry! Don’t be cruel,” Hermione grinned.

Harry looked hard at her. “No, I’m serious. He’s buff. And powerful, and nice. Some witch is going to be so bloody lucky, you know.”

“I – oh shit, I’ve really upset him, haven’t I? It’s just that he’s always been a friend, I haven’t thought of him like that.”

“Didn’t stop you with Ron,” Harry pointed out.

“No, you’re right,” Hermione agreed. “Oh, pigs’ bottoms! How am I going to make up for that? He’s been so great to me too, over Ron.”

“Apologise?” Harry suggested.

“Perhaps I could set him up with someone,” the wheels were whizzing in Hermione’s mind.
“Oh, holy shit, Hermione, don’t go there!” Harry looked appalled.

“Why not?”

“Because –“

The portrait door opened and Ron’s long legs came through.

He flung himself down in the vacated armchair.

“Whassup?” he asked.

Hermione and Harry changed the subject.

In Harry’s class on Tuesday, they worked on joined magic. It was an interesting experience. Eli and Ernie showed what they could do together as opposed to apart, and then Harry wrote some slips of paper and had everyone have a go in the randomly paired couples, then random threesomes, and then a go all together.

The latter seemed to produce highly unpredictable results, and did not reflect the combined power levels of those involved. He wondered what was happening to the magic that appeared not to be getting through to the spell, and asked the class to think about that for next week, before allowing them to work in pairs or groups of their own choosing. He wondered how his magic and Severus’ would work combined, and was disappointed but also relieved when Severus did not approach him.

The class were all in good spirits, and Harry had asked the house elves to provide them supper. They all sat around and talked and drank after the end of the session, and Harry was well pleased with the camaraderie. The appearance of the food reminded him that he had wanted to investigate house-elf magic, and he determined to speak to Dobby over the next few days.

Harry noticed that Neville had chatted quite a bit with Ernie and Eli, and even Draco. He had not in any way ignored Hermione, but Harry was not totally surprised when Draco lurked behind at the end of class.

Draco sat himself on a desk as Harry collected up the scraps of paper and righted the room.

“What’s going on with Neville and Granger?” he asked, swinging his legs.

“What does going on with Hermione and Granger?” he asked, swinging his legs.

“Hermione,” Harry corrected automatically.

Draco didn’t really use Hermione’s name. Although the rule in class was to use first names, he got round this by just not using any name, and had got by quite successfully. On the whole, people knew when you were talking to them. Outside, he called her Granger to keep up appearances, although the name did not hold the negative feel to him that it had in the past. It was just her name.

“What do you mean?” Harry stalled.

“Oh, come on! Something’s up! Are they going out and trying to hide it badly, or something?”

In which one? Came into Draco’s head, to his horror. “What, a Gryffindor? Please!” he sneered.

Harry looked at him carefully, and decided to chance saying what he thought. “You’re more bothered about her House than her heritage?”

Draco stood up. “I’ve signed up to your agenda, haven’t I?” he drawled. “In the fabulous new world you’re working towards, heritage is nothing, is it? I can adapt.”

“You don’t believe it, though?” Harry said, with some disappointment.

“She’s one of the cleverest people I know, and magically strong. I’d be a fool not to acknowledge that. But I have a thousand years of wizarding heritage that you’re expecting me to throw away, Potter – don’t expect me to do it lightly.”

Harry sat down. Draco stayed standing, but didn’t go.

“I’m probably an idiot,” Harry said, “but I don’t really understand the whole ‘my family goes back a thousand years’ thing. I mean, Muggles do that too. It’s not as if everyone else just appeared out of the blue a hundred years ago, or something. Everyone has ancestors, it’s just whether you’ve bothered keeping track of them, surely?”

Draco laughed. “I have to admit, you say the weirdest things. For wizards, it’s about our magical ancestry going back for ever. Of course, recording it is tied to wealth and status. All of which I will be leaving behind, for you.”

“No,” Harry said quietly, “I trust you are doing it for you, Draco. You’re not a blind follower, so don’t pretend otherwise. I’ve no objection to self interest – it’s a fact of life. Well, there’s a couple of things to say to that. What does it matter if your magical ancestry goes back pure as pure forever? It doesn’t necessarily make you more powerful magically. Look at Hermione. Or me. My relations aren’t all wizarding folk. I can’t believe everyone in the Malfoy line is either – it’s not natural. There must have been squibs somewhere.”

“Potter, I’m assuming you have no idea how insulting you are being –” Malfoy drew himself up.

“I’m not,” Harry interrupted. “I’m not meaning to be insulting. This shouldn’t be insulting. The only way thousands of years of a family can have gone on without any variation – any squibs, or exceptional talent – would be by human intervention.”

“What on earth do you mean?” Draco looked down his nose at Harry.

Harry didn’t know whether to repeat the horrid thought that he had just had – the nasty place where his argument had led him unawares.

“Perhaps I’ve said enough –“

“Oh, don’t stop there, Potter, please,” Draco said sarcastically.

“Well, the next comment is offensive,” Harry said frankly. “I’ve really no wish to insult you, Draco.”

Draco looked at him, and came and quietly sat down. “What?”

Harry brushed a hand over his face. “I don’t know enough about wizarding culture,” he said.

Snape appeared around the door. “Ah, Draco!” he looked between the two. “Is something wrong?”
Harry looked across at Snape. “I’ve been mortally affronting Draco,” he said quietly. “I don’t know enough about wizarding culture.” He looked at Draco. “Can the Professor join us for a moment?” He deliberately gave Severus his title.

“Sure,” Draco nodded.

Severus sat down.

“What is the problem?”

“We’ve got into a convoluted discussion of wizarding heritage,” Harry explained. “And I was wondering – well, I was wondering whether infanticide was an acceptable wizarding practice.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Well, some nationalities have practised it and it’s been acceptable – for example, killing off daughters because sons are preferred. I wondered if wizarding houses kept their lines pure by killing off squibs.”

Draco was shaking. “How dare you!” he began. “How dare you! That is –“

“Certainly the Prince's have done so,” Severus said calmly.

“What!” Draco turned to him.

“Consider your family tree,” Severus said. “Are there members who have died in early infancy?”

“Well, of course there are!” Draco exclaimed, recalling his family tree. “Living conditions weren’t always so easy, you know!”

Snape shook his head. “Magic almost always has prevented wizards suffering from the disease and deprivation suffered by Muggles. It was common practice to weed out those whose magic failed to exhibit itself. I wonder whether the richer houses had access to people like Neville, in the past, who could assess magical signatures without the performance of magic. A study to see whether the richer houses had infant mortality at a younger stage than other houses would be interesting.”

Draco slowly sat down. Jacob Arameus Malfyoy. D 1412, aged 2, he thought. Sebastian Lucius Malfyoy, d 1693, aged 15 months. The names from his family tree taunted him. Could they really have been killed by their own parents?

“That’s disgusting,” he whispered.

There was a moment’s solemn silence. “What led to this erudite conversation?” Snape enquired.

“Oh –“ Draco thought back to his enquiry about Gr- Hermione - and Neville. “It doesn’t matter.” He stood up. “Were you after me or Harry, Sir?”

“A word with Mr Potter,” Severus said calmly. “Do you wish to wait? I’ll only be a moment. We could discuss this further – “

“That’s alright, Sir, I’ll head off,” Draco said quickly. His thoughts were unpleasant and he needed to think things through on his own.

He left.

Harry turned to Severus. “Have I done something terrible bringing that up?”
“Probably not,” Severus shook his head, warding the door quickly. “It will help him to understand the full implications of what the pureblood philosophy has led to. Killing Muggles has been one thing- to realise that it might lead to killing one’s own flesh and blood –”

“He’s right,” Harry said. “It is disgusting.”

He looked at Severus. “What did you come back for?”

“How welcoming,” Severus smirked at him.

Harry’s eyebrows rose. Severus was teasing Harry Potter. Not Alex, but Harry. He leant forward. “You’re always welcome, Severus.”

“I wondered if you wished to join me for a drink in my chambers,” Severus said.

Was that a hint of colour in his cheeks?

“You can’t make tomorrow?” Harry asked. They had agreed to see each other on Wednesdays, as before.

“I can.” Severus stood up. “I quite appreciate that that is enough for you,” he turned to go. “I am sorry to have –”

“Severus!” Harry had stepped in front of him. “Are you saying you’d like to see more of me? Now, as well as tomorrow?”

“It was a foolish thought on the spur of the moment –”

Harry kissed him hard.

Several moments later, panting and breathless, Harry said affectionately, “Silly bastard! Don’t you know I’d be in your bed every night if you wanted me? I’m going at your pace here – you’re in charge.”

“Mr Potter, kindly refrain from addressing your professors so. I offer you a drink and you jump to conclusions.”

Harry pulled back, contrite and embarrassed.

“I’m sorry –”

Severus reeled him back in, one hand at the base of Harry’s spine, the other smoothing his cheek. “I find your conclusions quite acceptable, however,” his voice had dropped to a husky murmur, and was having that effect on Harry again.

“Shall I apparate us?” Harry breathed.

“I’d better walk down in case I am seen. Apparate from your room. I will be waiting for you.”

Just the thought made Harry shiver and he kissed Severus passionately again, his hands rising to palm over his nipples, then pulling away as just the feel of the tight buds through the cloth of Severus’ robes was enough to make him moan.

He arrived in Severus’ sitting room not many minutes later. Severus was absent, although two
drinks had been poured and sat invitingly on the side table, one level lower than the other. Harry took the fuller glass, deducing Severus had started on the first, and sipped the whisky, feeling it fire its way down his throat. Severus still didn’t appear. The bedroom door was open. Harry walked through, and could hear the shower.

Slipping off his clothes quickly, he walked into the bathroom. The shower was a big open area at one end, without a door or curtain – just the slope of the floor and magic keeping the rest of the bathroom dry.

Severus turned and saw him, hands gliding soap down the flat planes of his stomach. Harry gulped. His cock twitched.

The next moment he was under the hot spray with Severus, being thoroughly washed, soapy hands sliding slickly over every inch of him. It was wonderful.

“Turn around,” he said, taking the soap from the older man.

Severus braced one hand against the wall and did as Harry asked. He took the soap and slid his hands around Snape’s chest, leaning against his back and planting a kiss on his nape as he slicked his hands up. He pulled back, and slid his hands over Snape’s wide shoulders, the thick biceps; Harry’s cock loved them; one touch and it always jerked in response. He pressed himself against Snape’s arse, before pulling back to wash down his back. Even through the bubbles he could feel the scar lines where Snape had been whipped, and he bit back his ire, forcing himself to forget how they got there and accept them as part of the man he loved.

Loved.

His hand stilled where it lay, at the top of Severus’ curving derriere.

Snape turned to look at him, eyes warm and welcoming, giving Harry permission to do what he willed.

Harry slid under Snape’s arm in front of him, moulded himself to his body, and buried his face in his neck.

“Harry?” Snape said, concerned, fearful that the touch to his arse had sparked off bad memories for Harry, their recent conversations at the forefront of his mind, despite the activities they had indulged in. “Are you ok? We don’t have to do anything. You don’t have to be here,” he said gently.

“I do,” Harry said into his neck. “I do have to be here. I want to be here,” and he leant up and kissed Snape with all the delicate wonder that sang joyfully through his veins.
Draco had meant to go straight to his chamber, but he was stopped in the Slytherin common room by Crabbe, who had received a parcel from home that morning and invited Draco to have some cake.

He threw himself into the chair in the corner with the two inseparable boys and accepted a slice.

He couldn’t help wondering whether Goyle and Crabbe’s families had killed off their squibs; Greg and Vince had little enough magic themselves – perhaps only just enough to avoid extermination.

The thought made the cake turn to sawdust in his mouth.

And what sort of people might their families have got rid of? Ones that had no magic but more than two brain cells to rub together? What good had pure blood selection done either of their families? Both fathers were heavily enslaved to Voldemort – and maybe that was logical, for them, thought Draco. What else did they have to offer the wizarding world except the purity of their blood?

“What are you planning on doing after Hogwarts?” he asked casually, taking another bite.

Greg and Vince exchanged glances.

“What?” Draco said.

There was a slight nod between the boys.

“We’re thinking of going to Canada,” Vince answered, his chin up as if expecting a rebuke.

Draco carefully put down his cake.

“What?”

”We’re getting married,” Greg said proudly.

“They have wizarding gay marriage in Canada?” Draco queried, bemused.

Greg and Vince’s posture tensed.

“They have Muggle gay marriage,” Vince clarified.

“They have that in England, don’t they?” Draco frowned.

There was silence.

“We can be Muggles easier in Canada,” Greg explained. “When we don’t understand things, they’ll think it’s just because we’re English.”

“Let’s get this straight,” Draco leant forward, discreetly checking that no-one was listening, “you’re planning on going to Canada and living as Muggles?”

“You know we haven’t got much magic anyway,” Vince shrugged, reflecting Draco’s earlier thoughts. “Reckon we’ll be better off away from all this,” he said, waving his hand in a sweep as if to encompass all wizarddom.
"You want to leave the wizarding world? Do your families know?"

"Come on, Draco, we may be stupid, but we're not suicidal."

"But how will you live?"

"I've got a bit of money from my Great-Aunt," Vince said. "Enough to get us there and get started. Then we'll find work."

"Doing what? You'll need qualifications and things," Draco was absolutely gobsmacked, but not as much as he was moments later.

"We've been working on that," Greg said.

"We've got a Muggle tutor," Vince whispered. "We've done GCSE's – that's like Muggle OWLs – in English and Latin."

"The Latin was really easy," Greg grinned cheerfully, "I don't think Muggles use it much. Vince has passed his Maths," he said proudly, smiling at his partner. "I'm useless at it."

"You'll get there," Vince nodded at him, giving him a solid smile in return. "You did better than me in French, and that's going to be really useful." He looked at Draco. "You know, the Goyle's have that place in France, so Greg's brilliant at it. And they speak it in Canada as well as English, so that should be a real help."

"You're nearly as good as me," Greg commented, "you've been to the chateau every time with me for ever."

Draco stared from one to the other. "You've been planning this for years? And didn't tell me?"

"Only a couple," Vince said. "We couldn't tell you really, could we? What with your father and our dads and all. I'm trusting you to not split on us now." Vince looked at him seriously.

Draco studied them, felt the tension in them. Admired the underhand activities they had been carrying out all this time. Was rather honoured that they were now trusting him.

"Why now? Why are you trusting me with this now?"

Vince looked at his friend.

"Guess we thought you might have been doing a bit of thinking of your own," he said at last.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Draco said sharply.

"You've been seeing a lot of Hermione Granger," Greg commented.

"What? We've been working on stuff together for Snape –"

"Yeah, but if you hated her like you used to, you wouldn't be spending as much time with her as you do," Greg said logically, "so we reckon you fancy her."

Draco spluttered. "Fancy her! Oh come on! I know your straight radar must be out of tune, but really! She just a really clever witch –"

"Ha!" Vince pointed a finger.
“What? Just because she’s clever doesn’t mean I fancy her, for Merlin’s sake!”

“No, but in the past you’d never have admitted that she was clever – being a Mudblood and all.”


“What? That she’s clever or a Mudblood?”

“Either. That you think I fancy her.”

“It’s your business, mate. She’s got a nice body, for sure, and brains. Suit you nicely, I would have thought,” Greg said calmly.

Draco had to snap his jaw shut to stop it from hanging open.

“Don’t you mind that she’s not pureblood?” he hissed, leaning forward.

“It’s stupid, isn’t?” Vince said. “Look at us – as pureblooded as they come. We know we’re probably the stupidest people in the school. What sort of future have we got in the wizarding world? Everyone knows we’re thick – we’ll only get ratty jobs or have to live off our families’ wealth – well, I want more than that. Greg and I might not be the brightest buttons but we can do things, we’re going to do things, for ourselves. I’m not going to let Greg come home from a meeting with the Dark Lord all battered and tortured! Just ‘cos he’s angry – no way! You must’ve seen your Father come back knocked about? Or maybe not, maybe he’s been clever enough to avoid it. But my Dad has...Well, I’m not having that for Greg. Anyway, Potter’s going to beat the shit out of him, and then where will our families be? We’re going to get out of it,” he said, sitting back. “If you use your brain, you will too.”

“What makes you think Potter will win?” Draco asked, his head reeling.

“You’ve only to watch him,” Greg commented. “He sort of leaks confidence now, doesn’t he? He doesn’t make any fuss over anything, just quietly gets on with stuff. I’ve seen the Dark Lord. He’s as scary as shit, but I think he’s scared himself, always taking it out on other people. Potter will finish him,” he said firmly.

“Why don’t you side with Potter, then?” Draco asked.

“I might have to kill my Dad, or my cousins or uncles: I don’t think I could. I love them, you know.”

“So we’re going to get out of it,” Vince said.

“And come back when it’s all over?” Draco sneered.

“I reckon we’ll stay out there,” Vince said with quiet dignity. “It’s a new life for us. Maybe if we miss magic we’ll link up with the magical community out there.”

“You’d be very welcome to join us, Draco,” Greg offered. “Not – not in that way, of course,” he said suddenly, wondering if Draco might misunderstand. “You know, in our house. We’re worried about you.”

“You do me a great honour,” Draco said slowly. He had never appreciated these friends so much before; he would never underestimate them again. “My future is here, though,” he added.

Vince nodded. “Thought you’d say that. You’ll always be welcome, if you need somewhere,
“Thank you,” Draco inclined his head. He was aware that his friends had laid their cards on the table and he hadn’t shown his hand. His natural caution had held him back. But it was safer for them, as well as him, for them not to know.

Harry asked Dobby to come and see him, and to bring with him the most respected of the Hogwarts’ elves. He had no idea whether they had any sort of hierarchy, but Dobby seemed to him to be an elf rather out of the ordinary, so he also needed someone who could speak for the others. Both of them came to see him that evening. The senior elf was the most wizened creature Harry had ever seen, yet she had a quiet air of authority about her. Harry was pretty sure it was a her.

“Harry Potter, Sir,” Dobby bowed low, “this is Imi.”

Harry bent down to shake the old lady’s hand. “Thank you so much for coming, Imi,” Harry said, “do please take a seat.”

He had transfigured his desk chair and a book so that he had three chairs around his chamber fire.

The old elf regarded him with beady-eyed interest, shook rather awkwardly the hand (as if she was uncertain about the mechanics of it) and hopped into one of the chairs.

Dobby, looking rather stunned, but keeping unusually silent, took the other.

“I wanted to ask you some questions about a couple of things, but of course you don’t have to answer anything if you don’t want,” Harry said. “I’ve no wish to cause you offence at all.”

“How old is you?” the old lady demanded.

“Seventeen. May I ask how old you both are?” he added daringly.

“I is two hundred and seventy three. Dobby, is you one hundred and twenty seven?”

“One hundred and twenty eight,” Dobby corrected. “I is having my birthday last month.”

You should have said,” Harry smiled, “we could have had a cake, or a celebration –“

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“One hundred and twenty eight,” Dobby corrected. “I is having my birthday last month.”

You should have said,” Harry smiled, “we could have had a cake, or a celebration –“
“Well, to be honest, partly because I’m nosy, and partly because I’m trying to understand magic better, and partly it’s tied in with the second reason I wanted to speak to you.”

“Harry Potter had better tell Imi what that is, then,” she invited.

“You know that some wizards are fighting others?” Harry said. “That wizards like Professor Dumbledore and myself disagree with the things Voldemort believes in, and don’t want the sort of world he wants?”

“Dobby knows all this,” the elf said, jumping up, “that is why Dobby was trying to stop Harry Potter coming to Hogwarts, because bad Master Malfoy wanted to hurt Harry Potter for Voldemort.”

“Yes, and you was not behaving as a house elf should,” Imi said severely, making Dobby subside into the corner of the chair.

“Well, that’s a good point,” Harry said. “Why do house elves have to do what their master wants? You are obviously clever, intelligent beings. Why do you serve? And why can’t you make your own decisions?”

Imi hauled her round belly up over her legs, and settled herself at the back of the chair. “You is not understanding history, Harry Potter. Elves was living in the woods and not having families to look after. But when house elves discovered wizards living in houses, house elves liked it very much. House elves long ago struck bargains with the wizards to live in their houses, in return for looking after them. House elves is very fond of houses,” she said, as if that explained everything.

Harry thought about what she was not saying.

“So, are house elves tied to the houses themselves, or to the owners?”

“Ah! You is a clever wizard!” Imi nodded approvingly. “Many wizards is forgetting and thinking the elves is tied to them. Elves can forget too,” she said crossly.

“Hold on,” Harry said, “if Dobby is only tied to the house and not the Master, why was he not behaving as a house elf should in thwarting Mr Malfoy?”

“He was not in trouble for that,” Imi said impatiently. “He was endangering a wizard! That is a very bad thing! Very bad!”

“Oh,” said Harry. “Then if I asked if you’d be willing – of your own free will - to fight in the war with us, against Voldemort, you wouldn’t be able? Even if you wished?”

Imi sighed impatiently. She snapped her fingers and a tray of tea things appeared, hovering in the air in front of her. She pointed at the pot and it poured a cup for each, added appropriate milk (and a great deal of sugar for both elves, Harry noticed), and then flew the cups over to them.

“You wizards is very simple minded,” Imi said, having drunk half her cup with big slurping noises and her ears flapping as she drank. “Dobby put the wizard he was wanting to help into danger: that was very bad indeed! Especially jinxing Harry Potter's broom!” she glared at the elf, who sat looking cowed, curled up in the chair. He was trying to bang his head against the wings of the chair but the fabric was too cushioned to have any effect – especially as Harry had softened it wandlessy the minute Dobby started banging.

“So, you could fight if you wanted to?” Harry asked.
“We is not used to fighting,” Imi retrenched.

“But would you be willing to help defend?”

“House elves have been defending their houses for centuries,” Imi said proudly. “There is lots of defending things we can do!”

“And would Hogwarts elves be willing?”

“Dobby will do defending or attacking or anything Harry Potter asks! It would be a great honour for an elf to be asked to stand besides you, Harry Potter, sir,” the elf said fiercely.

“No, it would be my honour to have you there, Dobby, and any other elves that felt the same,” Harry said honestly. “I don’t want to put you in danger. I don’t know if elves would be any worse off if Voldemort won, so I don’t know what I can offer to induce you all to be on our side....”

“Indeed,” Imi said, “it is an honour that you should even talk of us so, Harry Potter. Most wizards prefers not to notice our existence.”

Harry looked at the elderly lady.

“I rather think elves often encourage that,” he suggested.

She chuckled. “You is right again! We is not wanting wizards interfering all the time!”

Harry grinned, and reached over to the pot, offering Imi and Dobby a second cup. “So now you know partly why, would you be willing to tell me about your magic?”

Hermione had gone out to the greenhouses. She could see Neville through the steamed up glass, and gave a small knock against the pane before slipping in, shutting the door firmly to keep in the heat. It had been snowing yet again, and flakes clung fat and white against her black cloak.

“Neville,” she said quietly, when he continued to work.

“A moment,” he answered calmly.

Hermione watched him repotting a plant, his deft fingers carefully untangling the roots, before tenderly placing it into a larger pot and trickling fresh compost around them. Once he had bedded it in and returned it to the huge tables under the charmed lights, he brushed his hands off on an old towel hung on a nail, and turned to Hermione.

“What’s up?” he asked, his voice friendly but distant.

Hermione found her mouth dry and her tongue cleaving to the roof of her mouth. “I wanted to apologise,” she began.

Neville snorted, and turned and picked up another plant. “No need to apologise for saying what everyone else is thinking.”

“Well, apparently not everyone does,” Hermione was stung by the brush off in his tone.

“Don’t tell me you fancy me, I don’t believe it,” Neville said flatly, easing the plant with contrasting carefulness from its container. The appearing root was a violent purple colour.
“Harry said you were hot, and he was worried about - his partner – fancying you.”

The plant slid free and the pot crashed to the floor.

“I think they have their hands quite full enough with each other,” Neville said, bright red.
“Literally,” he added under his breath.

“I didn’t mean they were wanting you to join them,” Hermione felt heat flush up from her stomach and under her collar. Now that was a hot thought! Holy shit! And suddenly she found herself looking, for the first time despite what Harry had said, at Neville as a sexual being. And standing there, broad and muscular, legs clad in faded denim that clung over what were, she noticed, extraordinarily muscular thighs, shirt sleeves rolled up revealing strong arms covered in fine dark hair, neck open revealing more dark hair curling in the vee, she could see, like a slap in the face, what Harry was saying. Neville looked virile. Hermione was shocked to feel the familiar tingling as her nipples tightened, despite the heat in the greenhouse, and was glad of her concealing cloak. She tightened it around her, and pulled on the door handle, wanting to escape her thoughts as much as the hot and steamy atmosphere. “Well, I am sorry, and I was wrong,” she snapped, and disappeared.

Neville stood there, plant dangling from his fist, and kicked one of the broken shards of pot.

Was one supposed to ever understand women?

Later that night, in the privacy of her bed, Hermione wondered if she had made the wrong decision. What would have happened if she hadn’t been such a coward? If she had stepped up to Neville instead of leaving? If she had dared to kiss him? How would he have tasted? Smelt? Of earth, and outdoor scents? Of the hot steamy smell of damp compost? Of sweat and desire?

Ron was enjoying life more than he had ever done. His diet of ample food, quidditch and lots of sex seemed to agree very well with him. He had continued to shoot up and was now six feet three, and his muscles had become much more defined- he liked the gym Harry had had set up, and fitted in a couple of hours a week there too.

Actually, he quite liked the gym for thinking. His brain roved all over the place. Girls, strategy, even schoolwork. After the initial bizarreness of this, he found that thinking over school work was actually really useful. He no longer had Hermione nagging him to get on with it, and initially his marks had plummeted as he missed deadlines and just couldn’t be bothered. Now, he thought while he trained or ran, and found he could write his essays much better once he’d planned them in his head.

He’d also started up some weekly meetings on strategy with Snape, Shacklebolt and Hestia Jones. They met at 12 Grimmauld Place, and it felt very odd, the house shut down and just them in the kitchen bashing it out over the kitchen table. His ideas had been accepted and considered valid, however, which had been a huge burst to his confidence. Snape treated him with his usual disdain, but that was more than acceptable. He hadn’t known how he would cope with him after what he had done to Harry, and knowing that he and Harry had once been lovers – eeww! He wondered how Harry stood the sarky attitude – it was hard to believe that Snape would act any different around Harry, even if he did want sex – but why Harry put up with him – but maybe he was an amazing lover – and there he was again –eeww!
With Snape being his usual acerbic self he found he could forget about him and Harry, and concentrate on the matter in hand.

It was during one of these meetings that Severus suddenly clutched his arm.

“You’re being called?” Shacklebolt said, understanding at once.

“Yes,” Severus gritted. The pain felt a lot less intense than it had used to, but it had been so long since it had happened that the shock to his nerves had taken him unawares.

He had become complacent.

He spelled his clothes into Death Eater garb and looked to Ron.

“Tell - Professor Dumbledore - when you return, please,” he said calmly.

Ron shuddered at the sight of him in those clothes, but nodded. “I will, Sir.”

“How long are you likely to be gone, Severus?” Shacklebolt asked, and even Ron realised that the underlying question was ‘when should we start to worry if you haven’t returned?’

Severus gave a harsh laugh. “Who knows? He has never kept me longer than overnight on a school night, so that I can go straight on to teach and not arouse suspicion.”

“Take care,” Hestia said, touching his arm.

The regular words sounded so inadequate, absurd in the circumstances, but Snape nodded, and walked through the house, his footsteps echoing morosely across the hall.

They sat in silence until the noise of the front door closing resounded.

“Ask Professor Dumbledore to let us know he’s alright, please Ron,” Shacklebolt said quietly.

“Of course,” Ron agreed, though he was surprised at the level of concern he felt from the other two. Snape always seemed so disagreeable. It was hard to believe that anyone would care, really, though now, seeing him go off to face Voldemort face to face, to lie to him, Ron began to realise the enormity of what Snape had been doing all these years, the courage it must take. No wonder the bastard was so obnoxious if he had had to stand in front of his classes and teach after no sleep and a night in the company of Voldemort. Merlin knew what he had had to do on those nights. What had been done to him. Ron shuddered.

“It’s ugly,” Shacklebolt said, watching the young man and realising what he was thinking; he had seen too many young Auror recruits after their first contact with what Death Eaters did.

“How does he have the strength?” Ron asked.

Shacklebolt shook his head. “I couldn’t do it,” he said. “The permanent fear, the isolation, the disgust of everyone who deals with you...he is an incredible ally for us.”

Hestia Jones had made tea, and handed Ron a cup. He loaded in a couple of sugars and took comfort from the sweet warmth.

“What would happen to him if he was found out?”

“You don’t want to know. Crucio might be an Unforgivable, but there are plenty of other really nasty ways to make someone suffer. Severus has undoubtedly already experienced many of them.”
Ron sipped his tea to try and still the lurching of his stomach. “Does Voldemort suspect him, then?”

“He has no respect for anyone,” Hestia said quietly. “After his absence, he made a number of his Death Eaters’ families suffer for their failure to search for him or to continue his work.”

“But they still follow him?” Ron said in amazement.

“Fear and the belief that there is no alternative is an effective inducement,” she responded. “He tortured a family member of each Death Eater. In front of them. To show them that if they left him, he would hunt down their families and they would bear the brunt of his anger.”

“Merlin! But –“ wheels were turning in Ron’s brain, “does that mean that actually, they may be a lot less loyal than we had supposed? Could we not offer protection to the families? Cut his support base out from underneath him?”

“It’s an interesting idea.” Shacklebolt considered. “I don’t know, truthfully, if we have the resources to offer that level of protection to so many families. It wouldn’t just be against Voldemort’s wrath,” he explained. “There will be many ordinary wizarding folk who’ll be out for their blood. And of course, we can’t just ignore the crimes they have committed.”

“We do need to think if we can use that reduction in loyalty, though,” Ron said.

“Yes, I agree,” Hestia nodded. “Let’s think that one over and discuss it again next week. Something else just occurred to me – I don’t know why I haven’t thought of it before – I suppose I’ve never seen anyone respond to being Called by the bastard. But how does Snape know where to go? I’m presuming it isn’t the same place, or it’s unplottable, or he would have revealed this before.”

“We need to ask him,” Ron said, nodding, “that could be really important. If we can take the battle into his territory –“

“The problem with that is that it’s likely booby trapped, and they have the advantage of knowing the layout and so on. Those factors would probably outweigh the advantage of surprise.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed, slumping back in his chair. “Still worth knowing, though.”

Hestia stood up. “I think we’re about done here? I really need to get back.”

“Sure,” Shacklebolt agreed.

He saw them both to the floo, set the wards, and they all left.

Harry was doing some homework in the common room when Ron stepped through the portrait hole and came and threw himself down opposite him.

“You’re back early,” Harry commented.


“That’s good,” Harry smiled. He’d head down to Severus’ chambers in a moment.

“D’you want a cup of tea, or hot chocolate or anything?”
“Nah, Hestia made us a second cup. I’m swimming in it already: be pissing all night. What’ve you been up to?”

“Transfiguration homework, and that Charms essay,” Harry rolled his eyes.

“Why do you bother?” Ron asked. “I’m sure I wouldn’t give a shit if I was you.”

“If I survive Voldemort I’ll still need a job,” Harry shrugged his shoulders.

“Yeah, but surely you’re going to tell them, aren’t you?”

“Tell who what?” Seamus came up behind Ron, grinning.

Ron exchanged a startled look with Harry; he needed to be more careful of what he said where.

“Which of my secrets do you think I should spill, Ron?” Harry mused.

Seamus chucked himself into the seat, and grinned. “What you got, Harry? Tell ole Seamus all!”

Harry stretched his legs out, hands folded behind his head, and mused. “Well, Seamus,” I could tell you I’m going to kill off Voldemort,” he said.

“Nah, we know that, what’s new?” Seamus grinned. He took out a bag of Bertie Botts and offered them to them both.

“Gonna help?” Harry asked.

“What, me?” Seamus grinned.

“Yeah, you, Finnegan. Can’t do it all on my own. I’m going to do it soon. You a doer, a sitter on the fence, or with the other team?”

“You’re serious,” Seamus said suddenly, sitting forward.

“I am,” Harry brought his arms down and rested them on his knees, looking at the young man with whom he’d shared a dorm for six years. “I think we’d all like a future without having to factor in Voldemort. I know you came to the DA, but now we’re talking heavy stuff. I’d be glad to have you at our side. Think about it.”

Seamus stood up, and came and stood in front of Harry. “I don’t need to think about it. I’m in.” He saw Harry begin to speak. “My Dad’s a Muggle; he’s the most brilliant Dad in the world. It killed him to let me leave home and come here, he told me last hols. Don’t anyone tell me Muggles aren’t as good as wizards.” He stretched out his hand.

Harry shook it. “Thanks, Seamus. Don’t speak to anyone about timing or anything else that could help the other side, please, mate. It’s important.”

Seamus nodded. “You should speak to Dean; Neville too. We’re with you.”

“I’m glad, of that. I will speak to Dean. Neville’s already a definite.”

“Well, that’s good. You never know when you’ll need some new roses.”

Harry looked hard at him. “Don’t underestimate Neville,” he said, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.
Seamus looked at him.

“Seriously, mate,” Ron added in, “if it was Nev having to face Voldemort rather than Harry, I’d still be standing beside him.”

“Okay,” Seamus said dubiously, “I’ll bear that in mind.” He got up. “I’m off.” He stretched his arms over his head.

“Where’re you going?” Ron asked.

Seamus winked. “There’s the odd girl here who’s not into red hair,” he grinned, and headed for the portrait hole, slicking his own hair with his fingers as he went.

Harry laughed.

“What?” Ron asked, slinging a cushion at him.

“I just bet you’re wondering who it is and if you can make her like red after all,” Harry grinned.

“Hey, it’s not my hair colour they’re thinking about,” Ron smirked back.


“Yeah, right. I just count my lucky stars –” he looked round quickly to make sure they weren’t overheard this time – “that you bat for the other team. Not that I think we’d have the same choice in partners.” He scrunched up his nose. “I mean – ugh! Go for someone better next time, mate!”

Harry stiffened. “He’s a great guy,” he started.

“Hey, I don’t doubt that,” Ron put up a hand to stop Harry. He leant forward, checking round again. “I mean, he was Called tonight, and it made me think – I mean, bloody hell! How does he do that? I’d be shitting my pants every time!”

“He was Called?” Harry’s stomach lurched.

“Yeh. Transfigured his kit and was off cool as a cucumber. I can see why you’d be impressed by that, but - physically – well! You’re not bad looking, you know, and with your name you could have anyone. Get out there and find them. Don’t know why you’re not shagging yourself silly before the big whatever.”

“Like you are?” Harry said tightly.

Ron sat back. “Think I’d be doing it regardless, battle or no. I like sex,” he said, unoffended.

“Don’t you want more?” Harry asked curiously, letting the conversation meander. He wanted to ask about Severus, and although Hermione and Neville knew they were back together, he didn’t know if Snape would want it going any further.


“Come on, Ron, you know what I mean. A relationship.”

“Been there, done that....I’m too young to settle, Hermione was right. It was great with her, but – well – I always noticed the others. Now I don’t have to feel guilty. And we’re still friends. Best of both worlds.”
Harry was shocked, really, that it was frankly all about sex to Ron. Maybe, coming from his large, close knit family, he’d had enough warmth and love to not worry about getting it from a partner, not needing someone special to care for him, to care for them in return: he’d always have his family to love him.

Harry loved Severus; loved caring about him; but right now that meant he was shit-scared with how he was, what he was doing at this very minute, whether Voldemort could feel the link was weakened, suspected Severus, was hurting Severus.

And even if that wasn’t the case, why had he Called him?

“Come upstairs,” Harry said suddenly.

“Wha -?” Ron said, but followed Harry.

Inside his room, Harry warded the chamber.

“Did he give any idea why he was Called?” he asked Ron as Ron flung himself comfortably across Harry’s bed.

“Snape?”

“Who else?” Harry said impatiently.

“Nah. Asked me to tell Dumbledore, which I did as soon as I got back.”

“What did Dumbledore say?”

“Thank you?” Ron grinned. He sat up. “Look, he knows what he’s doing –“

“Yes,” Harry said, “putting himself in danger once again.” He straightened. “With your strategist’s hat on, what do you think it could mean?”

Ron thought for a moment.

“Well, I suppose he either wanted to find out some information – which Snape may or may not be able to give him, so it could be a command to seek that information – or he could need him to do something – brew a potion, maybe – or he could be calling all his troops together to ready for a big push – but look, we should know soon enough. I mean, I can’t ever remembering him missing classes, so I expect he’ll be back by morning. Unless it is that they are going to attack, in which case we’ll all know rather sooner than we’d like. Or if he’s been found out, he’ll be dead soon enough, and a thousand students will be cheering at getting a new teacher.”

Harry snapped round. “God, Ron, that was nasty.”

“True, though.” He looked up suddenly. “Shit, Harry, you can’t still like the bastard! After what he did to you?”

“I deserved it,” Harry said.

“Hey!” Ron stood up, angry, and took Harry by the arms. “From what I gather, spell or no spell, it was a vicious rape! No one deserves that! Don’t dare believe otherwise!”

Harry shrugged him off and turned away, walking over to the fire, which had blossomed to life as they entered the room.
“Fair enough,” he said quietly. “Nevertheless, as you said, he is outstandingly brave and a big asset to our fight. I can’t accept you talking about him being killed as if it were a good thing. One day it could be me. Or you. Or -”

“Fine!” Ron threw up his hands. “I was too honest. Thousands of children who only know him as a snarky git would rejoice; anyone who knew the work he did would regret his absence. Will that do?”

“Perfect!” Harry snapped.

“Merlin!” Ron gritted. “Are we done here? I’ve pleasanter ways of finishing my evening.”

Holding his temper in as best he could, Harry nodded. “Thanks for your time,” he said sarcastically.

“Look,” Ron suggested, “it can’t all be about the war. There have to be good things in life to make it worth fighting for, you know. Go get yourself laid and out of that grouchy temper,” and he slammed the door as he left.

“Shit!” Harry thought. “Severus!” It felt worse than seeing Ron and Hermione tied underwater in the Triwizard tournament. At least he could do something about it then.

What would Snape need him to do?

He apparated into Snape’s room, and looked around. He lit the fire, made sure the whisky was out with glasses at the ready. He put a warming charm on the bed - he remembered how cold he had felt returning from the graveyard, and when the shock set in after the Department of Mysteries fiasco. Then he sat with a book, and waited.

And waited.

It was around two in the morning when Snape’s door creaked and he walked wearily in. He came to a halt as Harry stood up.

“Harry! What are you doing here?”

Never mind that Harry had spent every night with Severus since that Tuesday.

“Waiting for you?” Harry said, trying to inject a note of calm into his voice, rather than the fierce worry that he was feeling.

Severus walked towards the bathroom, skirting him. “I’m not up for sex tonight. Go back to your own room,” he said, back to Harry.

Full of fear of what that meant, Harry came towards him and reached his hand towards Severus’ arms.

“Don’t touch me!”

Harry jerked back instantly.

Was Severus hurt? Abused? His heart pounded.

Severus’ gaunt face softened a little. “I am not hurt, or – or anything else,” he said
expressionlessly. “I – I just feel dirty. Let me go and shower and get out of these clothes.”

Harry nodded, and went and boiled the kettle. It might be late, but Severus loved coffee and even if he only enjoyed the smell it was worth making.

Severus spent a long time in the shower, but eventually appeared.


“You don’t need to mother me, you know,” he said harshly, but he drank the whisky down in one and then nodded his head for the coffee, pouring another whisky as Harry did the honours on the hot drink.

“I’m taking this into bed,” he said quietly. “You should go.”

Harry stood up, and went over to Snape, not touching him, just close. Harry was relieved that he didn’t flinch.

“Of course I’ll go if you want me to, but if you just want company – no sex, definitely – then I’ll stay.”

“I am accustomed to dealing with the aftermath of my visits to that vile creature alone,” Snape said. Harry nodded. “Fair enough. But what we are accustomed to isn’t always the best.”

“No,” Severus said slowly, “but I have not enough brain to think tonight. Join me for a quick breakfast in here,” he invited.

Harry nodded, knowing he was being dismissed.

It hurt.

But this wasn’t about him, it was about Severus.

He touched Severus’ arm, just a gentle stroke. “I’ll be there. And just know that however dirty you feel, however contaminated by him, I do understand a bit. I’ve seen what he does, and I’ve had him in my head. And however you are, I still want you, to be with you. Good night, love, and try and sleep.” And though it was the hardest thing to do, he left.

And Severus didn’t stop him.
The next morning Harry apparated into Severus’ chamber. Severus was already seated at the table with a pot of coffee, toast and marmalade in front of him.

Harry slid into his normal seat, and gave a tentative smile as he reached for toast.

“No warm greeting?” Snape asked.

Harry was up and round the table in a shot, his hand cupping the smooth, newly shaven cheek.

He found only warmth and welcome in the dark eyes, and bent forward, brushing a soft kiss across the thin lips.

Severus accepted it, his hand coming to rest on Harry’s hip.

Harry pulled away slowly, reluctantly.

“Of course I was!” Harry burst out.

“About us. Silly boy. You are more mature, then, than I thought, to have gone. I am grateful for it, Harry, though next time, I think I will be glad to find you in my bed when I return.”

“Good,” Harry said, sitting back down and slathering marmalade over the toast, suddenly hungry now that his equilibrium had been restored.

“I spoke to Albus last night,” Snape said quietly. “Neither of us knows the best course of action. Voldemort wishes to attack Miss Granger’s parents.”

Harry gulped around the mouthful he had just eaten.

“Oh shit. Who else was there? Would Voldemort know it was you if we removed them?”

“That is not all,” Severus continued. “He has asked me to discover their address.”

“Oh. Right. Now we’re up shit street.”

Severus drank his coffee.

“We need to talk to Hermione,” Harry said at last.

“And let her worry?”

“She’ll feel worse if she ever finds out we knew and didn’t give her the opportunity to do something about it,” Harry said.
“Are you sure?” Severus asked.

Harry nodded. “There’s nothing worse than being left out of the loop, and Hermione might have suggestions.”

“I will ask the Headmaster to see us all after lunch,” Severus acquiesced. He looked at the clock on the wall, now pointing at ‘Time to Teach’, and stood up. Harry popped the last segment of his orange into his mouth and got up too.

Severus picked up a basket of scrolls and walked over to Harry, kissing him gently, his tongue lapping in to taste the citrus sweetness.

The pain of last night seemed to have morphed somehow into an even greater closeness, and Harry rested his forehead for a moment on Severus’ chest before stepping back, and with a smile apparating to his own room, before heading down to the common room and class.

“It was bound to happen,” Hermione said flatly, surprising the others assembled in the Headmaster’s study - Harry, Snape and Professor McGonagall.

At the startled noise her Head of House made, Hermione said, “I’ve been expecting it for years. I’ve added extra wards to home and to their work, but it sounds like we need to do something more. But then Professor Snape will be implicated.” She chewed her nails, and then looked up. “Who was at the meeting with you, Professor? And why would Voldemort want to kill my parents now?”

“Lucius Malfoy, Wormtail and Rookwood were also present.”

“Are meetings usually that small?” Hermione asked in surprise.

“They can be,” Severus answered.

“And the purpose of it was to organise an attack on my parents?” she said, confused.

“Several targets were discussed – in effect, we were given the task of organising one each.”

“And that’s a regular thing for you?” Hermione said with distaste.

Severus straightened. “As it happens, no. I am usually required to work on potions, or to give information on Professor Dumbledore’s strategies.”

Hermione put her hand on his arm. “I’m sorry,” she said gently.

Severus had never been so surprised.

“The thing is,” she continued, “if it was unusual, that makes it more complicated, in a way, doesn’t it? I mean, he’s putting you in a no-win situation. If you succeed in getting the address, you are very likely to be a suspect with Dumbledore. If you do not, you face Voldemort’s wrath. Why would he choose to put you into that position?”

“I think you can’t appreciate how he thinks, Miss Granger,” Snape replied. “He has asked me to do many things that would cause Professor Dumbledore to doubt me should he suspect me of them. Voldemort has no time for failures: he expects me to succeed, and quickly too.”

“Miss Granger,” Professor McGonagall said, “can you tell us what wards you have used? We can consider best then what the risks are, and what more we can do.”
Hermione nodded, and proceeded to list half a dozen extremely powerful wards.

The staff looked at her in amazement.

“Who did you get to put those in place, Miss Granger?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“I did them, some in third year and more in fourth.”

“On your own?” Professor McGonagall’s voice was almost a screech.

“How can that be?” Severus said. “The laws restricting under-age magic - “

“Actually lists the classes of spells restricted; wards are not mentioned,” Hermione interrupted stoutly.

“You read through the laws?” Dumbledore said, eyes twinkling.

“Anyone can gain a pass to the Reading Room at the Ministry and ask to read legal books,” Hermione said. “I’ve spent many enjoyable days there.”

“How come you never told me about the specific restrictions?” Harry asked.

Hermione looked at him. “Because you would have got yourself into trouble,” she said severely.

Severus could be heard making a choking sound, which he turned into a slight cough when Harry mock-glared at him.

“I knew if you had a serious problem you’d use magic and face the consequences later,” she continued firmly.

Even Minerva McGonagall was trying to hide a smile behind her hand.

“Honestly, I’m not that bad!” Harry exclaimed.

“Flying cars, Mr Potter?” Severus suggested.

“Knight bus?” Hermione contributed.

“Huh!” Harry humphed, “and here I am insisting you aren’t kept in the dark!”

Hermione smiled at him. “And I thank you for it, Harry, really. But what’s happening here? It sounds like my parents may be a target chosen specifically to distract Harry, – someone close – at least connected – obviously acceptable to the Death Eaters, as opposed to, say, the pureblood Weasleys, and they’ll not be expecting wards as they will at the Dursley’s. And – and – they get the effect whether you tell us or not, Professor Snape! Having told us, we’re distracted earlier trying to prevent it. If the attack went ahead, we’ll all be distracted afterw – afterwards,” Hermione said the last words reluctantly. Simple words that meant her parents were dead.

“Will they be able to know who did the wards? When they went up?” Harry asked.

The others looked at him.

“Well, I can feel the wards at Hogwarts, feel that they’re centuries old, but that there’s new stuff bound in them. Would Death Eaters attacking Hermione’s know that the wards had been there ages? Could they recognise her signature? If they felt that, Severus would be in the clear. The question is, are they strong enough? And I’m sorry, Hermione, but what’s to stop them attacking
when they aren’t in the home or at work?”

“I suspect most people would not be able to detect when the wards were placed, or who had done so,” Albus said, shaking his head. “The fact that you set them on your own home should make them stronger, however. I suggest that we have a look to see what can be done to improve them. All our Heads of Houses are skilled in wards, as they have a great deal of experience in setting both their House ones and Hogwarts ones. Minerva, would you be so kind as to accompany Miss Granger?”

“I would like to help,” Harry offered.

“You are strong, Harry, I know, but that may give the matter away,” Albus denied him.

“With respect, Albus,” Harry said, “I too have set extra wards here at Hogwarts, and I can use earth magic directly without a wand, which will be undetectable.”

“It could be a trap,” Severus said quietly. “It is not without possibility that Voldemort already knows where Miss Granger’s parents live: he has only to have had her owls tracked, or to have had her followed home at the end of term at some point. Should I be a spy, they would expect precisely what Mr Potter is suggesting – that he will plunge into the fray and go to reinforce them.”

“What are you suggesting, then?” Harry demanded.

Severus paced the room.

Suddenly he turned round. “Minerva, I’m afraid you are going to need to have a small but very public accident or illness – a fall down the stairs, or wizarding measles or some such.”

“Really, Severus? And why is that?” she said, drawing herself up.

“So that the Headmaster asks me to accompany Miss Granger home when her parents are involved in a – car – accident,” he said calmly.

“You can’t be planning on my parents really having an accident!” Hermione jumped up, fists clenched.

“A minor accident that requires your return home,” Severus nodded. “I am sure we can arrange something.”

“Where are you going with this, Severus?” Dumbledore asked.

“I will accompany Miss Granger and strengthen the wards. I can use wandless magic, and it is unlikely to be traceable as such,” he said.

“I’ll go with you,” Harry said.

“You can’t be seen, Harry,” Professor McGonagall shook her head.

“I know. I won’t be.”

Hermione looked at them all. “Thank you,” she whispered.

Harry got up and gave her a quick hug.

“Is this the right thing to do, though?” she asked over his shoulder.
“Because they’re still at risk?” Harry asked.

She nodded.

Harry looked at the older people in the room. “Are there any protection spells I could use?”

“A personal protection against everything is almost impossible,” Dumbledore said quietly. “With this combination, Severus could suggest he was responsible for the accident – “

“The Dark Lord will not be pleased if I have acted without his permission,” Severus commented.

“It’s a fall-back, Severus,” Minerva suggested.

He nodded. “Yes. I would still be pu- “ he looked at Hermione, and changed tack. “That might work, should I have need of it.”

“You are a good man, Professor Snape,” she smiled her thanks, eyes glistening.

“You have the wrong man, Miss Granger,” he said.

They thrashed out the details.

As it happened, things did not go according to plan.

Minerva certainly had an accident. Fate, however, took a hand to ensure that the outcome was entirely unexpected. Albus had been in charge of this element, without the knowledge of the others, so that true surprise would ensue. Unfortunately, his charm to make Minerva slip down the stairs (which he had pre-cushioned on the treads and at the bottom) in front of everyone as she led the Gryffindors down to watch the quidditch match between Slytherin and Ravenclaw, was foiled by a second year Hufflepuff, who had knocked against the banister and broken the bottle of butter beer that they were attempting to conceal under their robes. Minerva skidded on the slimy butterbeer (having been wearing her slipperiest shoes for several days, not knowing Albus’ plan), and instead of falling conveniently down the stairs, went head first over the banisters, a spectacular incident accompanied by the screams of the students and an impressive mid-air transfiguration into cat form.

Students for years afterwards debated violently on whether the Professor had really been wearing purple bloomers with pink lace edging, seen (apparently) as her robes flew around as she pitched forward, or (as was another school of thought) was actually seen completely naked momentarily as she transformed. Whatever the truth, her landing met with a resounding round of applause, but unfortunately hairline fractures to several bones in her feet and arms, the pain of which caused the professor to be unable to transform back, instead lying in a yowling heap licking delicately at her limbs.

“Don’t touch her!” screamed Hermione, racing down the stairs, not sure if this was a real or false set-up, but her love of felines (and not to mention her fondness of her Head of House) leading her to charge down the stairs yelling at everyone. As all the Gryffindors knew Hermione had Crookshanks and that Hermione knew everything about everything anyway, they obeyed, as did the Hufflepuffs at the bottom of the stairs who were wanting to pick up the poor kitty.

“Run for Madam Pomfrey!” Hermione shouted at a startled first year, who, flush with pride at the
task, shot off to find the Mediwitch.

“Sure you don’t want Hagrid?” Pansy Parkinson sneered, having witnessed the fall as she came up from the dungeons.

“Piss off, Pansy!” Hermione snarled, to “oohs” of delighted shock at the Head Girl’s language.

Hermione knelt down carefully by the cat, Ron and Harry at her side. It was hard to judge what was wrong – there was no blood, or protruding bones, thank goodness.

Fortunately Professor Sprout appeared, and quickly took charge, shooing everyone away.

“I hope she isn’t seriously hurt,” Hermione worried as they made their way down to the pitch. “That was awful!”

“Tremendous transfiguration, though,” Parvati said, who was in a cluster of students nearby. “Now that really makes sense of being an animagus.”

That evening the Gryffindor students were informed that their Head of House would be out of action for several days whilst her bones healed. They were informed that Professor Hooch would deal with any problems, should they have any, and the prefects were asked to be a first port of call for the younger students.

Hermione spent the night badly, worrying about Professor McGonagall and then the car crash that her parents would suffer. How could she be sure that they wouldn’t be seriously hurt?

It was at breakfast the next morning that the plan was put into action. There was a flurry of activity at the top table, with Dumbledore being called away and then returning to speak to Professor Hooch, who shook her head firmly. Dumbledore turned to Snape, who obviously protested, but then wearily acquiesced. The little drama attracted even more attention when Professor Snape strolled down to Hermione Granger and spoke to her.

“Miss Granger. The Headmaster would like you to accompany me,” he ordered.

Hermione stood up. “Yes, Sir. Where to, Sir?”

Snape flicked his eyes over the eager faces watching them and ears listening. “I don’t believe it is of any concern to anyone else,” he said shortly. “Do stop dawdling.”

Ron and Harry stood too.

Snape glared at them. “And where do you two think you are going? Is Miss Granger unable to walk without your support? Finish your meal.”

Hermione heaved up her bag.

“You may leave that to your helpful colleagues,” he sneered.

Hermione followed Snape out of the hall.

“Summon your cloak,” Snape said coldly, doing the same himself.

Hermione did so, fear and anxiety in her chest.
Their cloaks flew towards them and Hermione hugged hers over her shoulders.

Snape led her to the doors, holding it open wide in an elaborate flourish.

They walked down the path.

“I’m here,” Harry said quietly. “Good thing they’ve cleared the path or my footsteps would show.”

“Damn!” Snape said.

The reason was eminently clear.

Lucius Malfoy was walking up the path.

“It’s good, isn’t it? We have everything set up – “ Hermione said, looking straight ahead.

“Unfortunately not,” Snape snapped. “Mundungus Fletcher managed to get stopped for speeding in the car he acquired. He was then found to be lacking some essential documents and was apprehended. The incident involving your parents has not yet taken place. Nevertheless, Albus and I decided we could not waste Professor McGonagall’s situation, and to proceed, with the accident to occur shortly. Now we have a problem, should Malfoy check or follow.”

Hermione was silent. “Leave this to me, Professor, please,” she said.

He stared down at her. “What stupid scheme - ?”

“Trust her, Severus,” Harry added quietly.

“Look furious,” Hermione said.

“That won’t be difficult,” Snape bit out, lifting his head to an aggrieved angle.

“Mr Malfoy,” he said formally, in acknowledgement of Hermione’s presence. “What brings you to Hogwarts?”

Lucius Malfoy stood there, twirling his cane, looking as resplendent as ever. His cloak was made of finest cashmere, a rich deep blue which made his hair glow, and his grey eyes look preternaturally pale.

“I wished to have a word with the Headmaster about my son’s future studies. I am sorry to see that you are leaving, Severus. And in such –unexpected - company.” He raised his eyebrows, looking from one to the other.

Severus twitched his brows tighter, and hoped in the name of magic that trusting the young woman beside him was not a big, big mistake.

“Professor Snape is forcing me to take him to see Leonard Dimblethwaite,” Hermione said angrily, her face fierce.

“Indeed?” Malfoy said arrogantly. “I don’t believe I was addressing you, young woman.”

“Well, I’ve no desire to be addressing you, either,” she retorted. “Pray let us pass and get this business cleared up.”

“I will not accept rudeness from school children, Miss Granger, on top of the rest of this nonsense. Apologise to Mr Malfoy at once,” Snape demanded. The chit was giving him clues. Leonard
Dimblethwaite? Editor-in-chief of *Practical Potions Monthly*? Why on earth should she be taking him there?

“But he does not wish me to address him, Sir,” Hermione said cheekily.

“This is the problem with allowing such – riff raff – into the school,” Malfoy said to Snape. “They have no concept of manners whatsoever.”

Hermione lifted her chin. “Respect is about giving it where it is due,” she said calmly. “I wrote the article under the pseudonym Herbert Greystoke precisely because of the antiquated notions of outdated wizards like yourselves. I can assure you, the reactions of the readers of *Practical Potions Monthly* have been very positive. Had I submitted the article as a young witch – a Muggle-born witch – “ she looked at Malfoy disdainfully – “I doubt whether the reception would have been the same.”

Severus turned to look her in the face, eyes dark with fury. “And your conceit to think that you can claim the work of a respected member of the Potions community astounds me, Miss Granger! Expulsion will be the least of your problems when the Headmaster has confirmation of your appalling lies! In the absence of your Head of House, I will have great pleasure in returning you to the bosom of your family. Maybe Muggles find such lies acceptable.”

He glanced up at Malfoy during this little tirade, and found the other man’s mouth quirking. Good. He had reeled him in a little with the mention of taking Hermione to her home. Though what had possessed her to come up with this nonsense he had no idea.

“Draco always said that your head was a great deal too large: it seems you have exceeded expectations, Miss Granger. How very droll. Severus, do tell me, is Minerva McGonagall on a leave of absence?”

“She had an unfortunate slip yesterday. Over the banisters,” Severus smirked.

“Dear me, what is Hogwarts coming to?” Malfoy returned. “I may well remove Draco early. But we will discuss that another day. Do not let me keep you, Severus,” and he swept off up the drive.

Harry carefully kept his feet walking at the same pace as Hermione’s, turning to see Malfoy disappear into the school.

“He’s gone,” he whispered.

“What in the name of all that’s holy led you to make up a story like that?” Snape barked. “For Merlin’s sake! I thought you had something decent! We would have been better to risk the original tale!”

Harry chuckled, then muffled it.

“Severus, why do you think I was reading *Practical Potions* when we met?”

“Were you, Harry?” Hermione grinned.

“I conversed very ably on Herbert Greystoke’s thesis,” Harry retorted, a laugh in his voice.

Snape turned on the spot.

Hermione’s arm bumped against his, and Harry lurched into Severus’ back.
“Oomph! Give a man some warning!” he said, pulling away.

Snape ignored him, and pulled Hermione behind one of the ivy-clad pillars on which the gates were hung.

“Are you telling me you really are Herbert Greystoke?” he demanded.

Hermione gave a slight bow. “At your service. I kept the initials,” she added.

Severus stared at her for a long moment, and then gave a slight bow himself. “I have to admit to being impressed, Miss Granger,” he said at last.

“Thank you,” she said demurely.

They walked a few steps further to the apparition point. “And Leonard Dimblethwaite knows?”

“He didn’t before he published, but after – yes.”

They apparated, landing in Hermione’s front room.

Severus laughed. “You have an unexpected Slytherin side. I am astonished.”

“And unfortunately wrong. It was Harry’s Slytherin side that came up with the idea,” she grinned.

“We’ll need to go to see Dimblethwaite: Lucius may check.”

Hermione nodded. “Can we do the wards first?”

“Certainly,” Severus agreed.

Harry had thrown off his cloak and the two of them moved to stand opposite each other, then shut their eyes, feeling out, to detect what Hermione had put in place.

After several long moments, Snape opened his eyes. He watched Harry, who still stood there, motionless and sensing. His hair was mussed from being under the cloak – not that it looked much different from usual – his body loose and relaxed as he allowed his magic to work.

Snape felt a sudden sense of knowing. This was a man he could look at when Harry was old and grey and gnarled, and Severus would still enjoy the sight before him. Would Harry still want him all those years into the future?

He rather thought he might. Harry liked constancy. He had kept the same friends throughout his seven years at Hogwarts, just added more to the mix. He still visited Hagrid regularly – he had no high notions about himself – quite the opposite. He knew he ought to let Harry go, should he want to, but he wanted him; he would not let him leave without putting up a fight!

Harry’s eyes opened, big and green and filling instantly with pleasure at seeing him, and Severus’ heart gave the strangest little leap in his chest. Harry’s hand came out automatically towards him, and before he knew it, Severus had taken it.

Hermione smiled behind her hand.

Severus was leaning in to kiss Harry when the brightness of their surroundings struck him, and he suddenly realised where they were and that they had an audience.

Hermione was extremely disappointed when Snape moved away from Harry and turned to her.
“It is difficult to concede twice in so short a space of time, but again, I am impressed.”

“The wards are excellent,” Harry agreed. “I could add some top up, but it’s hardly necessary.”

“Would you, please, Harry,” Hermione asked. “The more protection the better. And even if someone can feel it, even sense who did it, if it’s you they won’t be surprised.”

“You’d rather I didn’t help?” Severus asked.

“If you’re sure they’re strong enough, I’d rather not endanger you,” Hermione said softly.

Severus was not used to people considering his needs. He was unexpectedly touched.

Harry sat down in the middle of the floor and worked on the wards. Hermione and Severus looked around the house, checking the Muggle protections – locks to windows and doors, bolts, etc. The house was overflowing with books everywhere, which he found very welcoming.

“No wonder Miss Granger had arrived as a fully fledged know-it-all.”

“Would your parents not consider coming into the protection of Hogwarts?” Snape asked quietly, as they stood in her father’s upstairs study. “I am sure Professor Dumbledore would be happy to make arrangements.”

“No.” Hermione shook her head. “They know there are dangers. They’ve suggested I leave the wizarding world - at least until things change. They don’t really understand that I need to be involved in that change – that Harry has to do it, and that he needs all the support he can get. I won’t abandon him, but I can’t expect them to abandon their lives either.” She looked up at him. “I’ve researched potions for personal protection, but there doesn’t seem to be anything long-acting that could be used.” Her voice was a question, and Severus realised she was asking him to share his knowledge, to help if he could.

“I am sorry,” he said gently. “I have researched the area thoroughly, and tried to brew such a potion many times, but I have had no success.”

She nodded. “Thank you.”

Harry appeared at the door, eating chocolate.

“I presume you brought that with you,” Hermione said.

“Yeah, want some?”

She shook her head. “You need it. My figure doesn’t.”

Harry and Severus both looked over her figure, then looked at each other. Hermione flushed with embarrassment.

“Looking good, girl,” Harry grinned.

“Well, I want to keep it that way,” she smiled, tossing her hair.

Harry laughed. “What now? Dimbledumble, or whatever his name is?”

Severus nodded. “Indeed. I plan on being outraged. This is turning into a pleasant morning.”

“What will happen about my parents?” Hermione said quietly.
“I’m afraid the plan will go ahead. Hopefully, someone with more sense than Fletcher has been put in charge. We will have to return here, quite openly, so that we are seen, I fear.”

“You fear?” Hermione queried.

“He’ll have to wear Muggle clothes,” Harry leant over and whispered in her ear, grinning, pleased to distract her from her worry.

“Don’t you like them?” Hermione asked, with interest.

“If you’re used to dressing in traditional wizard dress, they feel a bit – constricting,” Harry commented.

“What? Why? You’re usually all done up with a million buttons,” Hermione commented bravely, looking at the Professor.

“Harry –” Severus warned, just as Harry said, “Remember that old wizard when we were queuing for water at the World Cup?”

Hermione’s eyes widened as the comment registered, and her glance shot down Severus’ body. She could see only his boots, no hint of ankle.

“Thank you, Mr Potter,” Snape growled. “Wizards spell their robes to prevent anyone peering at uncovered elements of the body, Miss Granger.”

“What? No one told me that!” Harry said.

“I noticed,” Severus smirked.

“You bastard!” Harry exploded, throwing himself into Severus’ arms.

The wizard held him tight, restraining him. Hermione was laughing.

“Turn around, Miss Granger,” Snape ordered.

Hermione did, and Severus kissed Harry hard and long.

The mirror across the landing was really very well placed, Hermione thought, unashamedly enjoying the show. There was no doubt about the passion as well as the warmth in their relationship, and she felt thrilled for Harry. Snape really was ideal for him. Strong, passionate, and would brook no nonsense from anyone. A protector for someone who didn’t know they needed protection.

Harry reluctantly gave up Severus’ mouth as his lover drew back. He felt so – wanted.

“We had better go,” Severus said, hands smoothing over Harry’s back into the gentle curve of his buttocks.

“Are you coming, Harry?” Hermione asked, turning round.

“I could make a rude comment, but I won’t,” Harry grinned. “May I?” he asked Severus.

“I am glad to see you developing some restraint at last,” Snape said, and ignored Harry’s snort. Well, he did rather like him unrestrained. “I think you should return. Your absence may be noted – yes, I know you had a couple of free periods, but you should get back for your classes, and be seen beforehand. Meet someone in the library, knock over a pile of books and annoy Madam Pince. I’m
sure I don’t need to advise you on how to be clumsy,” he smirked down at Harry.

“Hey! I mended that vase!” Harry grinned.

“What vase was that?” Hermione said, heading down the stairs.

“Some Ming thing of Malfoy’s,” Harry said nonchalantly.

Hermione choked, then turned to grin at him. “Way to go! How did you manage that?”

“We will not go into that,” Severus said severely. “Now or later,” he added, seeing the sparkle in Harry’s eye.

“Spoilsport,” Hermione amazed herself by retorting.

“It is indeed my pleasure,” Severus bowed.

Harry returned to Hogwarts, whilst Hermione and Snape enjoyed tea and cakes with Leonard Dimblethwaite. After Snape burst in and ranted for several minutes, of course, and was then soothed by the editor who praised Snape’s excellent teaching in producing such an outstanding student. Hermione had to hold in her laughter. Whilst they were enjoying a slightly stilted discussion of a new theory, Snape still in his aggrieved but slightly mollified mode, an owl flew in for Severus.

He scanned the note quickly, and then turned, with a severe face, to Hermione.

“Miss Granger, I’m afraid that this missive brings bad news. Your parents have been involved in a – a - car – accident on the way to work this morning –“

Hermione allowed her cup to slip out of her hand and crash onto the floor. She’d noted earlier that, whilst pretty, the china was serviceable rather than valuable. And definitely not Ming.

“Are they hurt?” she gasped, a hand to her throat.

Although she knew this was going to happen, it was actually rather odd, part of her needing to act surprised and the other part in real fear for them. Wizards did not understand how frail Muggles were.

“They have been discharged from hospital –“

“Hospital?” Hermione croaked. She dashed over. “Let me read it, Professor, please!”

Snape handed over the note. It was from Albus, saying that an owl had reached Hogwarts not long after they left. It said little more than he had already mentioned, apart from the suggestion that Snape take her to visit her parents, who were recovering at home.

“Oh, Sir, Professor Dumbledore says you may take me to see them! Please, I beg of you!”

“Miss Granger, I have classes –“

“But Professor Dumbledore gives you permission! Please, Sir! You know Professor McGonagall can’t bring me! Please!”

“My dear, I’m so sorry,” Dimblethwaite said. “Severus, do take the young lady! She must be
worried sick! It will do Albus good to take your classes for an hour or two.”

“An hour, Miss Granger,” Severus intoned, his voice indicating that he was severely put upon.

“Thank you! Thank you both!” Hermione hugged the elderly editor, who turned pink and rubbed her back briskly.

“There there, dear, I’m sure they must be fine if they have been fixed up already. Severus, you could make them some chamomile tea for the shock, perhaps? I’m sure my secretary has some to hand – for our more volatile clients, you know –“

“Leonard, I am not a maidservant, nor a house elf,” Snape said severely. “I am sorry to have troubled you. Come Miss Granger, we have only fifty five minutes remaining.”

Hermione looked apologetically at Mr Dimblethwaite. “Thank you. So sorry about the china –“

She began, as Snape took her elbow and led her to the stairs.

Hermione was hugely relieved to find that neither parent had sustained any broken bones. The air bags had both released on impact; the car, apparently, was a write-off, but apart from whiplash and a severely bruised finger (which would be inconvenient for her mother’s work), both parents were in good spirits.

Severus, dressed in a dark suit with white shirt and dark tie, hair restrained in a ponytail, looked stunning. Hermione appreciated Harry’s disappointment in not being allowed to stay. Snape wasn’t handsome, but imposing, memorable – definitely. The moment they were through the door he was an ambassador for the wizarding world, charming and attentive. He held her mother’s hand whilst he anointed the bruised and swollen digit with a potion from a tiny bottle which he produced from inside his jacket, and Hermione felt warmed to know that he had come prepared to help her parents.

“I would advise keeping the bandage on, however, Mrs Granger,” he said apologetically. “It’s best to keep up appearances. If you will allow me to use a hint of this oil on your necks, it should help with the discomfort there. I’m afraid I’m only going to use the merest drop – it would be best if there is some indication of the problem for the next few days, and you play on it as much as possible.”

The doorbell rang.

Hermione peeped out of the window.

“Mrs Jones from over the road. I expect she’s come to see why you’re home at this time of day with a bandage.” She turned to Severus. “She’s a real gossip.”

“Good,” Snape nodded. He pocketed the bottle and sat back.

Hermione went to the door and the sound of explanations and Mrs Jones’ shocked responses resounded in the hallway.

Even as she sat and fussed the bell rang again. Another neighbour arrived.

Snape ostentatiously twisted his wrist to see his watch.

“Hermione, Professor, you’ll miss your train!” Mrs Granger said quickly. “Come and give me a kiss, love.”
“How on earth did you get here so fast?” Mandy Baker from next door said.

“By strange coincidence,” Professor Snape spoke, and you could almost see the two new women swoon at his rich voice, “I had accompanied Miss Granger to see an editor – she has had worked published in my subject, I have recently discovered - when I was contacted by the school who had received the message of the accident.”

“Well!” Mrs Jones exclaimed, “For all we complain about mobile phones, they do make a difference in a case like this, don’t they? Just think, Hermione, ten years ago you would have got back on that train not knowing your parents were hurt! Not that they are hurt, not too much, thank God –” she rambled.

Snape rose to his feet, towering over them all. Hermione fetched their coats, then kissed and hugged her parents.

“Take care of her, please, Professor,” her father said, rising too.

“I will, Mr Granger,” Severus shook his hand, meeting the concerned eyes.

Hermione gave her mother a last kiss, and they left.

Severus walked her down the road.

Hermione had not realised how tall he was – there seemed to be miles of leg in those Muggle trousers.

“Alright, Miss Granger?” he asked quietly, looking straight ahead.

“Yes, thank you.” She tried not to sniff. She felt ridiculously emotional. It was relief, she knew.

“What happens now?”

“We won’t discuss that here,” Severus answered coolly.

She nodded. She knew that they could be being watched or overheard. The cold tones braced her. She lifted her head, gave her eyes a surreptitious scrub, and followed him.

“Professor?” she said, as they entered the school once more.

“Miss Granger?”

“Thank you once again. And –“ she paused, blushed, and then said very quickly, “I’m sure your friend would love to see you in those clothes.”

And she dashed off to classes, leaving a musing Snape five minutes to prepare himself for the delights of teaching third Year Hufflepuff/Ravenclaw Potions.
“You’re still here, then?” Draco said, as Hermione slid onto her chair in the library that evening.

“You’re still here, then?” she asked.

“Where else should I be?” he said nonchalantly.

“Thought you might have been expelled,” he said nonchalantly.

Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“Father said Severus had it in for you. You’d taken credit for someone else’s work.”

He sat there, watching her. How much, months ago, he would have loved this moment! Now, he knew what depths there were to Hermione’s character, and took nothing for granted.

“Professor Snape was perfectly satisfied, after our meeting with Leonard Dimblethwaite, that I had not been lying,” Hermione said primly.

Draco looked at her keenly. “Granger, are you telling me you’ve had an article published?”

“Precisely.”

“What article?”

“Do you read *Practical Potions Monthly*?”

Draco leant down to his bag and threw the latest edition on the table. “I have a subscription.”

Hermione’s eyes lit with fun. “Want to guess?”

Draco sprawled back in his chair, studying the witch. She looked surprisingly attractive with her face sparkling with mischief.

“Narrow the search. Which month?”

Hermione thought about that. “Fair enough. August.”

Draco got up and went over to the periodicals section, returning with the magazine and leafing through.

“A letter or an article?” he asked.

“An article,” Hermione confirmed. “Come on, I’ve practically given it away.”

Draco flipped the pages. “Well, I’m assuming you weren’t posing as Snape, or he would have gone ballistic ages ago.”


Draco’s lips twitched.

“Professor Matthilde Heidleburg’s Essences of Rejuvenation?” he suggested.

“Oh please! As if I’m interested in beauty products! I’m surprised they allow that sort of article in.”
“It attracts women readers.”

“That is so sexist. I bet you use more slap that I do,” Hermione studied the flawless skin and the fine, clean hair.

“Most people don’t see that as a negative,” Draco said coolly.

“You are so vain!” Hermione choked out, laughing.

“But with good cause,” Draco drawled. He suddenly stopped page turning. “No! Not – oh, bloody hell! Even the initials! Herbert Greystoke, I presume?” He mock-bowed over the table at Hermione.

“The very one. What did you think of the article?”

“Damn and blast, I have to confess it had – points of merit,” Draco said, not mentioning that he had actually brewed one of the variants Hermione had theorised on at home, and spent several hours working on it. “Did you not think to try -?”

They got into an intense discussion lasting a good half hour. At last it began to wane.

“So what did your father want?” Hermione asked.

Draco looked at her. “To discuss my future. For me to test you to prove that Muggleborns are inferior.”

Hermione drew in a breath. “You didn’t tell him that you’ve already done so?”

“I don’t think he’d like the results,” Draco said under his breath.

Hermione regarded him with interest. “Going to tell me what you found?”

I found really nice breasts and beautiful skin, thought Draco, but he said, “A scientific survey is not complete with just a dozen studies.”

“Good one,” Hermione leant back, then added quickly, ”Is that what you told your father?”

“I told him that it would take years to conduct a formal study, and without solid research the results would not have any validity in the scientific community, or anywhere else.”

“Good for you! How did he take that?”

“He would like some initial results to pass on to the Dark Lord. As proof of my – good intent. He doesn’t think the wider community gives a toss about validity either.”

“Oh, Draco! What did you say?”

“I told him research was not about good intent; that I had the honour of being a Healer and had no intention of ruining the Malfoy name by acting as a charlatan.”

Hermione had her hands over her mouth, her eyes wide with astonishment. She was a very good audience, not like Pansy who always had to have her say, or even Greg or Vince, who didn’t always understand the implications of things without it being spelt out to them.

Hermione leant over the table and took his face between her hands; they were small and soft, yet the touch seemed to tingle down Draco’s spine. She turned his head side to side. He couldn’t
believe he was letting her do it.

She let go and leant back.

“Where is it? What did he do?” she asked quietly.

“Where’s what?”

“He doesn’t appear to have hit you, unless you’ve healed it yourself – *can* you do that?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered in surprise at the question. Another thing to explore. “Of course he didn’t hit me.”

“Why of course? He hits house elves.”

“I rather think my father sees some slight difference between his heir and a house elf,” he said disdainfully.

“Get off your high horse,” Hermione retorted. “If he’s able to hit a house elf it was more than possible that he had kept you in line with violence too.”

“Granger, he’s a wizard. Wizards punish their children with magic.”

“I could ask a lot about that, but what I really want to know is if you’re hurt,” she said quietly.

“I am not,” he answered coolly.

Hermione looked at him. “If you say so,” she said at last.

“Merlin, you’re persistent!” Draco snorted. “I think he respected me a little for standing up to him. That was before he told me that he had found another Healer to take me in hand – a rare creature who will not work with Mudbloods or squibs.”

Draco’s voice was neutral.

“How do you feel about that?” Hermione asked. The Draco she had thought she had known in the past would have jumped at the chance.

“It’s a missed opportunity, isn’t it?”

“To find out whether Muggleborns and Purebloods really are different?” Hermione said, keeping her voice neutral too.

“Yes.”

Hermione sat back, trying to hide her disappointment.

“And whether wizards are different from witches, centaurs different from humans, giants different —”

Hermione threw a scroll at him. “Bastard.”

“I assure you I’m not,” he grinned.

“That could be really interesting,” Hermione sat forward, resting her chin on her palm.

“Yes. I don’t know if it’s been done, I need to do some research.”
“If you need a hand—“

Draco looked carefully at her. “There’s nothing much here on Healers,” Draco said.

“Well, there wouldn’t be, really, would there? I mean, you’re so rare—“

“Thank you—“

“Shut it, it’s an observation, not a compliment. How about St. Mungo’s Research Library? And of course the Ministry.”

“Why the Ministry?” Draco’s brow drew into a line.

“Well, there’s a Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, isn’t there, as you knew when you were trying to get Buckbeak put down,” she scowled at him. “Any knowledge about their magic would obviously pertain to the department’s work, so if there is anything, they may have a copy. I could go and check it out probably more discretely than you, they’re used to seeing me in the Reading Room and asking for all sorts.”

“I presume you can’t take books out?” Draco mused, not rejecting her offer instantly, Hermione was pleased to see.

“No, but I pay an annual subscription for a copying licence.”

“Then I may well take you up on your offer, Miss Granger,” Draco smirked.

“Well that’s very kind of you,” she retorted with saccharine sweetness.

Hermione started reading her text book, and Draco picked up his quill again and began to continue working on a scroll.

“Draco? What will you tell your father? About the Healer?”

“He was talking about taking me out of Hogwarts, but Dumbledore persuaded him that as we’re so close to finishing it would be best to let me get my NEWTS, so I’ve got a bit of time. Hopefully, after Hogwarts—“ he shrugged.

Hermione understood. Hopefully everything would be different. Harry had said it would be over. It was weird to think of life without this threat hanging over them. And yet, Harry’s words had the feel of a promise.

“Was your Dad serious about taking you out? I mean, why would he, when there’s only a few months to go?”

Draco looked around, checking their privacy. “I don’t know. It’s—unexpected - isn’t it? I mean, I know he wants to assert his authority, but he’s always been so adamant that I get top marks, work hard, yada yada.”

Hermione too looked round. “You don’t think - you don’t think they’re thinking of attacking Hogwarts and he wants you safe?”

“If they were going to attack, I’d be more inclined to think that he’d want me here to help from the inside,” Draco said thoughtfully.

Hermione didn’t know what to say. She could see the logic of it, of course, but surely Lucius Malfoy would be worried for his own son’s safety?
There was a sudden kerfuffle across the room. Hermione looked up. Pansy Parkinson and Theodore Nott had come in, ties loose, Nott’s shirt hanging out, Pansy’s skirt so short that she’d obviously rolled it over at the top. Several times.

Draco sighed, and pushed the book in front of him so that it was in between them.

“She has got nice legs,” Hermione commented.

Draco grunted.

“Don’t you think so?” Hermione asked, surprised.

“Sure,” Draco said, not looking up.

“Are you jealous that she’s with Nott?” Hermione queried, taken aback by his tone.

Draco snorted. “No, Granger.”

“Sure?”

He looked up. “If I wanted her, she’d be here like a shot.”

“Right,” Hermione grinned.

Draco sighed. “Pans!” he called.

Madam Pince was obviously off for the evening, and only a few of the younger kids looked round in awe at breaking the silence taboo.

Pansy strolled over, thrusting her hips with every step.

“What’re you doing with her, Draco?” she sneered, perching herself on the edge of the table, back to Hermione, one thigh at an angle along the edge, so that Draco was between her legs.

Hermione blinked. He must be able to see right up to her knickers.

“Project,” Draco said shortly, wafting his hand at the book in the middle. “Seeing where Snape took her this morning.”

Pansy glanced round at Hermione, grinning unpleasantly. This second reason was much more valid than the first. “Spill,” she turned back to Draco, her knee rubbing against his side.

“Maybe later,” Draco said, lowering his voice seductively.

“Mmmm,” said Pansy, stroking Draco’s quill over her lips.

“Fuck off, then,” Draco said.

Pansy got up, laughing. She trailed the quill down Draco’s cheek, then dropped it on the table, glancing at Hermione. “Bet you’re a straight-laced little bitch,” she scoffed.

“You’ll never know,” Hermione said, putting her nose back into her book and cutting Pansy off.

The Slytherin tossed her hair and sauntered away, wiggling her bottom.

“Told you so,” Draco said.
“Could you see her knickers?” Hermione demanded, outraged.

“No.”

“Oh.”

“She wasn’t wearing any.”

Draco laughed as Hermione spluttered.

“In a skirt that short? And waving herself in your face? Has she no pride?”

“None at all,” Draco commented. “She was wafting odour de Nott at me, too.”

“Oh, that is disgusting!”

“Now you know why I am not interested in her lovely legs. Everyone has been between them, myself included when I was a young and guileless thing.”

“And any bike would do.”

“Well, as you say, she does have nice legs,” Draco said. “At 14, who was I to complain?”

“And now you’re more discriminating?”

“Wouldn’t you be?”

Hermione laughed.

“It’s sad, isn’t it? I mean, I know I miss sex, but to be that – trollope-y,” she shuddered.

Granger missed sex.

The words, so casual, so unaffected, shot straight to Draco’s groin, in a way that Pansy’s promiscuous flirting did not. He had flashing thoughts of that creamy skin, that delicious concave belly heaving in the throes of – he clamped down on the thoughts, trying not to shift in his chair. The fabric of his trousers brushed his balls, suddenly hyper-sensitive. How would those small hands feel –? He dragged his thoughts away again, but already his cock was thoroughly interested. He forced himself to note what else Hermione had said. Pans. Yes. That certainly had a depressive effect on his system.

“She’ll be married off as soon as she leaves school,” Draco said. “She’s just getting in all the fun she can while she can.”

“Doesn’t she have a choice?” Hermione said, shocked.

“With her parents? No way.”

“She’s not been betrothed to you since birth, or something, has she?” she asked.

Draco snorted. “My father can’t stand her Dad. Regards him as an arse-licking social climber. He’s found some Romanian Count or something for Pansy to marry.”

“Really? What does Pansy think? Obviously not keen, if she’s getting about as much as she can beforehand.”
“Would you want to be married to a hundred year old man who you’ve met twice and doesn’t even speak your language?”

“You’re not serious?”

Draco nodded.

Hermione considered. She couldn’t imagine being forced by her parents to have to do something so awful – and to be committed for your whole life to a complete stranger.

“Poor thing,” she whispered.

“I wouldn’t feel too sorry for her,” Draco said. “She’ll make the best of it. She’ll like the status, have lovers on the side, command a big house. Poison his wine after a year or two...”

“Draco!” Hermione laughed.

“It wouldn’t surprise me,” he grinned.

Down in the dungeons Snape was sitting in his favourite arm chair, Harry on his lap with his legs draped over the arm. Harry’s head was resting comfortably against his chest. It felt remarkably pleasurable.

“It’s a good thing you don’t weigh too much,” Severus remarked, “otherwise my legs would be dead by now.”

“Want me to get off?” Harry said, not moving an inch.

Harry could feel Severus’ chuckle rumbling against his cheek.

“You’re alright,” his hand brushed down Harry’s arm, his other reached and picked up the whisky glass at their side without dislodging his burden.

Harry’s head came forward and Severus held the glass to his lips, sighing. “I told you you should have your own glass.”

Harry swallowed, took another sip, and turned to Severus, linking their mouths. Only a tiny bit dribbled down as he transferred the burning liquid.

Severus accepted it, his tongue chasing back languidly into Harry’s mouth for last traces of flavour.

“What am I to do with you?” he murmured, lips still moving against Harry’s.

“Plenty of things I can think of,” Harry muttered, his mind turning to mush and his body to steel. Certain parts of it, anyway.

“I have marking,” Severus said reluctantly. “The Headmaster may have taken my classes this morning, but not the associated workload.”

Harry sighed, knowing that he wouldn’t push. He didn’t want just a quickie, but to stroke and tease and please Severus. He changed the subject, distracting himself from his body’s urgings.

“How did you find Hermione’s parents?”
Severus’ hand continued to stroke down his arm. “Pleasant. They have amazing sang-froid, considering.”

“You’ve been at that dictionary again,” Harry said, feeling the cloth of Severus’ robe against the edge of his mouth as he smiled.

“And you are an ignoramus,” Severus retorted. “Cold blooded. They are calm and collected. And I don’t think it is because they do not appreciate the situation.”

“They’re very supportive of Hermione,” Harry agreed. “Was Hermione ok?”

“She is an interesting young woman,” Severus admitted.

Harry turned his head. “Do you swing both ways?” he asked, surprised.

“I appear to swing your way only, at present,” Severus said severely, making Harry smile with pleasure. “I fear I will come to enjoy her friendship. See what you have brought me to.”

Harry laughed outright. “You love having another wizz brain to deal with, admit it! Especially one that is interested in potions.”

“Miss Granger does bring a refreshingly idiosyncratic style and view to the subject,” Severus said mildly.

“You like her,” Harry chuckled, snuggling in.

“The possibility exists that I may come to do so,” Severus said cautiously, making Harry keep up the giggles.

“Come on, up!” Severus said, rising and tumbling Harry off.

“Hey! What did I say?” Harry turned to stand in Severus’ arms, running a placating hand up his chest. Had he teased too much?

“It is more what you did,” Severus said, and at Harry’s bemused look, continued. “Wiggling, Mr Potter. I am not immune,” and he slid his hands down over Harry’s buttocks, pulling Harry in so that he could feel the burgeoning arousal.

“Not immune to wiggling,” Harry chuckled, pressing back, “I’ll have to remember that.”

They kissed long and languorously, before Harry pulled away at last. “I’m going to go and work in the library,” he said, moving to pick up his bag.

Severus raised an eyebrow, but Harry shook his head. “I won’t stay: you’re too much temptation. I’ll see you later?”

Severus, warmed by the desire, nodded. “Of course.”

Harry slipped one last kiss on his lips and was gone.

On the way up to the library, Harry met Neville who had come in from the greenhouses.

“You’ve been working late,” Harry said, as they walked up the stairs together.
“Time flies out there.”

“How’s it going?”

“No luck with the *ercandaeia farlica,*” Neville said, his voice disappointed.

“Still trying to get it up to the 50 years?”

“Oh, I’ve done that,” Neville said matter of factly, “but it’s not keen to flower again. There must be something else at play. I’m trying to work it out.”

“I’m really grateful, Nev,” Harry said seriously.

“Don’t worry about that, I’m having fun! It’s just the consequences of not succeeding that are the worry.”

“Yes.”

“Do we have strategies for if we can’t make more?”

“I think Ron and gang are working on it. You’re right, though, we all need to know. It could happen any time, not on our timetable.”

Neville nodded seriously.

“Who died?” Draco drawled, coming down the stairs.

“What?”

“You have the longest faces.”

“No, nothing’s happened,” Neville said. “Well, not having much luck with the *ercandaeia farlica.* Thinking of alternatives.”

Draco looked round. Although they could be having a Herbology discussion, he was ever cautious. “I’m going to the kitchens for a snack. Hungry?”

The other two shrugged, nodded, and followed him back down a flight.

Soon they were all in the kitchen, with house elves bustling to bring them food.

“Phew! It’s hot in here after outside,” Neville said, stripping off his robe and jumper before heading over to the sink to wash his hands.

Draco noticed how meticulous he was, his sleeves rolled up, cleaning his fingernails with the brush, his shoulders bunching and releasing as he moved. His arse was tight and firm too.

Merlin! He did not just think that!

He looked at Harry, but Harry was talking to his old elf Dobby, and his eyes were drawn back. What would Neville’s thighs look like naked? He’d never seen him in the training room, but he looked like solid muscle.

“It shocked me too the first time I realised how fit Neville was,” Harry said quietly, sitting down.

Draco opened his mouth to protest, but Harry took pity on him. “It doesn’t make you gay to notice,
Draco, just observant,” he said gently.

Wheels were turning in Draco’s head. “Are you and Nev –“

Harry laughed. “No! I don’t even know which way Nev swings! Shall I ask him?”

“No!”

“What’re you talking about back there?” Neville said, looking over his shoulder.

“Just admiring your arse!” Harry laughed.

“Yeah, right,” Neville turned back to turn off the tap, dried his hands and walked back to them.

Being seated, it was only natural that Draco’s eyes should look straight ahead. At groin level. Wasn’t it?

The soft jeans that Hermione had noted moulded muscular thighs that strained against the fabric as he walked, and – he was not going to look at Longbottom’s package. Or notice it. Or put any observations into words. Certainly not.

Draco swallowed.

“You have got a nice arse, you know,” Harry said, friendly as anything, as if it were a perfectly normal comment. “You probably can’t see it yourself.”

“Not unless you do a reflection charm,” Draco said, unthinkingly.

Both boys turned to look at him.

“What?” Draco said, trying not to blush. “I have to make sure my clothes hang right, don’t I?”

They were both laughing.

“Fuck off,” Draco said without rancour.

They tucked into cake and tea with gusto, in comfortable silence.

How life changes, Harry thought.

Who would he be sitting drinking tea with in five years time, should he be alive to do it?

He’d be very happy if it were these two. As long as Severus was there waiting for him somewhere.

“Is your potions research exploring other avenues?” Neville asked at last. “I’m worried that I’m going to let you down on this one.”

“Neville, you’ve done wonders,” Harry said. “We still have one dose of four times strength, don’t we?”

Draco nodded.

“Then if the worst comes to the worst, and they attack before we’re ready, I’ll take care of Voldemort and we worry about taking the Death Eaters later.”

“Can it be that simple?” Draco said.

“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly. “It’s a plan. I think I ought to start carrying the potion with
me at all times, just in case.”

Draco nodded. “We’ll decant it into an unbreakable flask. It would be wise.”

Neville looked at him sharply. “Your Dad didn’t let on? Sorry, I shouldn’t ask you to snitch on your own father,” he said apologetically, realising what he had said.

“I’ll be fighting him,” Draco said quietly. “At least, I really hope I don’t have to, personally.”

“God, no,” Neville said, surprising the Slytherin.


“Want to talk about it, or rather not?” Harry asked carefully.

Hopefully, Draco’s future would not be Lucius Malfoy’s business.

“Nah, I’ve already talked to Granger.”

“Hermione,” Harry corrected, though he was intrigued that Draco had talked to her about it. Well!

“Yeah. Look, Neville,” he said, changing the subject, ”do you want me to have a look at that plant? I mean, I know I’m not Mr Genius at Herbology like you, but in case anything about its properties jogs me on the potions’ options.”

Neville shifted. “Well, it’s a good idea, but I’d have to get permission from its owner,” he said, carefully not looking at Harry.

“Oh. I thought it was in the greenhouses.”

Neville shook his head.

“It’s not still in China or wherever you got it, is it?”

Neville laughed. “No, and thank Merlin for that, the amount of tending it needs. It’s – it’s in Professor Snape’s partner’s garden,” he added, as Harry hadn’t attempted to shut him up.

“Really?” Draco said, enthused. “Have you met him? How the hell did you get that job?” he sidetracked.

“Professor Snape recommended me.”

“No way!”

Neville smiled sheepishly. “Yeah, I was pretty shocked too.”

“So what’s he like? Gossip time, Neville!”

“Surely Slytherins aren’t encouraged to gossip about their Head of House?” Harry said.

“Not with other Houses, but you don’t count,” Draco dismissed the objection cheerfully.

Neville snorted. “Why’s that?”

“’Cos I want to know more, that’s why!”

“There’s nothing to spill,” Neville said.
“Come on, you must have met him!”

“I thought you said he was at that big party at Malfoy Manor,” Neville sidetracked.

“Yeah, well Father said that whatsisname almost gave Snape head in his study whilst they were watching,” Draco grinned, causing Neville to spatter his mouthful of tea all over the table, and Harry to turn beetroot red. “Dad offered a room to have a shag in but they left instead. Pity. I bet he would have put them in the room with the two-way mirror.”

“What?!” screeched Harry.

“Come on, Potter, you’re bloody gay! Going all prudish on me?”

“You wouldn’t have wanted to watch, would you?” Harry gasped. *Oh my god.*

“Well, Snape’s ugly but I expect his body’s fine under all that kit,” Draco mused.

“I didn’t know you were gay,” Neville said in surprise.

“I’m not,” Draco said quickly, avoiding Harry’s amused eyes. “It’s just – Snape, you know? Hard to imagine him really going at it. He’s all stiff and withdrawn.”

Harry choked. *All stiff and withdrawn?* He thought of Snape all stiff and his fingers withdrawing (and then plunging back in inside him) and was hard as a rock himself.

Neville was pink in the face.

“Blimey, didn’t you know Gryffs were such cissies,” Draco sneered. “Don’t tell me you’re both still virgins?”

“I think it’s time to change the subject,” Harry wheezed. “This conversation is so bizarre! I don’t think you have to be a virgin to find something odd about straight guys watching gay guys having it off together.”

“Maybe your Dad’s gay,” Neville said, then blushed again. “Sorry, keep saying things I shouldn’t. Not that you don’t do it all the time,” he looked at Draco.

“Course he isn’t,” Draco said. “How do you think I got here?”

Harry thought he’d better keep quiet, but Neville was in there now.

“Well, there’s only one of you, isn’t there?” he said, “despite the fact that your mum looks like a fairy princess.”

“She does, doesn’t she?” Draco smiled. “They also only needed one heir. And she likes being slim and beautiful. Why have more?”

Neville looked at him. “But doesn’t it bother you, being an only child? I mean, all three of us are. I’d have really liked to have had brothers or sisters,” Neville admitted, taking the conversation into easier, if no less controversial ground.

Draco didn’t know what to say, really. When he was young he had played with the house elves, but as he grew older he realised that the way he treated them – following his father’s habit - was not how people treated their brothers and sisters. Not that he knew that many – Pansy was an only child, as were Greg and Vince. Blaise, though, came from a big, friendly Italian family, and meeting them had been a revelation. He’d hated it at first – the having to share, the not getting his
way, but one night, snuggled up in a bedroom that he was reluctantly sharing with Blaise and his three brothers, and they’d been joking and messing about and he’d nearly wet himself laughing, he realised how great it could be. But it was obviously never going to be a part of his family life, so he’d never set himself up for false hopes.

“Never really considered it,” he said honestly.

They both looked at Harry. “Don’t look at me,” he said. “Until I met the Weasleys I assumed all families were like the Dursleys. In theory, Dudley should have been like a brother to me. One of him was quite enough.”

“You didn’t get on?” Draco asked.

Harry laughed. “That would be the understatement of the year. They hated me and they hated magic. They’d had this kid dumped on them with no way to return him. I’m sure it was a relief all round when I came to Hogwarts.”

“So why are you bothered about protecting Muggles?” Draco asked.

“Well, that’s a bit like meeting Voldemort and deciding all Wizards are shit,” Harry responded. “Let’s put it this way: my first lover was a Muggle and I’d do anything to protect his right to live on this earth. He’s a wonderful man.”

“Ha! Not a virgin!” Draco cheered. “Still mooning over him, then?”

“No, I’ve moved on, and so’s he. His new lover is great, so I’m really pleased for them.”

“You keep in touch?”

“Yeh, I’ve stayed with them in all the holidays except this last Christmas,” Harry said.

“Since when?”

“A couple of years ago.”

“Wow! But isn’t it weird when they disappear off into the bedroom together? Seeing your lover going off with someone else?”

Harry grinned, wondering if Draco would be shocked. “Well, they’ve both been my lovers, and I’m sure if I wanted to join in again they’d let me now and then.”

“Whoa! Hold on! - Again? You – you’ve had a threesome?” Draco almost whispered the words, leaning over the table.

“Yeah,” Harry grinned.

“Holy shit! But – how did it work?”

“Are you asking me for all the juicy details, Draco Malfoy?” Harry laughed.

“No! Well – but – I mean – doesn’t anyone get jealous or anything?”

“Not if you’ve all gone into it willingly, I don’t think so,” Harry said. “We didn’t.”

“Was it hot?”
“Whoo yah!” Harry grinned, “But there are better things.”

“Really?” Draco said disbelievingly.

Harry glanced at Neville, who had been very quiet. Was his friend offended by the conversation? It was hard to tell with Neville. He was sitting quietly, hands folded at the table, looking down at them. Time to change the subject, perhaps.

“Yes, really,” Harry nodded.

“Love and romance?” Draco teased. Who the hell could Harry be in love with? He’d never even seen him with anyone. Probably another Muggle, then. But then he hadn’t talked about protecting their life, just this first lover.

“At which point,” Harry said, “I am heading up. You coming, Neville?”

“Avoiding the question?” Draco smirked.

“Yup,” Harry said honestly.

Neville reached over and grabbed his jumper, slipping it on before standing to get his robes back on.

Draco got up. “You head out first; I’ve been seen with enough Gryffs for one day.”

“You alright, Neville?” Harry asked worriedly, as they’d passed two flights in silence. “Did I offend you? I’m sorry –“

“Offend? No, don’t be daft.”

“You’re very quiet,” Harry observed.

“Thinking,” Neville said succinctly.

“It’s allowed,” Harry smiled. After another minute or two, Neville said quietly, “Can I ask you a question? Don’t answer if you don’t want.”

“Sure. I won’t if I can’t, if you see what I mean.”

“You fancied Cho Chang, right?”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

“So when did you transfer to blokes? What made you even think of it? Do you still fancy women?”

“Whoa, right, one at a time!” Harry held up his hands as if to hold off the bombardment. “Um, let’s think. I suppose I transferred to blokes the summer I met Derek. I hadn’t really thought of fancying blokes before – I know that sounds stupid. The Dursleys were really anti-homosexuality, and I suppose it hadn’t even really occurred to me that I might fancy blokes. I mean, I noticed what the players looked like on Ron’s Chudley Cannons posters, but I didn’t realise I was checking them out, or that I was looking at them in any way differently than Ron was, say. Maybe I wasn’t. It was just acceptable to look, so I did. I left the Dursleys and went to work for Derek, and he was openly gay. Don’t think that he coerced me,” he said quickly, “it’s just that most of his mates were gay and were around a lot and everyone checked each other out, and I went to clubs with them. Derek
checked out men walking by when we were up the scaffolding at work, and would comment. He got furious though when I was propositioned in his own home – three times! I suppose it just made me wonder if I was interested. And then I kissed this guy at a club, and it was great. I mean I’d kissed Cho – it was all exciting, before, you know, first kiss and all, but frankly, just disappointing. Then this guy kissed me and it was like I’d put Pepper-Up Potion intravenously into my cock, or something.”

Neville burst out laughing.

Harry grinned. “Well, it was! It was yelling and screaming and waving with delight, and I thought, right, now I know, and I haven’t looked back. Men turn me on.”

“And not women?”

“Haven’t seen one yet that did it for me. And it’s easier with men; I mean, you know what the bits are and what they like. And everything feels hard and nice -“

“Too much information, Harry!” Neville cut in quickly.

“I didn’t mean that!” Harry laughed, “Well, only partially! I mean, men’s chests, muscles, it all feels different. I like it. Not soft and squidy. I mean, I like it if Hermione gives me a cuddle, but it doesn’t do anything for me down there, thank god! I’ve only got to touch - my lover’s – bicep – and I’m on the way to being hard.”

He looked at Neville. “Want to tell me why you asked? You don’t have to.”

Neville shook his head. “Just thinking.”

“Fair enough.”

A few steps later, he said quietly. “I am a virgin.”

“Well, it’s nothing to be ashamed of, or proud of, or anything is it?” Harry said practically. “I don’t understand the fuss, to be honest. One is, and then, ten minutes later, one isn’t. And that’s that. Seems silly to get bothered about it. “

Neville chuckled. “You are funny! Thanks, Harry, I needed that.”

“It’s just up to you,” Harry said seriously. “You’re good to look at, Nev, and nice with it. And powerful. There’ll be loads of girls – or boys – who’d be interested. You just have to have the nerve to go up and speak to them. I was lucky, because I was asked rather than having to do the asking. The worst that can happen is that they say no.”

Neville nodded. They’d reached the portrait hole.

“Harry, could I – when you next –“

Harry waited for Neville to get it out.

”When you next go to a Muggle club, could I tag along? I think I’d like to try the kiss test.”

Neville was bright red.

“Sure,” Harry said, and opening the door they went inside.
As the door slammed to, the whole wall shook.

“Holy shit!” Dean yelled across the common room, “I know you’ve been working out, Harry, but keep it in, mate!”

Harry looked at Neville, and, eyes fearful, they both reached out a hand each and placed them palm down on the walls. It took only a second.

Harry’s eyes shot open, meeting Neville’s shocked ones.

The wards were under attack.

“Nev, apparate to Dumbledore and check he knows. I’m sure he will. Then come straight back and get the sixth years organising the safety of the rest of the House. I expect McGonagall will help. Get any seventh years who’re prepared to fight to come. I’m going to get the potion.”

Neville nodded, quickly leant forward and hugged Harry. Harry took in the people in the common room over his shoulder. Neither Hermione nor Ron were there, but the room was full of young students.

He was desperately aware that he needed to keep them all safe.

Pulling away from Neville, he apparated to Severus’ chambers.

His lover was already at the warded cabinet where the potion was being kept.

He turned at the crack of Harry’s apparition, his relief that it was Harry and that the wards had not been breached by the Death Eaters showing on his face.

Harry was straight in his arms, held tight, his senses in overdrive, the strength, firmness, warmth, scent of Severus all bombarding him.

“Is this it?” Harry asked. “We thought the attacking Hermione’s family thing might be a distraction, but you haven’t even reported the address yet – he must suspect you. You can’t go to him.”

“I won’t,” Severus said firmly. “I’m at your side now.”

“God!” They were the best words Harry had ever heard, and he squeezed Severus even tighter.

Severus pulled back, his arms holding Harry’s shoulders. “Concentrate only on Voldemort. Do not think of anyone else. Don’t let yourself be distracted by others being hurt. Put up your strongest protection shield. The potion should keep you safe. Just kill the bastard, and let us take care of the others,” he said fiercely.

Harry nodded dumbly.

Severus took his face and kissed him hard, teeth and tongue and lips and care.

The fire flared.

“Severus! Is Harry with you?” Dumbledore asked urgently.
Severus pulled back, took Harry’s hand and led him to the fire.

“Come through, I’m assembling the Order,” Albus said.

“A moment,” Snape spoke.

Albus nodded and disappeared.

To Harry’s surprise, Severus strode over to the door and took down his cloak, handing it to Harry. “It’s still cold out there,” he said practically.

Harry nodded mutely. And he would be wrapped in Severus’ cloak, smelling him, feeling his concern wrapped all around him. That was good.

“You need something,” he said.

Severus whisked into his bedroom and returned with a deep green woollen cloak.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Minerva gave it to me for Christmas several years ago. She thought I might like a change from black. I’ve never worn it.”

Harry grinned.

“Severus -“ his voice halted.

Severus stopped and looked at him.

“I know,” he said quietly. “You can show me in bed later. As I will show you.”

Harry nodded, warmed. They had never spoken of their feelings, communicating through touch and actions.

There was banging on the door. Harry saw Draco through the spy mirror.

Go on ahead,” Severus said to Harry. “I’ll join you in a moment.”

Harry stepped into the fireplace.

Albus’ study was packed. There was no chance of falling over as he came through, as Bill Weasley, Ron, Fred and George and their father were all in front of him, Shacklebolt in front of them, others...Harry couldn’t see over people’s heads and his arrival went unnoticed.

Severus came through quietly just moments later and stood behind Harry. Everyone was so tightly packed that Harry could feel Snape pressing tight against him as he made way for the next floo arrival. Snape’s hands came to his hip to steady him. Harry pressed back for a moment.

Everyone was making so much noise that it was almost painful. Bill turned round as they were pushed forward and grinned.

“Hey!” He shouted out.

“Harry’s here!” George yelled.

There was a cheer.
It made Harry’s anxiety increase tenfold.

Severus, feeling his tension, soothed his hand over his hip again.

“Give him some room, for Merlin’s sake,” someone bellowed, and then he was separated, pushed through the crush, to the front, with Severus left at the back.

The hullabaloo was unabated.

“Silence!” roared Snape.

You could almost feel the breeze as the knees of his ex-pupils quivered. Silence reigned.

“Thank you,” Snape said sarcastically. “If you could all hold your tongues so the Headmaster can update us -” One or two voices started butting in. Snape stopped, and waited for silence, glaring. He got it, as the offenders slowed to a halt. “Mr Potter has a potion to take, and the timing is of the utmost importance.” He felt everyone take that on board. The silence held. “Headmaster, what is the position?”

Dumbledore stood up, his face waxen. “The wards are under attack -“ there was a rumbling murmur, that was then swiftly dropped. “They are holding at present. This is what we are facing.”

He directed a large foe-glass at the wall, blanking the backdrop of past Headmasters and Headmistresses, before projecting an image there.

It was like a film, thought Harry, without the soundtrack. There were gasps of horror.

Throwing curse after curse at the usually invisible barrier of the wards separating the grounds from the moorland outside, were what appeared to be hundreds of Death Eaters, their masked faces lit up in the dark of the night as the curses hit the wards and exploded in showers of colour.

Fear and its resultant adrenaline rush suffused the room.

“How long can the wards last?” someone asked.

“We’ve strengthened them,” Harry answered.

People looked at him.

“Neville and I,” Harry explained. “They’re pretty strong. But we’re under siege. I don’t see much point in just sitting it out. Everyone just gets weaker.”

“But surely they’ll just go away,” someone else said. “There must be enough provisions here, and we can floo -“

“We will need to shut down the floo system as soon as we can,” Severus said quietly. “They may well try to breach it. Once they are inside, it will be a great deal more difficult to keep the children safe, with the possibility of hostage taking.”

“But we’re not ready to fight them,” Molly said. “Harry’s too young –“

Dumbledore cut across her, “There is never a right time, Molly. Strategists, your advice, please.”

The room fell silent, the moving picture a silent backdrop.

“Hestia,” Albus said.
Hestia Jones stood up. “Our plans are not yet in place,” she said shakily. “If we could hold them off for even a few weeks – or days –“ her eyes scanned the room for her fellow strategists, “it would make a difference –“

“Not really,” Neville rose to his feet awkwardly. “If you’re talking of creating more potion so that everyone can have some. Even if I could get the plants to produce what we need, and I can’t at the moment, the brewing period is lengthy.”

“Mr Longbottom is correct,” Severus spoke up, seeing the doubt in people’s faces at trusting to such a young man. “His work had been invaluable in helping Miss Granger and Mr Malfoy in the creation of the strengthening potion, and at least there is enough for Mr Potter.”

“Ronald Weasley, please,” Dumbledore asked as Hestia sat down.

Ron rose nervously to his feet. His voice broke as he spoke. He looked across, terrified, at Harry. “I think it would be a bad mistake to try and sit it out. As Harry said, everyone just gets weaker, and more scared. History doesn’t show any advantages to it. They’ll find ways to break through. The question is, will the Ministry side with Voldemort or the rest of us? I think Fudge will just give in to Voldemort.”

“Kingsley? Is that a fair assumption?” Dumbledore asked.

“Unfortunately, yes. There’s a core of loyal Aurors, but others will be severely torn if their orders are to stand down or to support Voldemort.”

“Severus?” Albus asked.

Harry looked down. He knew what Severus needed to say. Maybe the other man would find it easier without Harry’s eyes on him.

“As disappointed as I am that we do not have more potion, I believe it is Mr Potter’s time. Time to go out there and finish this once and for all. He knows what he must do, as he himself told us before: he must go out and kill Voldemort. The rest is up to the rest of us.”

There were howls of protest. Molly was weeping and muttering, “he’s just a boy,” over and over.

“He isn’t,” Snape said loudly. The voices simmered down. “He isn’t just a boy.”

Harry looked up at his vehement tone, and met Severus’ eyes. He nodded.

“He’s a mage. The most powerful wizard on this planet. “

He let that sink in.

“Voldemort thinks he has all the advantages – surprise, strength, support. Well, Harry has a surprise in store for him, and we need to take advantage of that. Neither Voldemort nor the Death Eaters have any idea what they are facing. If we go into a siege, Mr Potter is bound to attempt something heroic and give the game away.”

There were several outraged murmurs, but Harry just looked up and gave a small smile.

“Voldemort will expect us to opt for the siege. I suspect he will have plans to force its end – he will bring our children’s parents or brothers or sisters here, and murder them in front of the school. Someone will break. There are bound to be sympathisers in the school, and not just my Slytherins. What will we choose to do to them? At present, everyone is confused. Now is the time for Harry to
kill him, and he can. He will,” Severus said with conviction.

Harry’s heart swelled. Severus believed in him.

“What if he – fails?” a voice quavered.

Ron stood up. “Then we continue fighting. Us. Everything has always been put on Harry. Well, I don’t believe in destiny or divination. It makes sense to follow Harry, because he’s powerful, and courageous. But if he falls – and I don’t believe you will, mate,” he looked across at his friend and made a slight bow, “then we fight for our own destiny. Because I’m not living under the control of that murderous bastard. He’s attacking a school, for fuck’s sake.”

Ron’s speech struck a chord with everyone, despite Mrs Weasley saying, “Ron! Your language!” which broke the tension and made people laugh.

Harry was amazed at his friend, and very proud. Even though they were discussing what to do if he died, the fact that it wouldn’t be the end of the fight took the pressure off him a bit.

“So how do we go about this?” Tonks asked.

“There’s hundreds of ‘em and not many of us,” Mundungus Fletcher moaned.

“Can we wait for some of the others? Charlie? Remus?” Bill asked.

“Good chaps, but they won’t make that much difference,” a voice chipped in.

“What about the parents?” Hermione spoke for the first time.

“What are you thinking, Miss Granger?” Dumbledore asked.

“Well, I suspect most parents wouldn’t want to stand by whilst their children were under attack. Surely they’d come to help?”

“I’m sure you’re right, Hermione, but Snape said we’d need to close the floo,” Fred said kindly.

“Well, I’m assuming the battle is going to be outside, not in.”

There were interested looks.

“Have we time to contact all the parents?” Professor McGonagall spoke up; she had just come in, a few minutes after Sprout. Flitwick was yet to arrive. Harry supposed Snape had delegated his Head of House duties to Draco. Was Draco coping? Was he in danger? What of Pansy Parkinson and the other 7th Year Slytherins?

“Well, we could do a chain,” Hermione was suggesting. At the blank looks, she said, “Muggle schools do this sometimes. You contact say five parents, and ask each of them to contact five more, and that five the next five, and so on.”

“But how do we stop contacting the ones that will support Voldemort?” someone asked.

“I believe that issue is irrelevant,” Snape said in his deep voice. “From the look of things, they are already here.”

“Attacking their own children?” Molly said in horror.

“We may find that their own children have instructions,” Snape said quietly. “I have asked Draco
Malfroy to lead those whom I’m afraid I do not trust into a secure room for the moment.”

The contact idea was approved, and the first calls were made. Parents were asked to arrive in 45 minutes. Dumbledore had used another scanner to find a safe apparition point for them outside the wards.

Dumbledore looked at Harry, and then turned to Severus.

“Professor Snape,” he asked formally, “I believe it would be best if you would assist Harry with relaxation techniques before administering the potion. Would you like to use my sitting room?” and moments later, Harry and Severus found themselves alone.

Harry wasn’t sure whether this was a wise move.

There were too many things, and nothing, that needed saying to Severus, too much desire to touch and confirm their need for each other and not enough time to do it.

“I know,” Severus agreed, though Harry had said nothing. “Why he thinks he knows what’s best for people I do not know.”

Harry grinned, relaxing now that he knew he wasn’t the only one feeling this reluctance.

And suddenly, the barriers just collapsed, and Harry moved into Severus’ arms and they were sitting on the sofa with Harry straddling Severus’ lap, his arms around him and his head on his shoulder.

They sat there like that, peacefully, for a good ten minutes, not talking.

At last, Harry sat up.

“Any advice?”

“None that I haven’t already said. Just concentrate on killing him. Let everyone else do the rest.”

Harry nodded.

They both got up, Harry holding onto Snape’s hand a fraction longer than he needed after he pulled them up. Severus handed him the potion, and Harry gulped it down.

It felt very final. A confirmation that it was happening.

They stepped out of the room.

Hermione looked up at them and smiled.

Severus moved across to where Hestia and Ron were looking over several hastily drawn parchments. He spoke to them both, and they nodded, then had a brief word with Dumbledore, who then coughed to get everyone’s attention. The room fell silent.

“Well everyone. Some last minute clarification, and matters to clear up. As you know, Harry is to concentrate entirely on Voldemort. Everyone else is to help clear the path through for him. Any curses or spells are allowable. Use what will help in the ultimate goal. This is war. We have been openly attacked by a large army, and I have registered a declaration of such, and our right to defend ourselves, with the Ministry, here, for what it’s worth, and with France and America for confirmation.”
There was a rumble of emotion sweeping through the room.

“If I may, Headmaster?” Harry spoke up.

“Of course, Harry.”

Harry was aware of all eyes on him, and especially Severus’. “I’m sorry that there was not enough potion for everyone. I have now taken the dose, so we need to act soon,” Harry began. “I’ll be creating a shield. It will cover us all –“

There were gasps and a flurry of words that Harry couldn’t make out.

“Please,” he held up his hand, and silence fell at once. “I won’t be able to do the parents, so bear that in mind. Act as fast as you can. I will hold it as long as I can, but must conserve enough power to destroy Voldemort. You will be able to cast spells but you won’t be hit until I have to drop it, so use that initial time to the maximum. Don’t hold back, please.”

“Are you able to maintain that and do what you must?” Dumbledore asked with concern.

“Yes,” Harry said firmly, “but I will drop it when I must. I’ll try and warn you – ummm – what would work?”

“How about yelling, “Duck!” ” Fred suggested, to laughter.

Harry grinned. “I’ll sonorous that,” he agreed, to even more laughter.

“Albus, will you stay here to hold the wards?” Shacklebolt asked.

“No, Minerva and Flitwick have agreed to do so.”

Harry’s eyebrows twitched into a sharp line as he thought about that. “No,” he said loudly.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “but –“ his eyes looked around the room, and met Neville’s.

“No,” Neville said, “I want to fight –“

Harry shook his head. “I’m sorry, Neville. Please.” He looked at everyone. “Neville Longbottom needs to hold the wards. Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick should look after the children; they’ll be terrified. They will also be our last line off defence.”

Heads shook worriedly at the realisation of what that would mean.

“Longbottom can’t look after the wards, he’s a child himself,” someone shouted out anxiously.

Harry straightened himself. “Neville is a very powerful wizard indeed. The wards have accepted him.” Harry heard the murmur run round. He thought his words about strengthening the wards earlier had passed with a surprising lack of comment. Usually only the Heads of House and the Headmaster were able to work with the wards. “You know when we tested me that Neville was apparating huge bunches of you in and out,” he said in response to the muttering.

“Thought you’d let them down for the day; anyway, it was outside,” Fred said.

Harry shook his head. “Apart from myself, Neville is the only wizard I know who is able to apparate into and out of Hogwarts, including the castle itself, and within it,” he added. “Those
skills are going to be really important today. Neville has another extremely rare gift: he can also recognise magical signatures. Neville, I’d like you to hold the wards, to check everyone over and to let us go out of them, and then to let only those whose signatures you recognise back in. It’s a huge task. Am I asking too much?”

Neville, who was horrified at the thought of being left behind, realised the magnitude of what was required of him.

Albus stepped forward, and said, with genuine humility, “Mage, may I make a suggestion?”

And with those six words, people realised Harry might actually understand what he was doing.

“Of Course, Albus. I asked for your advice,” Harry smiled gratefully.

“May I assist Neville? If we set up a position in the Astronomy Tower – as well as for canoodling it is designed to give a 360 degree view of the sky and land around – we can follow the action and do what is necessary. The telescopes can be magnified to allow us to use them almost like this foe-glass. I can hold the castle alone until – and if it should come to it – it is directly under attack. Neville can do the perimeter wards, and grounds, which is going to be a much more active task than mine. He can use his herbology skills linked into the wards out there, should there be breaches.”

Harry looked at Neville. “Will that be acceptable to you, Neville?”

“I’d be most grateful, Sir,” Neville bowed slightly to the Headmaster.

There was a tingling in the room. Neville’s potential as a future Headmaster occurred to more than one of the occupants of the study. He could actually be a very interesting choice.

“Then we had all better go,” Harry, said. “I believe there will be many of the older students waiting for us in the entrance hall.”

There was a huge number of students waiting for them, from fifth year through to seventh.

“Couldn’t keep them back.” Ernie McMillan said with a grin, Eloise at his side. Harry noted Draco, smiling at him, with Goyle, Crabbe and Zabini and a number of Slytherin sixth years, who all cheered as they spotted Severus. There was Ginny, Dean, Seamus, Colin and his brother, Parvati with Padma, all the old DA crew. A roar of approval went up from everyone, and it lifted Harry’s spirits.

“Harry, will you speak to them?” Dumbledore asked.

“No, you do it, please,” Harry said.

A few words of explanation were spoken.

Harry in the meantime, had gone up to Draco, hugged him and then shaken hands with all the Slytherins. The other students looked at each other and suddenly, the Slytherins were accepted. Harry met Severus’ eyes, and the warm glow of approval therein.

“Harry,” Dumbledore said, suddenly at his side, “this may be the moment to make known you are a Mage. Certainly, it will give heart to our troops and put fear into our enemies.”
Harry, despite his misgivings about how it was viewed, could see the tactical advantages.

“I’ll head out with the Order, I’ve no time to waste. You can tell them and send them out.” And he slung Severus’ cloak over his shoulders and was gone.

The next hour was a jumbling of cold dark night and bursting spells and shouts and screams. They left the wards and attacked the Death Eaters on the cold, hard ground outside.

Neville had followed them to the edge, before apparating up to the Tower, and then down again, towards the edge of the Forbidden Forest. They had seen a group of Death Eaters disappear into the woods and try and make their way through that way. Neville put his hand to the earth, and called on the woods and the earth magic to strengthen the defences there.

Harry did not know how many wizards he had put out of commission. He had killed one, early on, and realised the huge amount of power that Avada Kedavra used. He had not appreciated before how much power the spell took, and understood why wizards used other spells so much. He was therefore saving it for Voldemort, because he was pretty sure that he would need an inordinate amount of power to use it on him. So far there had been no sign of the Dark Lord, and Harry was worried that this was either another cover, that Voldemort was taking over the Ministry or acting somewhere else, though he couldn’t think where else was important enough, and couldn’t believe that Voldemort would have vast numbers more troops. The potion’s effects only had another hour or so to run. He needed to get Voldemort to face him.

Concentrating, even as he cast spell after spell at his attackers, he called up his Mage wand and staff from Hogsmeade. Within minutes, they had zoomed over the heads of his attackers and landed in his hands. He tucked his ordinary wand into his back pocket, under the back of Severus’ cloak, which flapped open around him in the biting wind.

He turned to Snape, who was, as he had promised, at his side. “We need to taunt him, Severus,” he shouted. “Pass it on that Voldemort is too scared to face a Mage.”

Within moments the words were flying in the air, the Death Eaters who had heard the rumblings of Harry Potter being a Mage from the fighting students, but disbelieved them, now noticing the Mage staff and wand both held at the ready.

Suddenly, the Death Eaters parted and Voldemort was there.

“A Mage?” he laughed. “What nonsense is this, boy? You have –“

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry cast the killing curse as he had planned, taking no notice of Voldemort’s ranting.

Unfortunately Voldemort threw the nearest Death Eater into the path of the spell. Voldemort attempted to return the curse, but it bounced off Harry’s shield. Harry could feel the power of it battering at the shield.

“He’s drawing power from us!” Severus yelled to Harry.

“Duck!” Harry screamed, startling Voldemort, who to Harry’s momentary amusement, did just that.

He could only have one objective now. Everyone would have to fend for themselves.
He and Voldemort did duck and dive, hurtling Avada Kedavra’s at each other, and when that failed, other spells in an attempt to break through. Harry could vaguely hear the screams of the fighters at his sides, as they took hits. He was amazed at how nimble Voldemort was, how strong his shielding, and began to feel a sense of panic.

He couldn’t lose!

He couldn’t!

Everyone was depending on him.

But he couldn’t think what to do. His only plan had been to get close enough to kill the bastard.

As if the shit was going to stand there and let him do it.

He must’ve been mad.

But he had trained. He was fit physically, his magic strong...

“Harry! Severus shouted, “Use the other wand! He’s draining our power!”

Even as Harry was wondering what Severus was on about, he saw Voldemort’s attention flicker, as he recognised Severus’ voice.

“Avada Kedavra!” Harry bellowed, dropping his own personal shield to throw every iota of his strength into the spell.

Everything seemed to slip into slow motion. Harry could see the slitted eyes widen, then Voldemort yell something even as Harry’s curse was speeding towards him.

Harry felt Voldemort’s spell hit him at the same moment that the Dark Lord hit the ground.

He leapt forward. “Incendiare!”

Voldemort’s body burst into flames, the smell of cooking flesh hitting the nostrils of everyone close.

The Death Eaters began to apparate as the news of Voldemort’s destruction rolled across the battlefield; the Side of Light fought to capture as many as they could.

Harry stood there, by the burning body, his hand holding the cloak across his mouth and nose to shield the smell. He began to shake.

Shacklebolt staggered up to him, wand high, a hand touching him briefly, sweeping a circle as he guarded him.

Acting on instinct, Harry raised his staff and smashed it through the burning skull, driving shards of bone and brain into the hard earth, then held his staff up to the sky. A small cyclone seemed to suck down, dropping fat gobs of rain onto the body, which hissed as they met the heat of the fire.

“Earth and air, fire and water, elements of life and good, take back what you have given, and may it be better used in future,” he chanted, and stood there, watching as if in a daze, as the body burnt slowly away, feeling the magic doing as he asked.

He looked around, vaguely. There was still fighting in pockets, but it would soon be over.
He turned to look at the Astronomy Tower, and hoped Neville could see him.

“Neville,” he shaped his mouth clearly, “I need you.”

A moment later Neville apparated beside them.

“Fucking shit!” Shacklebolt swore, the point of his wand in Neville’s chest.


“Any sign of a magical signature?”

Neville looked at the body carefully.

“Yes.”

“What the fuck?” Shacklebolt said, but Harry just nodded.

“Help me destroy it, Neville. Severus!” he shouted.

Moments later Severus staggered over.

“You okay?” Harry reached out to him, worried.

“He’s dead, isn’t he? If so, I’m fine.” Severus gave him a lop-sided grin.

“He has a magical signature still. What would you recommend to destroy it?”

“You’ve dealt with the body?”

“Consigned to the elements,” Harry nodded.

“A good choice. Then it should dissipate as the body is destroyed.”

“Let’s speed it up then,” Harry suggested. “I need to be sure.”

“Earth or own magic?” Neville asked.

“Both,” Harry said. “One hand each.”

All three pointed their wands with one hand, held out the other hand, and cast. They had to step back as the fire burnt bright and fierce, but they held on, until only ash remained.

“Neville?” Harry asked. “Check again, please.”

“Gone,” Neville said a moment later.

“Good,” Harry grunted, his hands dropping.

He looked round.

It was plainly over.

“So many injured,” he whispered.

“We’ll get them help,” Neville said. “I’ll go and floo St. Mungo’s; Madam Pomfrey has already set
up a treatment centre in the Great Hall.”

Harry nodded.

He felt deathly tired all of a sudden, and knew the potion had worn off.

“Harry?” Severus’ worried voice seemed to be coming from a great distance.

Harry fell to his knees.

His body jolted as if he had been hit.

And then he shrieked.

His hand fumbled inside the cloak.

And when his fingers came away, he didn’t need the wand light Severus was casting at him to know that the warm wet on them was blood.
Severus fell to his knees beside Harry, but even as he pulled the cloak away to look, Harry screamed.

His hand shot to his face, but stopped just short. Even by wand light, Severus could see the grimace of pain contorting it – but –oh, holy shit! That wasn’t just a grimace of pain.

Harry’s face was – melting? – peeling – blistering –

“Draco!” Severus roared.

“Get Draco! And Poppy!” he turned desperate eyes to Neville and Shacklebolt.

“I’m here!” Draco shouted, from close by, “But....”

Harry forced his head round at Severus’ silence, the one eye he had open seeing Draco bending over Goyle, who was lying still on the ground, blood pouring from his chest. Vincent Crabbe was shoving his cloak under Goyle’s head, and even by moonlight the terror on his face was evident.

“Save Goyle,” Harry choked.

Draco nodded, relieved, and pulled open Greg’s shirt, thrusting his hand to his stomach.

Harry suddenly shrieked again, then bit it off, his body convulsing and his face in a rictus of pain.

“For fuck’s sake, where’s Poppy?” Severus bellowed, reaching out to hold Harry, who gasped and flinched at the touch.

“Should I apporate Harry to the Great Hall? I expect she’s there.” Neville said urgently.

“You may do more harm that good,” Shacklebolt interjected. “We usually portkey severely injured Aurors.”

“I’ll fetch her, then,” and Neville apporated.

Severus didn’t know what to do, where to put his hands. He carefully lowered Harry to the ground, where he writhed in agony. Severus knew the signs of Cruciatus, he had experienced it himself not many minutes before, and was still shaking. But nobody was cursing Harry now, so what in hell was going on?

Hermione came running up.

“Harry! Dear God, what’s happening?” she gasped.

Severus was kneeling on the ground beside him, rather as Crabbe was beside Goyle, gently stroking the undamaged side of his face.

“I don’t know!” he got out, distraught. “It’s as if someone is casting spells on him, but no-one is –“
“This one looks like Cruciatus,” Shacklebolt commented. He was still standing guard for potential attack, although it looked as if the fighting was all over. He was furious. Only a dozen or so Aurors had joined in the battle, all of them loyal members who he knew had been out on active service. It seemed certain that the Ministry had stopped any others coming, although it could be that the Ministry itself was under attack. There would be hell to pay for someone.

“Are there time-delay spells?” Hermione asked, her brain trying to whizz through the possibilities as she bent over her friend. “Jesus! Harry, have you been burnt?”

Harry was shaking on the ground, but managed to get out an agonised negative.

A pop of apparition and Neville had brought Madam Pomfrey.

“Now, stand clear,” she said firmly. Severus stayed where he was. Shacklebolt moved back a bit, but still kept his guard. After one glance at them, Poppy ignored them and turned to Neville and Hermione. “Can one of you throw up a bit more light, please?” and without waiting, turned instantly to Harry. “Don’t worry, Harry, we’ll soon have you right as rain,” she said, with infectious conviction.

She took her wand and began to wave it over him, chanting.

Hermione had a ridiculous moment when she thought of the Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe, and created three lamp-posts, already lit, which provided sufficient lighting.

Glancing up, she saw Draco with Crabbe and Goyle, and leaving Poppy to her ministrations, went over to put up a lamp-post for them.

Crabbe stared up at her blankly.

“Draco will heal him, won’t he?” his voice cracked.

Hermione looked at the blood covered chest, a huge wound slashed through the clothes and flesh.

She put her hand on his shoulder. “He’s a Healer. The best medical help there is. And he cares for you both. He’ll do everything and more that he can.”

Crabbe nodded. “He’s got to be alright,” he whispered. “I’m nothing without him.”

Tear tracks glistened in the light down the rounded cheeks. Hermione felt her own throat closing and hoped that Draco could do something.

“It was an honour to have you with us today. You were both so brave,” she said gently.

Vincent shook his head. “I should have got him out of here. I should have looked after him - “

“Don’t give up on him yet,” Hermione said. She didn’t know what she could do. Slightly guiltily, she was looking around for other injured people.

There were many Death Eaters hurt; groups of parents standing over them, their injuries for the most part ignored. They needed Aurors and medical help, and she prayed both were on their way. There were also some others down, and again, parents were working on them. Hagrid was in the distance carrying someone inside.

She glanced down again at Goyle. Crabbe was rubbing a hand over his face. “Look!” Hermione shook his shoulder. “Look! Draco’s doing it!”
Before their eyes, the wound was healing.

A huge sob escaped Crabbe. She gently squeezed his shoulder and left.

She glanced back at Harry, but Poppy was still working on him. Harry seemed to be convulsing again. Forcing herself to be useful, Hermione went to another victim and cast a lighting spell.

Ron dashed up and swept her into his arms.

“Harry did it! Harry did it!” he yelled joyously, swinging her around. “Have you seen him? Where is he?”

“He’s hurt,” Hermione shoved her hands on his shoulders to make him put her down.

“What?”

“Something’s wrong, come on,” she tugged his hand, taking him over to where a whole group were now clustered around Harry.

Floating across the landscape, cheering could be heard, as word of Voldemort’s demise had obviously reached the school. The windows had been flung open and the tiny heads of the pupils were leaning out, joyous and happy.

It seemed utterly bizarre, with Harry lying in agony.

Hermione pushed through the strangers, still holding on to Ron.

Snape was kneeling beside Harry, keeping his body levitated off the ground as he writhed, to stop him injuring himself further as Poppy tried to work.

“Harry!” Ron gasped, then as someone elbowed him in the ribs to get a better look, he turned back, glancing round at all the bystanders. “For fuck’s sake!” he exclaimed. “This isn’t a show! Go and help someone!” And threw up a privacy screen.

“Hey!” Someone shouted.

Ron stepped through it into view. “Bugger off!”

“Who the hell are you to tell us what to do?” one of the crowd shouted.

“His mate, that’s what!” Ron snapped. “You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! How would you feel if that was your son in there?”

There was muttering.

Suddenly Snape swept through, and stopped, as if startled to see them.

“Hey, Professor! Is Potter dead?” someone yelled.

Snape turned to them and raised his wand. “You will be if you ask that again,” he said, his voice icy.

Dumbledore appeared, calm and authoritative.

“Mrs Swithins? The school is now open to parents. Go and see your daughter. She was crying earlier. Mr Pope? There is an infirmary in the Great Hall. Could you please help organise
Snape strode across to Draco, who was sitting back beside Goyle, panting. He looked down at Goyle, his head cradled on Crabbe’s lap, but eyes open.

“Welcome back, Mr Goyle,” he said, his voice more kindly than any of the boys had ever heard it. “Mr Crabbe, I suspect in a moment you could take Mr Goyle up to the Great Hall for some Blood Replenishing Potion. Draco, I’m afraid we need your assistance urgently.”

Draco staggered to his feet.

Suddenly there was a thunderclap of apparition and Neville appeared with a whole team of medics in St Mungo’s uniform.

“A boy over there,” Snape pointed at Goyle, and two medics began rushing over instantly. “I need the most senior of you with me.”

“He’s healed,” Draco shouted over his shoulder. “Just needs aftercare.”

Severus, with Draco, a couple of medics and Neville, pushed through the screen.

Albus was talking to Poppy, bending over Harry, who was still cushioned above the ground, Hermione now maintaining the spell. Ron, tears streaming down his cheeks, knelt beside Harry, who was now unconscious.

“Draco!” Madam Pomfrey said with relief, turning from the Headmaster, “I can’t make any sense of it! Burns, knife wounds, Cruciatus – they just keep happening –“

Harry suddenly jerked again, and screamed.

Draco, who was already exhausted, nodded. He was frankly horrified at the sight of Potter. The cloak was trailing beneath him, but above, he could see blood all over his front - and his face – his face was disgusting.

He knelt down beside Harry, and began to open his shirt. Severus knelt opposite him. Like Shacklebolt, he was surprised that Snape was so bothered. But then, the man had just been very kind to Goyle. And Potter had saved him from a life of servitude. The buttons slipped through his fingers, coating him with Harry’s blood. He started to peel back the shirt, and dropped it, yanking his hand away, turning to the side on his hands and knees, trying to restrain the impulse to retch, gulping in the cold air.

He heard the gasps around him. The St Mungo’s staff were opening their medical packs, talking to Poppy Pomfrey.

“Draco!” Snape’s voice, sharp and urgent, pulled him back. He could hear Granger trying to muffle sobs, and Weasley was making little grunting noises.

He looked back at Harry, trying to decide where to place his hand.

On the left side, where he had started to pull back Harry’s shirt, the skin had come with it. There was a patch of unburnt stomach, and Draco slipped his hands there. He could feel one of his fingers make contact with one of the puncture wounds that was leaking blood, but forced himself to ignore it.

He dropped in.
Several moments later, he took his hands off, eyes wide with horror, kneeling back on his ankles. His eyes searched around, finding Dumbledore.

“What is it?” Poppy said. “Can you not help?”

Draco shook his head wildly.

“We must get his magic out! Quickly! Quickly!” he gasped. “Professor, there must be a spell!! Oh please, he’ll die! Quickly!”

“How!” Snape said sharply.

Draco was so overwhelmed he felt he might pass out if he hadn’t needed them to act.

“Please!” he begged. “You must know a spell! There’s hundreds – hundreds! – of curses, all tied into his magic! All dreadful things!”

Suddenly Harry flailed, and a snap! rent the air; Harry’s arm suddenly hung limp and at a funny angle at his side.

“That’s a Bone Snapper Curse,” Ron said with a shudder. “Someone did that to me earlier but it hit the shield, thank Merlin!”

“Please!” Draco grabbed Dumbledore’s robe. “There’s every horrible curse – they’re all tied in but they’re working on him, he can’t contain them! You must get his magic out of him!”

“But he won’t be a wizard then,” Shacklebolt said, looking at Draco suspiciously.

“He’ll be dead!” shouted Draco. “There’s Avada Kedavra, and Cruciatus – Merlin knows how many of them – and acid curses and slash hexes –“

“Oh dear heaven!” Ron gasped. “It’s the shield.”

They all turned to look at him. “It’s a gut feeling,” he said, “but – it sounds like – all the spells that his shield absorbed – all the spells we all took – he’s absorbed them into himself, and now –“

“Oh my,” Madam Pomfrey clutched a hand to her breast. “Oh my poor dear lad,” she whispered. The mediwizards were standing there looking helpless.

“There must be a spell, there must!” Draco implored. “You can’t let him die like that! Take the magic out and clean it up! Put it back later. This is a death too horrible – it might be ages before an Avada Kedavra – or any moment – I don’t know which is worst.” He shook his head.

Dumbledore and Shacklebolt were looking at each other.

“There is a spell,” Shacklebolt acknowledged. “Sometimes used on prisoners. But we’ve never put the magic back, just dispersed it.”

“You know the spell? You’ve done it?” Hermione asked.

Shacklebolt nodded. “It’s not exactly public knowledge –“ he began.

“Who gives a fucking shit?” Ron barked. “Let’s do it!”

“But if we can’t get his magic back?”
Harry opened his eyes and gasped, then started choking, his one hand going to his throat, but it made no difference.

“A Strangling Hex,” Shacklebolt observed quietly.

It was horrible to watch; no “Finite Incantatum” worked, Harry was suffocating in front of their eyes.

“Do it,” Snape snapped. He leant into Harry’s face, into the bulging eyes.

“Harry, we’re going to take out your magic. I won’t let you die,” he said fiercely.

With a horrid gurgle, the spell finished, and Harry gasped in lungfuls of air. He nodded. “Either kill me or do it,” he mangled the words, his throat crushed, clutching Severus’ hand. “Please,” he begged.

Severus nodded, and looked to the others. “Do it.”

“We need a container for the magic,” Albus said.

“It’d better be big, he’s got tons of it,” Draco said quickly.

“I’ll get something,” Neville said, speaking for the first time, and even as Shacklebolt was saying the spell, with Dumbledore supplying power, a huge bin appeared.

“What the fuck is that?” Ron whispered to Neville.

“Compost bin. Hold on, let me scourfify it and fill the drain holes.”

A moment later it was done.

They fell into silence as Harry’s magic began to stream from him, a bright silver light encased in writhing red. More and more and more of it poured into the bin.

“Where has all that magic come from?” one of the mediwizards asked. “Is the spell multiplying his magic?”

“He’s a Mage,” Ron said proudly.

“Was,” the other mediwizard said, shaking his head.

Everyone turned to glare at him.

“Perhaps you’d like to go and help someone else,” Poppy said severely.

“I’ll watch. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

Neville looked across and held out his hand.

The man disappeared.

“Where in all that’s holy has he gone?” the other Mediwizard gasped.

“I’ve sent him to the Great Hall,” Neville said, with no remorse whatsoever. “He may remember his profession is to help others there. Want to join him?”

“I’d like to see if I may be of use in a moment,” the other said quietly.
“Stay, then,” Neville nodded.

Dumbledore, despite his concentration, smiled.

Harry was looking at Severus.

“He’s gone,” he mouthed. “Worth it.”

“You did it. I’m so proud of you,” Severus said quietly.

Harry, floating, found it hard to move without resistance to push against, but turned his head towards Severus. Severus slipped in closer so that Harry’s head was resting against his chest. Harry let out a slight sound.

“Too painful?” Severus asked.

“Don’t go,” Harry held on tight; the words were broken, and it was too much agony to shake his head.

Severus understood.

“Shit!” Shacklebolt exclaimed, a spell exploding out of the strand of magic just as they were extracting it.

Harry groaned, as the curse lifted him several feet in the air and then attempted to slam him down.

“I’ve got him!” Hermione said, the cushioning charm holding firm.

Severus too had hold of him, though controlling the move, too scared of damaging him to hold Harry tight. The broken arm flailed.

Severus’ eyes raked Harry’s: they were glazing with pain.

“Hurry!” he urged.

Barely minutes later Shacklebolt breathed a sigh of relief as a last strand went into the bin.

Neville slammed on the lid.

“Draco,” Poppy said, “would you be good enough to go back in and check?” She had been feeding Draco chocolate in the meantime.

Draco nodded, touched Harry’s stomach again – he felt colder, though the burn was glowing heat – and went in.

“Clear,” he said, moments later.

He felt a ridiculous urge to cry. Potter had felt hideous with all that malevolent magic in him, but his core had been – more than incredible. Now, he was empty. So empty. It was dreadful.

“Right, let’s heal the worst of these injuries and get him up to the castle,” Poppy said cheerfully. “Alfric?” Poppy had ascertained the mediwizard’s name. “You do burns, I’ll do the knife wounds. The arm can wait.”

They both moved in and started some complicated spellwork over Harry.
Harry was semi-comatose. Snape was on one side of his head, Ron now at the other.

“You’ll feel better in a minute, mate,” Ron was saying encouragingly, and rabbiting on to distract Harry. “Two mediwizards working on you at once! Give it half an hour and we’ll have some firewhisky or something to celebrate. What d’you fancy?”

“Sev’rus,” Harry mumbled.

Ron blushed. “Yeah, well, that wasn’t quite the lines I was thinking of, but you’ve got a good idea there, you’re right, mate! Hope Madam Pomfrey’s got a lot of Day After Anti-Contraceptus at the ready, wouldn’t surprise me if there’s quite a bit of nooky going on before the night’s out. Not that you need that potion, of course,” he said, looking at Snape with a face getting redder by the minute as he realised what he was saying in front of Snape.

“Why isn’t it working?” Alfric whispered to Poppy.

Draco looked up from where he was sat on the ground. It was freezing his arse off, but he was too exhausted to move. “Oh shit,” he groaned, hitting his forehead.

Hermione looked at him. And then realised. “God! He’s got no magic.”

“We know that,” Ron said impatiently.

“No. There’s nothing for the healing spells to work with.”

They all looked at each other.

Harry, aware, looked at Severus. “Worth the try,” he managed to get out, though his words were hard to understand, his voice so raspy.

“We’re not done trying yet! Don’t you fucking give up, alright?” Snape snarled at him.

“Let’s get him to the castle,” Poppy said decisively.

Hermione floated the air cushion supporting Harry.

Neville and Dumbledore went on ahead with the container of Harry’s magic, to lock it away safely. They had agreed that apparating with it might not be a good idea.

Severus did not notice what was happening around them as they made their way up.

Shacklebolt, however, had peeled off the party. His Aurors had the Death Eaters restrained and had all their wands, and were awaiting his instructions. The most seriously injured were being treated by two of the mediwizards, but he suspected the rest of the mediwizards had taken the other injured people into the Great Hall, with the help of the older students and parents. He needed to secure the Death Eaters somewhere; he could not yet trust what was happening at the Ministry to take them there. He spoke to several of his officers, then spotted Hagrid.

A word with the giant had elicited an excellent place to put them, in a ruined folly across the hillside; Hagrid had several creatures that would be happy to guard the building, and it was spelled to act as a pen for his more volatile animals. Leaving several Aurors in charge, Shacklebolt took four other Aurors with him, as well as Arthur and Charlie Weasley and Remus Lupin.

Harry was taken to an ante-chamber off the Great Hall. Alfric, at Poppy’s request, went to check on the other injured.
“Draco,” Harry mumbled.

Draco came up close.

“Help others,” Harry got out. “Can’t help me.”

Draco stared at the battered man in front of him. He was himself exhausted, but if Harry could think of helping others in the state he was in, so could Draco. He nodded, touched Harry’s shoulder with the lightest of touches, and left.

Ron, Hermione, and Snape remained.

“Miss Granger, I am about to strip Mr Potter: you should leave.”

“I won’t,” Hermione said firmly.

The others all looked at her. “For God’s sake, I’ve seen dangly bits before! I’m the only one here with any idea of how Muggles treat injuries.”

“Only had to ask,” Harry rasped. “Didn’t need all this to see me bits,” he attempted a smile, but produced a lopsided grimace, his face contorting further in pain even as he did so.

Her presence welcome, Severus unfastened his cloak, still half round Harry.

Poppy Pomfrey cut off the zip-up hoodie that was already unfastened. The blood had soaked into it. The shirt cut off one side, but on the other the fabric was sticking to the blistered flesh of heavy burns; in the better lighting, charring and white patches were also visible, and on top of that the shirt and top were stabbed through in at least a dozen places, with crusting blood on the shirt. Harry’s trousers were also showing charring on the same side, sticking against the flesh, damp with unknown substances.

“Harry,” Madam Pomfrey said gently, “we can see burns, stab wounds and a broken arm. Anything else to tell us about?”

“Thigh,” Harry said.


Harry shook his head fractionally.

“Hurts,” he whispered.

Snape held his hand tighter.

“Do the burns hurt?” Poppy asked sharply.


Poppy was shaking her head; ”I haven’t even the equipment to check his vitals; I need to look up how to treat the burns. The puncture wounds appear to have missed vital organs, but I can’t be sure –“

“Muggles usually treat burns under cold water, but I don’t know if that is true with really serious ones,” Hermione worried.

Albus and Neville appeared.
“How are we?” Albus said cheerfully.

“I think we ought to immerse him in a bath of cool water,” Poppy said, “to prevent the heat from the burns from invading further into his tissues.”

“Not a cooling charm? Around him?” Neville suggested.

“Water will help detach the shirt; his trousers are the same; the blood is crusting them into his skin and we don’t know how bad the burns are underneath, or what the damage to Harry’s leg is.”

Dumbledore conjured a bath – a big, old cast iron roll-top bath with claw feet, complete with water slopping as it righted itself.

Madam Pomfrey performed a purification spell on the water, and carefully, Harry was lifted in. In moments the water was turning pink, then red, and Harry’s teeth began to chatter.

“He’s going into shock,” Poppy’s brows were drawn together. “Albus, I can’t help him. We need to get Muggle help, and fast.”

Dumbledore nodded, and walked over to the fireplace at the side of the chamber. “Downing Street,” he spoke.

“Headmaster Dumbledore? How may I help?” A young woman’s head appeared in the fire.

“We are in need of urgent medical assistance,” Dumbledore spoke firmly.

“Muggle help?” the young woman said, her voice trying to mask her surprise.

“Yes, it’s absolutely urgent. I will speak to the Prime Minister when you have arranged it.”

“Yes Sir,” the woman said quickly. “How many casualties?”

“One, severely injured.”

“A moment, Sir.”

The floo went blank.

Ron had changed the water, the red upsetting them all. Already it was pink again. Harry was just conscious, head resting against Severus, even as the rest of his body was immersed. Severus was cupping water in his hand and pouring it down Harry’s blistered cheek.

”All right, mate?” Ron asked, although he plainly wasn’t.

“Didn’t think I’d die in a bath,” Harry croaked.

“You won’t,” Snape snarled. “You will not die, do you hear me? The Headmaster is getting Muggle help. Do you understand, Potter?”

Harry just looked at him, eyes half-lidded. “Stay?” he whispered.

“I’ve no intention of being anywhere else,” Snape bit out.

The twisted smile slanted across the ravaged face as Harry’s eyes slid shut.

Dumbledore’s contact had returned, and they had been conversing.
“A helicopter is on its way, Sir. Is the situation dangerous? Do we need to scramble troops?”

“The situation is under control,” Dumbledore said. “I’ll discuss it with the Prime Minister.”

“Thank you, Sir. The medics will want to contact you for details of the injuries. If I pass you a transmitter, will you be able to activate it?”

“Yes, we can do that,” Albus nodded. He assumed, correctly, that the spells they had used on Dean Thomas’ mobile would suffice.

Several minutes later the transmitter buzzed.

“Captain O’Donnell speaking, are you receiving?” a voice crackled. There was heavy background noise.

They all looked at the instrument Dumbledore was holding.

“May I, Sir?” Hermione asked.

It was almost thrust into her hand.

“Loud and clear,” Hermione said, and then wanted to hit herself for slipping into film-speak.

“Good. Can you tell me the injuries to your casualty, please, so we can be prepared,” the male voice was calm, despite the background noise, which helped steady Hermione.

“The casualty is a young male, previously in good health. He has multiple stabs wounds, severe burns to his face and torso – we can’t remove his clothing, it’s burnt in – fractured right arm, damage to his leg. Oh, damage to his throat from strangulation –“

There was a silence.

“Are you receiving me?” Hermione asked.

“Yes Ma’am. Are you sure he’s still alive? What’s been going on there?”

Hermione looked around. Dumbledore shook his head. “I’ll tell the Prime Minister.”

“It’s classified, Sir,” Hermione said.

“Cruciatus,” Severus whispered.

“Oh. Er, other injuries unknown, we suspect a nerve agent has been employed,” she said, thinking fast, into the mike.

“Shit! Pardon my French, Ma’am. Who am I talking to?”

Hermione looked up. Dumbledore shook his head again.

“Code name Brown Fox,” Hermione replied.

Ron grinned.

“Well, Brown Fox, pleased to meet you. ETA 25 minutes. Can you tell me the current condition of the patient, and what you are doing for him?”

Hermione explained in as much detail as she could.
“Okay, we’ll be with you shortly. Can you mark a landing place at the co-ordinates?”

Albus nodded.

“Will do.”

“Call back at once if things worsen. Just press the button on the right, okay, Brown Fox?”

Hermione switched off and looked up. “We need to get him outside again. Put up some flares.”

After a moment’s discussion, Neville, Snape, Poppy and Hermione levitated the tub, carrying Harry, slopping water and all, out into the night again, leaving Dumbledore talking to the Prime Minister.

Harry was shivering, in and out of consciousness.

Poppy was spelling the water to keep cool but not to become so cold that it in itself endangered Harry.

They moved out of the grounds into the area where the battle had taken place.

Shacklebolt strode towards them, and Remus Lupin, who was on the far side of the area, dashed over. Kingsley had obviously sorted out the Ministry, and had brought lots more Aurors with him, but there was no time to ask for details. The land was almost clear, Aurors levitating bodies and laying them in a row to one side. The ground was scorched in places, but it was hard to believe that it had been a battleground that very evening.

“Merlin, what the hell’s this?” Shacklebolt exclaimed.

“Harry!” Remus gasped.

Harry opened one eye. “Lo Remus,” he gargled.

“What are you doing to him?” the werewolf growled.

“He had burns, Mr Lupin,” Poppy said quietly, coming round to the shocked man. “We’re attempting to cool them. We cannot use magic on him, it has no effect at all.”

“Harry,” Remus said again, squatting done beside the tub, but Harry had passed out again. Poppy took his pulse.

“I wish they would arrive,” she said anxiously.

“Who?” Remus asked.

“He’s being picked up by a Muggle heli-something,” Ron answered.

“Hell,” Shacklebolt shook his head.

“We need flares for them to land,” Hermione said. “A big, big circle of clear flattish space.”

Shacklebolt nodded, shouting to a couple of Aurors. Soon, the lights were flaring in a rough circle. Hermione removed her lamp posts, and looked at the others. She quickly spelled their clothes into Muggle black trousers and tops, with thick black jackets.
“What the –?” Ron began.

“Muggle,” Hermione merely said.

“What about the bath?” Neville asked.

“Lots of Muggles use old baths for watering cattle, it’s a bit clean but it should be alright,” Hermione replied.

Suddenly she could hear a throbbing pulse in the air.

“What the hell is that?” Ron yelled, his voice rising as the noise came closer.

“Helicopter,” Hermione pointed to the search beam in the sky.

Within moments the huge twin bladed Chinook had landed. It was as well that they hadn’t sent further troops, as there was already cover for the medical team, armed soldiers pouring out.

“Hermione, you’d better do the talking,” Ron said.

“Fuck that, just get him help,” Severus snarled.

Shacklebolt had gone forward, shaking the hand of one of the soldiers, directing the medics to Harry.

“Hello all, I’m Captain O’Donnell,” a soldier in khaki with a stethoscope around his neck ran forward. “Brown Fox?”

Hermione nodded.

“Pleased to meet you. Any change in his condition?” he asked, even as they carefully lifted Harry out of the water and transferred him to a body board.

O’Donnell put a stethoscope to his chest, another medic visually examined him, his hands moving carefully over his body.

Two soldiers held lights over them.

“He’s barely conscious now,” Snape said.

O’Donnell gave him a glance. “He’s deteriorated?”

Snape nodded, swallowing the lump in his throat, aware of the tight knot of fear in his chest.

A neck brace was applied. Four soldiers stepped forward to carry him aboard.

Severus stood up, and moved beside Harry.

“Anyone else need attention?” O’Donnell asked, looking round with interest. “Looks like there’s been a massacre here.”

“Just concentrate on him,” Severus said.

The Captain nodded. “We’ve been told he’s a fucking hero; we’ll do all we can. He looks just a kid,” he shook his head. They were moving at a pace towards the helicopter.

The soldiers and medics ran Harry up the aft ramp.
“We’ve no orders to take anyone else,” a soldier standing guard at the base of the helicopter said, as Severus stepped onto the ramp, moving to block Severus’ path.

“I am going with him,” Severus said, his tone icy.

The soldier gave him a once over, noting the long hair, the shaking hands.

“I think not.”

“Out of my way before I force you!” Severus snarled.

Hermione came up next to him and laid a hand on his arm.

“The Captain asked if others were injured. The Professor is suffering from the effects of a nerve gas. He needs specialist medical treatment,” she said firmly.

“Thank you,” Severus turned a relieved look at her. He glanced down. “That cut needs attention,” he commented, gesturing towards her leg with his hand.

“What cut?” Hermione looked down.

Her transfigured black jeans had a slash all down one thigh, blood pouring out of a gash.

“Jesus! Come on, Miss,” the soldier said, “let me give you a hand.”

Hermione looked at Severus as the soldier swung her up in his arms and carried her up the ramp.

“Hey!” Ron yelled.

“I’ll be fine,” Hermione shouted over her shoulder. “Nev, can you help me get back later?”

“Sure, as soon as you call.”

And then the rest of the soldiers were piling into the huge interior, the ramp was shutting, and Hermione was yelling, “Where is - Alex?”

The soldier carried her through the wide space of the interior; the other soldiers moving to strap themselves in to the bench seats at the sides. There was a door in the bulkhead, and through it, a room such as Hermione had seen in the Accident and Emergency Department of her local hospital, with a table to which Harry was strapped, powerful lights and Harry looking tiny, surrounded by medics. Hermione slipped down from the strong arms. Severus was behind her.

“Two more injured,” the soldier called.

O’Donnell looked up.

“Take a seat, we have urgent work here.”

“Forget us,” Snape said, moving over to the table to see Harry. He had a plastic thing over his mouth and nose, and a drip into his arm.

They worked fast.

The efficiency relieved Severus somewhat.

“Can you take a seat, sir?” another medic said.
“I promised not to leave him. I will not get in your way.”

“Sit until we’re airborne. We all will.”

Severus was strapped in by the soldier, who had been concentrating on Hermione, pulling the straps over her breasts to fasten at her stomach. The lad went to sit down, eyes still on Hermione.

“Out, soldier, you’re done,” one of the medical team said, banishing him to the outer area.

The soldier gave Hermione a grin, and sauntered out.

In moments, Severus felt his guts lurch as they took to the air.

Harry remained unconscious throughout the flight. Severus fought to keep his stomach, and knew Harry would have been amused. Harry enjoyed flying so much, he surely would have loved this.

The medics sought information on how the wounds had occurred. Were the burns chemical or from heat? How had the stab wounds been made? – they weren’t the normal pattern of a frenzied attack, or an attack in warfare. Had he been able to speak after the strangulation?

Hermione could feel the medics’ frustration with their answers, but what could she say?

Severus finally snapped. “Look, you saw the bodies. There was a fucking battle, you can’t keep track of what happened to everyone else.”

Captain O’Donnell looked across at him. “I beg your pardon, Sir. We’re just very concerned – these injuries – I’ve never seen anything like them. And I have to tell you he is in a very serious condition.”

“I fucking know that!” Severus shouted.

In the ensuing silence, which wasn’t silence because of the noise of the rotors and engine, Hermione coughed.

“The organisation we were dealing with – they have weapons that you’ll never have seen before,” she said quietly.

O’Donnell inclined his head in understanding. “And vicious with it,” he added.

“Yes. Utterly without remorse. Many of them enjoy inflicting pain, as you may have gathered.”

“I wish we could be sure what caused these burns,” one of the doctors spoke to O’Donnell.

Severus looked up. “I told you they were not chemical.”

“Well, they aren’t like normal burns, and you’ve said you couldn’t see everything that happened –“

“I’ve smelt him,” Snape said prosaically. “There is no trace of chemicals.”

“Pardon?”

Hermione allowed a small grin. “He’s a chemicals expert,” she explained. “You need be in no doubt.”

Hermione saw the glances reappraising Severus.
Suddenly, Harry started fitting.

Severus was at his side in a moment.

“Sit down, Sir!”

“He has had a cardiac arrest previously,” Snape ignored them, staring at the jerking body. He wanted to touch Harry, as if the contact would ease the boy.

“Jesus Christ! He has a heart condition and he was on active service?”

“He does not have a heart condition. He went into cardiac arrest following a severe infection resulting from injury.”

“When? What sort of injury?” they threw the questions at him as they worked.

Severus stared at Harry. Hermione had stood up, but was keeping out of the way.

“January.”

“This year? What was the injury?” O’Donnell asked urgently.

“It is not relevant.”

Sir? There’s a scar here –“ the other doctor said.

Severus shut his eyes briefly. They had discovered Harry’s colostomy scar, hidden in his tattoo and masked in blood.

“He had to have a colostomy. Temporarily. The infection set up after he was raped,” Severus said stonily.

“God almighty! He’s only a kid.”

“He made his first kill six years ago,” Hermione interjected.

“I don’t believe this! When did we start employing child soldiers?” one of them asked rhetorically, shaking his head.

Suddenly Harry stilled.

Severus’ heart leapt into his throat.

“He’s alright,” Hermione said, touching his arm. Harry was attached to a heart monitor and his rhythm had improved, although Hermione could see from the line on the monitor that it was still erratic.

“There’s another old scar here,” Doctor Number 2 said, running his fingers over the scar on Harry’s arm, where Wormtail had drawn his blood at the end of the Triwizard tournament.

“He was taken prisoner three years ago,” Hermione offered quietly in explanation.

“Who are these people? You can’t tell us anything? Not even which unit you’re in?”

Hermione shook her head.

Suddenly, the sound began to change and they dropped altitude.
It was only minutes before Harry was being rushed through the doors into a building. The medics were rabbitting nineteen to the dozen to the team that had come to meet them, passing over vital information.

Again, Severus was barred as he tried to follow them.

“He’s going into surgery, Sir, please wait here,” a female doctor said, her voice firm but kind.

Severus turned to Hermione.

“We can’t go in,” she confirmed. “Harry will be unconscious. We can see him straight after?” she asked the doctor.

“Of course,” she nodded.

“If he calls for me, fetch me,” Severus stretched out his hand and gripped her arm.

She looked down at the hand, then back up at Severus.

“Yes, Sir,” she nodded, and followed the others through the door.

It swung back with a bang, sounding hollow in the space.

Severus felt hollow.

Hermione and Severus stood there, in the silence. The soldiers had dispersed elsewhere, having not entered this building, obviously the hospital or some sort of medical facility, although there was one soldier standing on guard by the door.

They were on a military base. Hermione didn’t know what it was called or where it was.

Her mind began to wander to the wider picture. How many Death Eaters had got away? Had Dumbledore requested the security of the military base? She did feel safer being there. But did they have the specialist care that Harry would need? They must have medical professionals trained for dealing with battle injuries. How much were they allowed to say? How would they contact Hogwarts?

Suddenly a door to the side opened and a doctor, this time in a white coat rather than fatigues, came through. He was middle aged, with a friendly face.

“I’m so sorry to keep you waiting,” he smiled, holding out his hand, “I’m Andrew Sullivan.”

Hermione shook it. “I’m awfully sorry, I’m afraid I need to confirm security clearance here before I can use our names. I’m Brown Fox, and this is the Professor.” She decided, having called Severus that already, it wouldn’t hurt to use it as a codename.

“That’s fine. What’s in a name, eh?”

He extended his hand to Severus also; Snape hesitated, then responded. The doctor held on to his hand, turning it over to look at it.

“The helicopter signalled that a nerve agent had been used,” he said quietly. “I take it this tremor is part of the effect?”

“It is. It will pass,” Severus said.
“I’ve taken the liberty of calling in a specialist, as it is not my field of expertise,” Doctor Sullivan continued.

“There’s really no need –“

“Alex has also been affected,” Hermione said to Severus. “With all his other injuries –“

“Yes. Of course,” he nodded to her gratefully. He turned to the doctor. “Thank you, Doctor Sullivan. When will the specialist arrive?”

“They’re being flown up from London now. Your colleague has excellent surgeons with him, and a burns specialist is also on the way. If you’d like to come through,” he said, holding open a swing door.

They followed him down a corridor, the lights bright; a nurse was coming towards them.

“David! Would you be good enough to take this young lady into treatment room 3, and look at her leg please?”

Severus looked at Hermione.

“We’ll stay together, please,” she said firmly.

“Would you prefer me to call a female nurse?” the doctor asked.

Hermione gave David a brief smile. “I’ve no issue with David looking at my leg; but the Professor and I will remain together.”

“If you wish,” the doctor said equably. A brief look passed between him and the nurse.

“Your deductions are entirely incorrect,” Snape said sarcastically. “There is nothing improper between my colleague and I.”

Hermione snorted. “Certainly not!”

“I do beg your pardon,” Doctor Sullivan nodded. He moved further down the corridor. “This room is larger,” he explained.

The treatment room had two gurneys, each with curtains round pulled back.

“Take a bed,” Doctor Sullivan smiled, but even as Hermione moved towards one of them, there was the sound of running footsteps, in heavy boots, in the corridor.

Severus stood in front of Hermione automatically; both of them were fingering their concealed wands.

The Doctor strode across to the door before the knock came.

There were three soldiers in full combat dress, complete with automatic weapons; they saluted.

“Sorry to disturb you, Sir,” the front one said, looking past the doctor to Hermione and Severus, “but we’ve orders to protect the two operatives.”

The doctor looked round in surprise.

“Very well. Please wait outside.”
“We’re not to let them out of our sight, Sir.”

“That is quite ridiculous.” He looked at the three soldiers. “Two of you outside. One may stay in the room. I will see the female patient behind the curtain.”

The soldiers looked at each other. One stepped forward and shut the door, whilst the two others took up positions outside.

Hermione thought it was bizarre in the extreme to be in a medical room with a soldier carrying heavy duty weaponry standing there. Although being in a room with four men and having to drop her trousers was pretty bizarre in itself.

The nurse said quietly, “I’m going to fetch Maria. It isn’t right that you should be alone like this,” and without waiting for Hermione’s view, left the room. The soldier stared straight ahead, ignoring him.

Doctor Sullivan took Severus to the other bed. Uncertain about leaving Hermione outside the curtain with the soldier, he didn’t draw the curtain. “Now, Professor, if you’d be good enough to hop up on the bed, I’d like to take your blood pressure and pulse. We’ll ask the nurse to take some blood so we can determine what’s been used on you.”

Severus stood still, not sitting down.

“That will be unnecessary,” he said firmly.

“You’ve obviously been exposed –“

“It is unnecessary,” Severus repeated stubbornly.

The Doctor looked at him, rather bemused.

“You were sent here for treatment.”

“We came because we had no intention of leaving our colleague,” Snape said.

A tap at the door and a comfortable looking woman in her fifties appeared.

She smiled at Hermione, the Doctor and Severus, and came over, taking charge.

“Hello, I’m Maria. If you’ll excuse us,” she nodded to the others, and drew the curtains around Hermione and herself with a swish.

The Doctor looked at Severus. “I’ll help with Brown Fox; I would very much like the specialist to see you when she arrives,” he added, and went to wash his hands at the sink.

Severus inclined his head and perched on the side of the bed.

“Now, dear,” Maria’s voice could be heard. “Can you get those trousers off or do we need to cut them off?”

The sound of rustling clothing could be heard, then Hermione getting onto the gurney.

Severus sat there trying not to feel like a voyeur. Thank Merlin he wasn’t inclined that way.

The Doctor slipped behind the curtain; every word and sound seemed amplified.
Severus wanted to be with Harry. His chest hurt and he knew it was fear; fear that after everything, Harry might die; he knew his injuries were appalling; he was covered in stab wounds, and the burns...his stomach, still unsettled from the flight, suddenly revolted as he thought of the burnt away flesh. He bolted for the sink and emptied his stomach.

The Doctor appeared at his side, and handed Severus some paper towels to wipe his mouth as he finished. Hermione had leapt off the bed and Severus turned to realise she was standing there in a pair of pink knickers with a T-shirt just reaching over her stomach.

She really had very nice legs.

“Professor?” she said worriedly.

“Please let me examine you,” the Doctor said to Snape.

“It is nothing. I did not like the flying,” Severus shook off their concern. He looked down at Hermione. “You have restarted the bleeding,” he said, nodding at her leg.

Hermione glanced down and realised her state of undress.

Glancing at the soldier, she blushed, but held her head high.

“Let the Doctor check your blood pressure, please,” she asked.

“I am perfectly aware that my pressure is raised,” Severus said firmly, “and that I am having palpitations. The effects are well known to me and will wear off in the next twenty four hours or so.”

“You’ve experienced it before?” the Doctor said, his brows drawn together.

“Unfortunately, yes. I hope I will never need to experience it again,” Severus drawled.

Hermione nodded, and returned to her gurney.

Again, the curtain swished.

“I’m afraid there’ll be a fine scar, dear, but I think we can get away without stitches if we steri-strip this – that is, if you’re not returning to active duty? I recommend a period of rest, but I ought to stitch it properly if you’re likely to get it torn open - “

“The active duty is over,” Severus said firmly, from outside the curtain. He was feeling guilty enough for having cut Hermione, let alone cause her permanent scarring. Stitching indeed!

“I’ll go and get you some scrubs to wear, dear,” the nurse said, “you stay there, alright? Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“Oh god, yes please,” Hermione gasped, even the thought making her mouth water.

“Professor? Would you like some?”

“That would be most welcome,” Severus nodded.

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea –“ the Doctor began.

Severus turned to look at him. “Allow me to know what I need,” he said coolly. “You need have no concern for my welfare.”
The Doctor shook his head in exasperation, but nodded at the nurse, and left them to it.

A couple of hours later, the door opened again. Hermione and Severus had drunk tea and eaten sandwiches brought by the nurse. It would perhaps have been awkward anyway, but with the soldier standing there, the situation seemed heavy and anxious. Hermione had offered the soldier tea and cake, and been politely refused. He also refused to sit.

Hermione had leant back on the pillows and must have dozed off, because she suddenly startled awake when a young soldier bustled in with a clipboard.

“Sorry to wake you, Miss,” he said, looking between the two of them, surprise on his face, “but I’ve been asked to get some details.”

“Yes?” Severus answered.

“It’s about the chap in the operating theatre,” he went on.

“You have news?” Severus said, standing.

“Well, they’ve asked me to get details of next of kin, and so on.”

“Why?” Snape asked.

The soldier shrugged. “I gather he’s in a pretty bad way. Probably want to contact his family.”

“To what purpose?” Snape said grimly.

“Well, they may want to see him before – or they’ll have to deal with the formalities after.”

Hermione drew in a deep shocked breath.

“Are you telling me he is dying?” Snape said stonily.

“Hey! Don’t shoot me! I’m only the messenger,” grinned the soldier. He took in their faces at last. “Oh. He’s a friend. Look, I’m sorry, but we all have to expect it, don’t we? If you join the army you have to be prepared –“

Snape strode to the door. “Where is he?”

“Hey! Look, you can’t go there –“

The soldier on guard had stepped in front of the door.

“Are you holding me prisoner?” Snape snarled.

“Sir,” the soldier appealed. “Just a moment, please.” He looked at the private who had come in looking for information. “Have you come from the theatre? Do you know the patient’s condition?”

“I’m just doing my job, right? They sent a message –“

“So all the rest is supposition?”

“Look –“

The soldier turned to Snape.
“He knows nothing. I’ll radio and find out for you. But his family might like to be contacted; they wouldn’t suggest it unless there was serious worry, Sir.”

Snape turned away.

“I will speak to the commanding officer here, and no one else.”

“Well, that might be difficult,” said the private unhelpfully. “It is the middle of the night.”

Suddenly the door opened and a woman doctor, dressed in scrubs, came in. “Professor?”

Snape nodded.

“How is Alex?” he asked quickly.

“I’ve just come from the theatre, but I need your help.”

“Yes?”

“Has Alex also been exposed to the nerve agent?”

“Yes. We said that before,” Snape said impatiently.

“The initial blood tests haven’t shown any traces –“

“There won’t be any,” Snape interjected.

“Are you sure? There’s always –“

“I am sure. I have extensive knowledge in this field,” Snape said ominously.

The doctor nodded. “The effects – please can you elaborate? So we don’t mistake them for something else.”

Snape took a deep breath. “It causes intense, excruciating pain, along every nerve pathway. Continued exposure results in an appalling death. Repeated exposure can cause permanent damage. Residual effects include raised blood pressure, palpitations, tremor….discomfort.”

“Do you mean pain?”

“The initial relief when it wears off make one feel that it isn’t pain, but there may be pain caused by bones snapping from the tension, biting the tongue, prolonged screaming damaging the throat, and things of that nature.”

The soldier and the private were trying not to look horrified.

“And you have also been exposed to this?”

“Yes, many times.”

“Jesus,” the private whispered.

“Thank you. I’ll be back,” the doctor said.

“He’s alive,” Snape stated.

“Yes, but very poorly, I’m afraid,” the doctor understated. “Are you his superior officer? It would
be advisable to contact his family.”

Snape looked at her. “You need only fetch me,” he said quietly. “Please come and get me as soon as possible. I would prefer to be with him now. I am told that is not possible.”

“Not whilst he’s in surgery, Professor,” she shook her head. “He must have some family – a girlfriend, perhaps?”

“I am his partner,” Severus said clearly. How obtuse were these people?

He saw the private open his mouth.

“In every sense.”

The private’s mouth stayed hanging.

The doctor looked at him with sympathy. “We’re doing all we can,” she said quietly, and left.

The silence in the room was tangible.

Snape walked over to stare out of the window. The coming day was beginning to grey the sky. He had never felt so torn – hope, despair, welling in him.

“Perhaps you could get the message to your commanding officer?” Snape prompted.

“I really think he won’t want to be disturbed,” the private said with a sneer. “Not for two faggots.”

And left.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the guard began.

Snape looked at him. “You cannot be responsible for another’s actions or prejudices,” he shook his head. “Forget it.”

Half an hour later the doctor returned.

“No news,” she said quickly. “He’s holding on. One of the stab wounds has caused more damage than initially thought. I can’t do anymore in there at the moment. The burns specialist is also in there. I’ve come to have a look at you,” she went on.

“I do not need help,” Snape said firmly.

“It won’t help him if you collapse,” the doctor said practically. “You have visible tremor; you are very pale indeed; I understand that you have vomited; and from the list of symptoms you have mentioned, if you are suffering from them, you must be feeling pretty rough.”

“I can cope.”

“Why are you forcing yourself? I’d like to give you a quick check over; I may be able to help. Then you can be of more help to him.”

“I have been manipulated by people with a great deal more skill,” Snape said silkily, but he was moving to the bed.

“If you could undo your cuff and the front of your shirt, I’d like to do your blood pressure and listen to your heart.”
Snape did as he was asked.

Several moments later, the doctor said, “I’d like to attach you to a heart monitor. You seem to have an arrhythmia.”

“It will pass,” Snape shook his head.

“There’s no pain,” the doctor said. “And I could organise for you to go into a side ward with your companion. When he returns from theatre. A twin bedded room,” she clarified.

Snape looked at her.

“That sounds a good idea, Professor,” Hermione said quietly. “It may be some time before he awakes after the anaesthetic. You can rest, but still be there.”


“Let’s get you moved.”

A half hour later they were in a twin bedded room. There was a great deal of equipment.

“He will need a lot of monitoring,” the doctor explained quietly.

The soldier who had been with them all along had accompanied them, the other two still outside the door. David the nurse was in attendance.

“If you wouldn’t mind taking off your shirt, I can attach these little things to your chest and back,” the doctor indicated the little round discs.

Hermione, sitting in a chair by the window, looked away. The doctor hadn’t drawn the curtains, and she would have loved to have had a glance, but it was only fair to respect his privacy.

Suddenly there was a rap at the door and an officer walked in. The guard leapt to attention and saluted.

“I beg your pardon,” the man said, in cultured tones. He was in his late forties, Hermione judged. “Shall I come back?”

The doctor glanced round. “We’ll be done in a moment, Sir. If you don’t mind the Colonel being here, Professor?”

“I’m pleased you’ve come, Colonel. I’m sorry that this nonsense is thought necessary.” He indicated the wiring.

“No point arguing with doctors,” the Colonel smiled.

“If you wouldn’t mind turning round, Professor, we need to attach them to your back too.”

“Good heavens, how am I supposed to move?” Snape queried, turning round.

Despite her best intentions, Hermione looked at Snape when the guard gasped. His shoulders were broad, tapering down to narrow hips and a tight rear, she noted. However, that wasn’t what had
elicited the gasp. Snape’s back was covered with scars.

The doctor placed the electrodes without comment.

“You’ve been whipped,” the Colonel said bluntly.

“Spying on a sadistic bastard for twenty years does have its downside,” Snape said, turning round.

His chest was toned, a covering of dark hair in a triangle between his nipples, pointing down to the almost concave stomach, Hermione noted with a blush.

“I’m afraid it’s not easy to put a shirt on,” the nurse said. “Would you like to slip this on?” He held up a standard issue hospital gown in yellow with a pattern created out of the repeated words Hospital Property written diagonally across it.

“I think not,” Snape said disdainfully.

He sat himself on the edge of the bed whilst the doctor set up the monitor.

“I’ll be back to assess this in a while. Can I get you anything?”

“More tea and breakfast at some point would be good,” Snape said. “Thank you, Melinda, David.”

The two medical staff left.

The Colonel looked to the guard. “You can wait outside.”

“Yessir!”

The guard saluted to the Colonel, and then turned to Snape, and saluted again.

Hermione looked to Snape and raised an eyebrow.

The Colonel noted it. “Have you not been treated with courtesy?” he asked sharply.

“Nothing wrong with that guard, he’s been good,” Hermione said, as Snape was silent.

“But someone else wasn’t,” the Colonel deduced. “I offer my sincere apologies. It will be dealt with.”

“It is no matter. As long as they treat Alex with respect, there is no issue,” Snape warned.

“He will be,” the Colonel said. “But shall we use proper names? I am David Fry, and for my sins I am in charge of this base. I apologise for not being here to meet you, Professor Snape, Miss Granger. I was at a meeting with the Minister for Defence in London yesterday and stayed over. I was then called in to see him and the Prime Minister, and – Albus Dumbledore? - in the early hours and have been made aware of the bare bones of your achievement. We are all severely in your debt. It is an honour to have you with us, though I could wish that the circumstances were better.”

“How much do you know about us, Sir?” Hermione asked.


“He’s more what you expect a wizard to look like, though, isn’t he?” Hermione chuckled, as she

...
transfigured a spare pillow into a chair for the colonel and then proceeded to add silencing charms to the room.

“Good heavens, that’s extraordinary!” he said, touching the chair as if it might bite him.

“It’ll stand up to sitting,” Hermione suggested.

The man seated himself tentatively, as if expecting the chair to disappear from under him at any moment.

“Well well!” he said, with a grin.

Hermione smiled.

“Now, down to business. I’ve taken the liberty of talking to the doctors whilst they are in surgery. As you know, Mr Potter is very seriously hurt. I understand that at present he cannot be healed by your usual means. He’s likely to be with us for some time, and the best care and specialists will, of course, be made available to him. I would be very grateful if you could let me, or his doctors, know if there is anything he needs at any point. I am at your disposal at any time.”

Severus listened, but the words meant only one thing to him: Harry was expected to live.
His hands began to shake, and he had to grip one wrist with the other to steady them.

“Professor?” Hermione said anxiously.

Severus wanted to get up and move away, but the attachment to the monitor made that impossible.

“It is nothing,” he said dismissively. “Please go on, Colonel.”

“Should we call for the doctor?” the Colonel said, also looking worried.

“It is an after effect, and will pass,” Severus said once again, his voice frustrated now. “Please continue.”

The Colonel looked at him carefully, and at last, nodded. “Very well. But please understand that any care you need is also available. Given Mr Potter’s importance, and his current state, we have increased security at the base. There will be a guard within his room at all times and two outside, as well as on all corridors, entrances to the buildings, base, etc. Unfortunately these sort of increased arrangements can draw the attention of the press despite our best efforts: therefore a minor royal has been drafted in to have a knee operation. He’s of little real publicity value – too old to attract the sort of attention that our young princes do, for example, so I expect the interest will be a five minute wonder, and the press, if they do follow it up, will take the line of the waste of taxpayers’ money,” he smiled, a rather cheeky smile that crinkled his eyes and warmed his face.

“Does the gentleman need a knee operation?” Hermione asked with interest.

“He will do,” the Colonel’s eyes twinkled.

Severus and Hermione regarded him.

“He’s injured it once or twice playing polo,” the Colonel explained. “Most notably, and fortuitously, last weekend. The surgeon is seeing him this morning to tell him he has reconsidered his advice that it is best to wait and see before operating.”

Hermione’s mouth was dropping open. “You won’t do any damage, will you? Harry would be very unhappy about that.”

“Do set your mind at rest, Miss Granger. The operation was inevitable in the long term, and he will probably be a great deal more comfortable for having it now. Now, can I ask you your plans? I’m assuming you will wish to put in some security of your own.”

“We’ll need to discuss that with our colleagues,” Snape said calmly. “I trust we can rely on your provision in the meantime?”

“Certainly,” the Colonel agreed.

“Miss Granger and I will remain until Mr Potter has returned. Miss Granger will go back to report. One of our team is likely to be with him at all times,” Snape said authoritatively.

“Of course. I can arrange accommodation for any number of –“

“Whoever comes will stay with him in the room,” Snape cut him off.
The Colonel looked between the two of them. “As you wish. If you wish to have further back-up now, so that you two can rest –” he said delicately.

Severus regarded him, eyes holding a trace of amusement.

“You think we are incapable? An injured man and a very young woman? Miss Granger, given that the Colonel has been made aware of our world, do give him a little indication of how we could prevent an attack.”

Hermione whisked out her wand, and even as the Colonel’s lips twitched in amusement, she had immobilized him. His eyes reflected the sudden fear as his body became rigid.

“Miss Granger may look a young and harmless thing, but she is a very capable witch, as well as voraciously intelligent,” Snape spoke, as if nothing odd were happening.

Hermione smiled. “Thank you, Sir.”

“It is not flattery, Miss Granger, merely the truth,” Snape said repressively, though Hermione was still grinning. “Do lift the spell before the Colonel goes into an apoplexy.”

“Oh, sorry,” Hermione apologised, quickly removing the curse.

“What in hell was that?” the Colonel, said, getting quickly to his feet, as if he were unable to do otherwise, so relieved was he to move.

“Just a basic spell to restrain you,” Hermione said calmly. “I’m sorry if it was a bit frightening –”

The Colonel pulled down his jacket, looking very ruffled. “Is that thing a magic wand?” he asked disbelievingly, changing the subject.

“It is,” Hermione agreed. “Although don’t be misled – the most powerful wizards – Harry, and Professor Snape - for example, can do an awful lot of magic without them.”

The Colonel ran a hand through his hair. “It really is very hard to take in, you know. Magic...we spend billions developing weapons, but then a young chit with a bit of wood –“ he shook his head.

Hermione stood up. “It’s no solution to try to use magical people to fight your wars, Sir,” she said quietly.

He turned round sharply to look at her.

“The other side would do just the same. There are good and bad wizards, ideological and mercenary ones, just the same as in your world. The damage they can do is – appalling. Look at Harry,” her voice choked. “He’s probably the most powerful wizard in centuries. He killed the bastard who’s been terrorizing our world, and would have destroyed or enslaved yours. But even he –“ she gulped. “Look at the injuries he has. He was trying to protect us all. And now –“ she turned away.

A sound rather like a sob came from her. She had been so calm and cool that Severus, who had been overwhelmed with fear for Harry ever since the battle, was shocked back into a semblance of his normal self.

“Miss Granger,” he said coolly, “pray do not give a poor impression of us by snivelling.”

The Colonel looked at Severus in surprise. “Young things,” he said carefully. “Quite
understandable. Although one of the reasons that many felt it inappropriate for young men and women to fight together. It’s inevitable that some will fall into romantic liaisons –“

Hermione’s sobs turned to a snort.

“The Greeks sent warriors into battle in partnered pairs because the love between them was an advantage,” she commented as she scrubbed her eyes and turned back.

“They didn’t send young women into battle, Miss Granger,” the Colonel said patronisingly.

“No, they didn’t, did they?”

“What are you saying?” the Colonel’s eyebrows twitched together.

“I’m saying love doesn’t stop you fighting to your utmost ability; that it might give you a reason to fight in the first place. I have no romantic links to Harry, though I’ve loved him as a friend for many years. He has my support and complete confidence. I’ve had the privilege of knowing him well, but many in our world would follow him without having personally known him; he’s been a figurehead for our side almost his whole life. And, as it turns out, not without reason. He’s not a ‘young thing’: he’s a man of incredible power. When you see him, he does look young and small. But he isn’t at all.”

“The Prime Minister and Mr Dumbledore said something similar,” the Colonel acknowledged, sounding confused. “My apologies, I meant no insult. I assumed you were here as a – close friend.”

“That would be me,” Severus said smoothly. “Miss Granger is more aware of the Muggle - your - world, and is here really as an interpreter.”

The Colonel’s eyebrows twitched together. “Your unit has obviously been working very closely together and you feel responsible for the young man, as any of us would –“

Severus sighed. It was not in his nature to discuss his private business. But he would not deny his role in Harry’s life. Harry might need him, call for him. He needed to be fetched, if that was the case, and he wasn’t going to leave this open for interpretation.

“Let me make this clear. Your soldier was rude because he didn’t think you’d wish to be disturbed to come and talk to a faggot. If that is still the case, I will ask the Prime Minister to arrange Mr Potter’s transfer to another facility as soon as he is able to be moved. Harry and I are partners in every sense. I frankly do not care whether you approve or not; however, I will not accept any hint of poor treatment or discourtesy towards Mr Potter because he chooses to find comfort with a person who is clearly of the same sex, and old enough to be his father to boot. The details of our relationship are no one’s business but our own. I will not pretend that that relationship does not exist to appease anyone’s sensibilities; only Harry’s views, and his care, matter to me. Shall I arrange to speak to the Prime Minister?”

Hermione marvelled at the haughty tone; you could almost feel Severus swishing by in his robes. Even sitting there in bed, he exuded power, and was so far from the limp-wristed caricature of the gay man that she wanted to grin.

The Colonel stared at him, rubbing his chin. “I had no idea –“

“Why should you? I tell you this only because I am his partner, and have no intention of hiding the fact when he may have need of me,” Severus said stonily. “You need have no worries that we will be – overly romantic – in public.”
“Gay men and women are, of course, accepted in the military,” the Colonel said, “but I do not know if I can get enough to provide the cover —"

“I am not seeking a gay escort for Harry,” Snape snorted. “Merely personnel for whom it is not an issue.”

“Of course,” the Colonel nodded. He wondered how he could ascertain the required knowledge.

“The guard who was in here may be a source of information,” Hermione suggested, realising the thought process. “He seemed unfazed by the idea.”

“Thank you,” the Colonel acknowledged. He straightened up, and came over to shake Hermione’s hand, and then Severus’.

“Once again, I’d like to express my gratitude, and also – my – sympathy, now that I realise the importance – both nationally and personally – of Mr Potter. Do let me know at once if I can be of help. I will, of course, be monitoring the situation closely, and will liaise with whoever is appointed as my contact. I assume that might be you, Professor Snape?”

Severus, for once in his life, was concentrating on the next few hours, not the long term future.

“I will let you know,” he said noncommittally.

“Sir?” Hermione spoke as the man moved to leave. “Could we have a mobile phone, please, so that I can make the necessary contacts?”

“Certainly. I’ll have one brought,” he nodded, and left.

A different guard slipped back inside. Hermione saw another senior officer outside, but the Colonel obviously asked him to stay whilst their original guard left with the Colonel.

Hermione looked to Severus.

“We need to find out who escaped. They’re putting in an awful lot of security.”

At Malfoy Manor, Narcissa Malfoy was woken by a quaking house-elf.

“Mistress! Mistress Malfoy!”

“What on earth is it, Libby?” Narcissa said, sitting up.

“Master is saying to dress quickly, Mistress. Urgent, it is urgent!”

Narcissa knew to obey Lucius to the letter. She slipped quickly into a smart robe, with stockings and shoes, tidied her hair briskly and ran down the stairs.

“Where is he?” she demanded of the elves cowering in the hall. A smell of burning pricked her nose.

“In the library, Madam,” one of them pointed, arms shaking.

Narcissa, fear and panic rising within her, made her way on swift footsteps. She flung open the
door to face the point of Lucius’ wand from across the room.

“Ciss.” He sheathed it quickly, continuing flinging items from his desk into a trunk. One of the bookcases was in flames, which he was ignoring.

“Lucius! What are you doing?” Her heart was pounding.

“The Dark Lord is dead.” He rifled through a few papers, slinging the cast-offs onto the floor, the others into the trunk. He turned to a portrait of Nero Malfoy behind him, putting his hand against the man’s spluttering face.

Narcissa gasped.

The portrait dissolved, revealing a doorway behind. Lucius again placed his hand on the handle, gritting his teeth as it burnt into his hand before letting him open it.

The Door of Last Resort.

Narcissa had heard tales of it.

The door had never been opened in her time at the Manor, even when Voldemort first fell sixteen years ago.

“He’s really gone?”

“Yes. Potter and Severus saw to that.”

“Severus?”

“Yes,” Malfoy hissed. “Traitor!”

“Where was this?” Narcissa came over, fear on her face. “What about Bellatrix?”

Lucius grabbed her by the throat and thrust her against the wall.

“What about your son?” he snarled. “Did you know? Did you?” he banged her head into the wall.

“Draco was there?” Narcissa got out, her eyes wild. “Is he alright? He’s not hurt?”

“He fought with Potter,” Lucius’ eyes were sparking with fury. “Did you know our son was a turncoat? Fucking tell me, Ciss!”

Narcissa’s feet were only on the ground by tip-toe. She had never been so frightened of her husband, and yet she could not help the relief she felt wash through her. Draco had fought on the winning side.

“I knew nothing! Let me down! Was he hurt?” she got out, around the constriction.

“You’re pleased,” Malfoy whispered into her face, looking at her carefully.

“Let me down!” she kicked his shin.

Lucius’ hand tightened, and then he laughed, and dropped her.

“You never did care for the Dark Lord,” he turned away.

Narcissa grabbed his arm. “Is he hurt?” she demanded again.
“I didn’t kill him. I should have.”

“And end the Malfoy line?”

“After this disgrace? Oh, I should have!”

“Winning is no disgrace!” Narcissa snapped. “Every Malfoy is taught that! So do not blame your son for heeding what you have drilled into him!”

Lucius laughed wildly. “I am sealing down the house. Neither the Ministry nor my son will have it. Do you come with me, Narcissa? If you wish to stay, the Dower House awaits.”

The home of widowed Malfoy ladies when their sons took the title. What was Lucius suggesting?

“You will not –“ she said urgently.


At Hogwarts, Draco Malfoy staggered. Ron Weasley, standing near him, took a look at the young Healer, a swift glance around the Great Hall, and summoned one of the house elves who was tidying a tray of bandages.

Moments later, a table had been set up, and bacon scented the air.

Ron collected Draco, who had leant himself quietly against a wall.

“Come and eat,” he said.

Draco was about to say that he wasn’t hungry, when he realised he was ravenous. He allowed Ron to steer him to the table.

“Other patients,” Draco got out, round a tongue that wouldn’t seem to find its way around the words.

“You’ve done them all,” Neville said gently, coming to sit on his other side.

Suddenly, the table was filling with a motley assortment of sixth formers, most looking gaunt and exhausted.

Draco looked round blearily. The remaining gurneys were empty. The injured had all been taken at last to the infirmary, then. They had worked in the Great Hall – Madam Pomfrey, the team from St Mungo’s and Draco, with patients being taken up to the infirmary after they passed through assessment and help, and were on the recovery phase. He couldn’t think how many injuries there would have been had Harry not maintained the protective shield for so long.

He knew that a number of the St. Mungo’s workers were staying to help Madam Pomfrey. Ron Weasley, Neville, Ernie and others had worked non-stop doing the infirmary runs or acting as general assistants, turning, lifting, finding supplies.

Other seventh years had been in charge of the House common rooms, supporting students whose parents hadn’t come, finding sleeping accommodation for parents who were staying, and so on.

The ceiling of the Great Hall reflected the first stages of dawn. The people around the table ate almost in silence, drinking down huge cups of tea.
Draco felt exhausted, but much better.

“Best bacon butty I’ve ever had,” Ron said, licking the last remnants of flavour from his lips.

Draco agreed, though didn’t have the energy to put it into words.

He was ready to sleep. The need was over. Their table was like an island in a sea of empty trolleys.

But sleep meant the Slytherin Common Room and dormitories. He could not face going there. He knew from the reports that had come in that many Slytherin parents were dead or injured – and parents from other houses too. A couple of Slytherin children had been orphaned, and these had been taken off by Madam Hooch; other bereaved children had had the remaining parent summoned, if they were not there already, and Professor Sprout and Albus Dumbledore had been dealing with them. Professor Sinistra had been put in charge of the Slytherins, and the staff members had been flitting in and out all night. Draco shoved his plate to the side and laid his head on the table.

Here would do.

There was a slight cough behind him but Draco was too tired to care.

“I can’t ever thank you all sufficiently, or express how very proud of you all I am,” Dumbledore said quietly. “You all need to sleep but I’m afraid I must beg a last favour. Most of the students have finally settled and I am loath for them to be disturbed again. I would be happy for you all to sleep here, but I know you will be disturbed by parents and pupils when they eventually come to breakfast. If you will not object to a dormitory all together, I’ve set up some mattresses in an antechamber. I suggest just sleeping as you are, and cleaning up tomorrow.”

There were no objections.

Even in his exhaustion, Draco could tell the Headmaster was making it easy not to face housemates, and when they stumbled into the antechamber, the floor of which appeared to be covered entirely by a huge mattress, with a stack of blankets at the edge, Draco realised he was also making it easy to share the comfort of simple touch for those who needed it. Draco noted Ernie collecting a couple of blankets and covering Eloise carefully before slipping in behind her and twining his arms around her.

Draco grabbed a blanket, kicked off his shoes and stumbled onto the mattress. He sank down, uncaring as others did the same, and was asleep in seconds.

Severus and Hermione both awoke from respective dozes as the door opened.

Three doctors, still in scrubs, came in, one of them the lady neurologist.

Severus sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed.

“How is he?” he asked urgently.

“His condition is still serious,” a swarthy older man said, his voice accented; “we hope we have everything under control, but the next 48 hours will be critical.”

“We’ve set his arm and stitched all the stab wounds that we could,” the other male doctor said carefully. “Thankfully the depth of penetration - exactly the same for each wound – was not
critical, though has obviously caused severe bruising and damage to muscles. Incredibly, no major organs or arteries were severed, although we have had to do some minor internal repair work. The muscle damage to his leg caused us some confusion. Frankly, we’ve never come across injuries such as these. We were also grateful for your help as regards the neurological agents, and obviously we’ll keep monitoring his responses and assess the damage there. Our major concern, however, has been the burns. He seems to have been hit from the side, although his arm seems unaffected. His face, chest, down his body to his hip are all affected to varying degrees. We’ve been unable to stitch the stab wounds in this area, and obviously the possibility of infection is also a grave concern. We can use a special mask on Mr Potter’s face – you may have seen the like in the press. We’ve had impressive results with these, and feel hopeful that the facial disfigurement won’t be too great. We’re very concerned about his body; I’m afraid I must warn you that there will be severe scarring,” the doctor looked straight at Severus.

Severus’ eyebrows tightened, and he leaned forward. “The scarring is likely to cause him difficulties?”

“If he survives –“ the female doctor placed a swift hand on Snape’s arm, “and we have more hope that he will at this point than some hours ago – his body will be severely marked. We’ll consider what we can do with grafting and several new techniques available to us, but I have to warn you that – that - he will not be the attractive young man he was.”

“But he will have full mobility? No problems?” Snape asked.

“He should have good mobility eventually. There will be loss of sensation in some areas, where the nerves have been destroyed. He - may - find it hard to come to terms with how he looks. As may those he is involved with.”

Severus looked at her, at the three doctors, as understanding dawned. “You think I care that he will be scarred? Look at me!” He flung his arms wide. “I am old, ugly, scarred - and those are the minor points. Bitter, sarcastic – has it put him off? It matters nothing.”

The two male doctors looked at each other. “You may change your view once you see him. I’m sorry to say this, but as a burns specialist I’ve encountered this again and again. I only ask that you support him through the worst. No one can fault you for being put off. He will never be a pretty sight, though I promise you both, I will do my best for him, and compression clothing allied with plastic surgery these days has been greatly improving outcomes.” He looked at Hermione. “As his friend, you may find it easier to give him ongoing support. If you can rally his friends –“

Severus snorted. “He could look like a troll and he would still be revered. You do not appreciate what he has done for people.”

“He may be revered, but maybe harder to love, or at least desire,” the burns doctor said gently.

Severus stood up, and stripped off the monitoring discs, causing the machine to go haywire. “Take me to him.”

“He’s in recovery. We have him in a special frame to prevent the burns touching anything. We’ll need him to remain in a clean area without potential contaminants – “

“Take me to him,” Snape said again, striding to the door. “There are perhaps things we can do.”

“You may observe him from outside,” one of the doctors said.

“You need to speak to the Colonel about security,” Severus said. “Now, let us see what we can do
for him.” And held open the door.

Severus and Hermione looked at Harry through a glass window in the recovery room. He appeared to be a mass of bandages suspended on a torture instrument.

“What on earth is that thing?” Hermione said, startled.

“Due to his multiple injuries, this is the best we can do to protect him from the pressure on various parts of his body,” one of the doctors explained. “It’s state of the art equipment – they’ve flown it in especially.”

Hermione and Severus looked at each other quickly, before staring back at Harry.

“The purpose of that is to stop the contact with the bed?” Severus sought confirmation.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“We need to get in there,” Severus turned to Hermione.

“I’m afraid you’ll need to change into scrubs and mask up. We need to do everything to prevent infection.”

Hermione and Severus followed the procedures and were eventually allowed into the room.

Severus stood over Harry, reeling in horror.

Hermione was trying not to cry.

“When will he be conscious?” Severus asked.

“He may flit in and out, but he can’t talk at the moment,” the burns specialist who had accompanied them said. “I forgot to mention – we’ve done a temporary tracheotomy – his throat was swollen from the strangulation, and we couldn’t intubate him.”

Severus walked all around Harry, assessing the situation.

There was a slight movement.

Severus moved at once to stand beside Harry’s head.

The eyelashes fluttered on his uninjured side.

“I’m here,” Severus said quietly, laying a hand gently on Harry’s good cheek.

The eye opened and slowly focused. Severus saw the lips try to move.

“Unbelievably, Potter, the doctors here have achieved something I have not been able to manage in all our years’ acquaintance, and have shut you up,” Severus said in his usual sarcastic voice. “Something about it seemed to calm Harry. “You can’t speak - no, don’t panic – it’s temporary, to ease your throat.” Severus reached down to his fingers. “Squeeze if you’re in pain.”

There was no movement.
“That was unusually stupid of me,” Snape said calmly. “I’ll allow you to tease me about it later. Let us establish basics. Squeeze if you understand me, Harry.”

A slight motion.

“Good. Squeeze again if you are NOT in pain.”

Again the pressure.

“Good boy,” he stroked the face.

Hermione was enthralled. The mix of Snape’s usual acerbic tone, coupled with this extraordinary gentleness – Snape was in love with Harry, she was positive. Before, she had not been sure if it was guilt allied with some degree of care and responsibility. She had no doubts now.

“We’re in a military hospital, Harry, so expect some unfamiliar faces, all right? They’ve got you in a rather odd contraption, but Miss Granger and I are going to sort that out. They’ve invested a lot of time in operating on you, so I expect you to put in all your effort into recovering as quickly as possible, do you understand? You and I have unfinished business,” he whispered the latter seductively in Harry’s ear.

A slight squeeze.

“Yes, I thought you might need a little motivation.”

Harry’s eye began to flutter shut again, then suddenly flew open. He stared anxiously at Snape.

“He is dead, Harry, you did it,” Snape said, thinking that was what Harry wanted reassurance about.

Harry gave the tiniest shake of his head.

Severus looked at Hermione who stood beside him so that Harry didn’t have to turn his head.

“Are you worried about who else has died, Harry?” she guessed.

Harry squeezed Severus’ hand again.

“Ever the Gryffindor,” the older man said, his voice without rancour and warm with affection. “We do not know yet, we’ve been with you all the time. We can find out –“

Harry’s eyes moved to Hermione, anxious.

“We’ll find out for you, ok? But before we left we saw Ron and Neville, Draco you saw yourself, and Crabbe and Goyle, Dumbledore’s fine – all right?”

Harry’s hand gave the slightest of touches to Severus, before his lashes flickered down.

Reluctantly, Snape withdrew his hand, brushed his fingers across Harry’s hair, and went to the door. He stood there a moment, eyes shut, as if praying. Hermione waited, then followed him out, leaving the doctor there.

“We need to speak,” Severus said quietly.

The outer room held three armed guards. Severus and Hermione moved over to some chairs in the corner.
“I’ve put a decontamination charm on the room,” he began.

So that was the weird pause. Wandless, wordless magic. Hermione nodded, pleased.

“We can suspend him easily, put him on a cushion of air,” Severus said quietly. “Any ideas how to make the Muggles not realise how it is done?”

Hermione thought. “We can pretend we’ve set up some sort of force field. They know we deal with weird shit, anyway. Call in someone – Remus Lupin say; he looks the shambolic absent-minded professor type, which should do the trick – don’t tell him I said that!” Hermione said sharply.

Severus grinned.

“Does Madam Pomfrey need to check the charm you added?”

Severus shook his head. “I use it for very delicate potions work, and she uses it in infectious cases; the same thing will kill any bug. It’s the best there is.”

“I’ll go out and call Lupin now,” Hermione said. “He might be sleeping though.”

She looked at the dawn light coming in the windows.

“Wake him. Harry is more important. I expect he’ll agree with me for once. You can return with him, and get some rest yourself,” he said.

“Will you be alright here, alone?”

“I shall endeavour to manage, Miss Granger.”

“I didn’t mean any offence –“

“I know,” he cut across her. “I have been most grateful.” He sighed, and rubbed a hand over his face. “Do you plan to return?”

“Of course –“

“I would also be grateful if you could see how my Slytherins are doing, and who is caring for them. And Draco –“ he rubbed his hands along his thighs.

Hermione touched his arm. “Draco knew what he was doing. He didn’t blindly join our side. We’ve talked a bit,” she said after a moment. “He’ll understand that he’s in danger until his father is caught.”

“I wish we hadn’t lost him,” Snape shook his head. They had had an update after ringing earlier. Malfoy, Nott and McNair had all escaped. The Lestranges had both been captured, as had Avery and Rookwood and Rosier. It was unclear if Karkaroff, Fenrir Greyback, Crabbe and Goyle’s parents and others had been taken or not.

“What about his mother? Draco’s mother?” Hermione asked.

“She’s never taken the Mark – tried to ignore Lucius’ involvement, and prevent Draco’s. I hope she comes to us for help. I’m not sure what Lucius will do with her,” he said, shaking his head.

Hermione stood up. “I’m going to call. Are you going to rest?”

“When Lupin’s been, I’ll get a bed set up in there with Harry. I’ll rest then.”
Hermione nodded. Severus looked exhausted, but she could understand his decision.

An hour later, Lupin had acted his part. They had placed some strange metal orbs at several points in the room, and created a ‘force-field’ that suspended Harry, yet allowed him to be touched and moved without affecting anyone else. This top secret technology was met with awe by all the staff, as were the sensors by the doors which apparently killed all germs, viruses and microbes. All the staff were already sworn to secrecy, and Lupin had added a *Speak-Not* spell to anyone who came into the outer room for good measure.

A second bed was set up. Harry had not reawoken, and after Remus and Hermione departed (leaving the camp on Sirius’ motorbike, but apparating with it from around the corner), Snape finally settled down, and slept.

Back at Hogwarts, Hermione reported to a very old looking Dumbledore, then visited the prefect’s bathroom and had a quick, refreshing shower before being led by a house elf to the chamber full of sleeping sixth formers. She picked up a blanket, wended her way across the mattress between the bodies, and settled down wearily to sleep.
Draco Malfoy snuggled further under the warm blankets. He was still more than half asleep, but aware enough to know that he hadn’t felt so cosy or comfortable in a long time. He wriggled down into the mattress.

The shift of an arm across him alerted him to the fact that someone was loosely cuddling him. He was too tired to object, too warm and content to protest. He dozed off again.

He woke a little later to find that the hand had moved under his shirt and was brushing over his stomach. It felt pleasant, and he relaxed into it, only startling awake a little more as a finger circled his belly button.

That was more overtly sexual than what had happened before.

He couldn’t remember who was sleeping next to him, behind him. The room had obviously been spelled into darkness.

The hand was warm and nice, and began to move up over his stomach to his chest. He snuggled back.

Everything happened at once.

Draco felt a solid body curled around his, but more startlingly, the unmistakeable hard length of an aroused cock against his arse. The hand touching his nipple leapt back as if burnt.

The person behind threw himself back and on to his knees and a garbled lumos spell showed him the horrified face of Ronald Weasley.

“Malfoy! Fuck! What are you doing there?” Ron shrieked.

“Being fondled against my will,” Draco drawled. “Didn’t know you fancied me, Weasley.”

“Fuck! Shit! I thought you were Susan Bones!”

“Do I look like Susan Bones?”

“It was dark –“

“Feel like Susan Bones?”

“Well your skin’s all soft and – oh God, I did not say that! “ Ron gagged.

“Told you you used more beauty products than a girl,” a voice to Draco’s left mumbled from under the covers.

“Susan Bones got up an hour ago,” Neville yawned from the other side of Ron.

“See! She was here! I wouldn’t have touched you up – oh my god!” Ron held his head in his hands.

“Weasley, you were sticking your erection up my arse,” Draco said, enjoying Ron’s humiliation immensely.

“It wasn’t you!” Ron said quickly. “I always have a stiffie in the morning! Everyone does, don’t
“They?” he pleaded.

“Not when they’re in bed with the opposite sex, I wouldn’t have thought,” Draco said.

“Oh god. I’m not queer,” Ron moaned.

“And he does always have a hard-on in the morning. Stop whinging, Ron. Nothing wrong if you were,” the voice came from the blankets again.

“Mione? That you?” Ron exclaimed, excitement in his voice.

Draco rolled back over to find himself almost nose to nose with Granger. Her hair was all over the place. She opened brown, brown eyes and looked straight into Draco’s before rolling on her back and pushing the covers down a bit. Her hair tickled against Draco’s cheek. And then she stretched.

Her armpit, so close to Draco’s face, didn’t smell, and her hair was fresh scented. She was wearing a fluffy white bath robe. She must have showered before coming to sleep. Her body arched off the mattress and the movement went straight to Draco’s groin.

He heard the intakes of breath behind him and was pretty sure that Ron and maybe even Neville were also affected by her unconscious sensuality.

She gave a little moan, then turned onto her side, propping herself up on her elbow. Draco’s eyes shot straight to the creamy flesh exposed by the neckline of the robe, the swell of breast less than a foot from his face.

He forced his eyes up to her face, but she was looking over his shoulder at Ron.

“How’s Harry?” he asked urgently.

Her mouth opened, and shut again. Tears welled in her eyes. The next minute Ron had slipped in behind her and was holding her on his lap, Hermione sobbing into his shoulder.

“He’s alive,” she got out, “but they don’t know...the next 48 hours...he’s in a terrible state...they said awful scars....”

Draco and Neville were also sitting up. Draco saw Neville encircle them with a privacy charm.

“What’s the worst of it, Hermione?” Neville said, as the sobs subsided.

“The burns, I think. They’re really worried about them – infection getting in – but Snape’s sorted that - and that there’ll be terrible scarring. They’re talking about plastic surgery, and a face mask and –“

“What’s plastic surgery?” Neville asked quietly.

“Sort of reconstruction. They take skin from an unharmed part – your leg or stomach, say, and put it over the damaged bits, and hope it will grow on.”

“That’s disgusting,” Ron choked. For once, Draco found himself agreeing with a Weasley.

“It works,” Hermione said. “Better than without...” she turned her head into Ron’s chest.

“We need to clean up his magic and get it back into him. Then we can use magical healing,” Neville said firmly. “I’ll look up what plants can help in the meantime.”
Draco found Neville, sounding so authoritative, strangely comforting.

“How’s Snape?” he asked.

“Holding up,” Hermione answered.

“What was he hit with?” Draco asked, furrowing his brow. “Surely I could have helped him?”

He became aware of one of those conspiratorial silences. Gryffindors against him. He felt blocked out. It was surprisingly painful.

Hermione wriggled forward and put a hand on his arm. So small and delicate. Not like the hand on his stomach earlier.

“I should think you were rushed off your feet as it was. How are you?”

Draco was so taken aback by the genuine concern that he let go the feelings of hurt. “Knackered, frankly. Alright, though.”

Hermione moved back. Ron groaned.

“What?” Hermione said, turning round.

“Come on, Mione, I was hard to start with. You’re wiggling round – and I need to take a leak,” he blushed.

“Honestly!” Hermione griped without rancour, as she slipped off his lap and cuddled the blankets around her again.

Ron stood up.

All three of them looked at his crotch.

“For heaven’s sake!” he stuck his hands over his erection, and with an, “I’ll find you later,” was gone.

Hermione chuckled and laid back down again. Draco looked from one side to the other, realising that he had Hermione on one side and Neville on the other. He looked around the darkened room, seeing, now that his eyes had adjusted, the shapes of several more bodies here and there, though many students had obviously got up already.

“You should get some more sleep,” Neville said quietly to Draco. He looked across at Hermione. “When did you get in? I thought you were going to call me?”

“Remus Lupin bought me back about eight this morning. What’s the time now?”

“About two in the afternoon,” Neville answered. “Why don’t you two get a couple more hours, then we can meet up for tea. I expect there’ll be a lot of celebrating this evening. Maybe at the Three Broomsticks if we’re lucky. I could sink a pint.”

Draco glanced at Neville with interest. He didn’t know the man liked a drink.

“I don’t think that will be likely,” Hermione said quietly.
The both turned to look at her, Draco lying on his side and Neville stretching out, his head appearing over Draco’s shoulder.

“Not all the Death Eaters were captured,” she added.

“My father escaped?” Draco asked. He hadn’t dared think before. Not really. No one had come to tell him his father was dead. He had seen him on the battlefield, seen the fury on his face. An involuntary shudder passed through him.

Neville touched his shoulder gently, and he glanced back, feeling the firm weight of the hand. “You’ve got us,” Neville said gently. “I know it’s not the same. People like me and Harry have never had much family, but we’ve found it here. You’ve got us. And I daresay Crabbe and Goyle. We’ll always be here if you need us, don’t ever forget it.”

“And probably a lot of times when you’d rather we weren’t,” Hermione lightened the tone, grinning. Her hair was fanned out again on her pillow, one of her hands brushing it off her forehead. She turned over and faced the two boys again. “Are there things we need to be doing, or can we chill out for a little longer? I expect I had an easy time while you were working last night.”

“Why don’t you two sleep a little longer?” Neville repeated his suggestion, getting to his feet. “I’m awake. If you’re needed, I’ll come and get you, okay?”

“Thanks, Nev,” Hermione snuggled down into the blankets, and Neville quietly wended his way across the remaining sleepers and out of the room.

“This is weird,” Hermione said, turning on her side again facing Draco. They had made a bit more room between themselves now the others had gone, but it still felt as if they were the only people there.

“Being in bed with Draco Malfoy?” Draco suggested.

Instead of taking offence, Hermione chuckled. “Indeed.”

The casual humour took Draco by surprise. Suddenly, frighteningly, he knew that waking up looking at Hermione Granger could presage a lifetime of enjoyable mornings.

Lucius Malfoy hated having to change his appearance, but the hair was a give-away, and a simple glamour would not be enough.

He strolled down the Paulus Pottersstaacht – even the name seemed to mock him - cloak pulled tight over his head – the heavy drizzle making his dress much as anyone else’s, and slipped down a side street into the barber’s shop.

An hour later, a tall, elegant man with short brown hair and eyebrows regarded himself in the mirror, told the sycophantic barber that the job was satisfactory, and proffered a knife up through the ribs directly into the heart in payment.

New clothes – well cut, but not of his usual standard, bought this time in Grenoble, completed his transition to wealthy trader, as opposed to nobleman, and Lucius apparated once again, this time to Munich. Not his favourite city, but one where surely no-one would expect to find a Malfoy. He made his way along the Shellingsrtasse, past second hand bookshops that served the student
population, to a rather dowdy looking shop into which he stepped with quiet grace. The door-bell sounded, but the bearded man behind the counter was speaking on the telephone. He looked around casually.

The centre of the shop had open storage boxes filled with thin books, whilst in the glass cabinets on the side, brass instruments of every variety were displayed – saxophones of every size, trombones, trumpets, and woodwind instruments – piccolos, flutes, clarinets... Racks held assorted odds and ends.

Lucius perused the cabinets, and after some observation, opened one with the slightest wave of his wand, concealed in his sleeve, and took out a flute from its blue velvet bedded box. He assembled it with deft and knowing fingers, and after a quick *scourgify* of the mouthpiece, settled the instrument across his lips and began to play.

The haunting melody had the man behind the counter terminating his conversation in very short order. The hurried footsteps did not stop Lucius, and as he neared, the shopkeeper seemed to think twice about his indignation and stood listening.

“A beautiful rendition of a lovely piece, Sir,” he said, as the final strains lingered on the air and seemed to dissolve around them. “And if I may say so, a fine instrument to play it on. You’ll excuse my initial haste, I’m sure, Sir: our cabinets are usually locked, containing such valuable instruments as they do...how fortuitous that a master should find them open,” he fawned.

“Indeed,” Lucius said smoothly, his German fluent, though slightly accented, “this is a rather better instrument than I had expected to find.”

“All of our instruments are of a very good quality, Sir,” the man went on, “although if you are looking for a flute your skill has chosen the best we have. A very pretty instrument indeed.”

“Show me your best clarinet.”

“Oh. Ah. Yes, of course, Sir. But I’m afraid we have nothing of quite the quality of the flute,” the man said, putting the instrument carefully back into its sensuous nest. “We have this model –” he led Lucius over to another case. “It’s an intermediate student’s instrument, really, Sir,” he said apologetically.

“And if I asked you whether you could find me something better?”

“Well, sometimes we get offered them, of course, if you’re prepared to wait, but there would be no guarantee –“

“You don’t have contacts?”

The man looked shifty. “I do have friends I could ask, of course, Sir, but you may be better off going to one of the shops in –“

“No.” Lucius said firmly.

“No?” the man said, taken aback.

“No. Do you have staff?”

“A young lady comes on a Saturday, Sir, and if I need a day off,” the salesman said, rather perplexed at the question. Thinking he suddenly understood, he started to add, “But she is a music student, very knowledgeable –“
“Magical or Muggle?”

The man stiffened. “Pardon me?”

“You heard me.”

The man looked both ways, as if expecting to be overheard. “Muggle, Sir.”

“Good. I had better introduce myself. I am Armand Renoir.”

“Monsieur Renoir! I had no idea – everything is in order I hope – “

“I am rather surprised to see you have such a fine instrument on display. I thought I made it clear that the shop was to cater to the lower end of the market?”

“Yes, Monsieur,” the man’s head was practically scraping the floor, “but sometimes fine instruments come in, when a person has debts, you know, they often will accept a fraction of the value for cash – and I find it encourages the students to have something to aspire to. They keep returning, buying little things – music books – and so on – looking at the instrument - it’s very good for business,” he said agitatedly.

“I am not used to having my orders ignored,” Lucius said severely. “However, I will consider what you say. Please show me to the – flat,” he said, as if the word itself was a disgrace.

“Of course, Monsieur,” the man was sweating now. “You’re planning on staying, then?”

Lucius gave him a look. “I hardly feel that it is any of your business,” he said silkily.

“No, of course not, Monsieur. Only – the place hasn’t been used. I’ll get the cleaner in to go over it, if you could wait an hour or two –”

Lucius could smell panic as easily as the scent of flowers. Surely the authorities did not know of his safe house? It was more than ten years since he had bought it, unknowing then quite why he had chosen to do so. He had told no-one of it, nor ever visited the flat or shop, the money from which, little though it was, had been banked over the years here in Germany.

“I’ll see it now,” he said curtly.

The man – his name, Lucius was reminded as his eyes dropped to an order book on the counter, was Albert Reichman – hurried across and locked the door, putting up the closed sign. He led Lucius through the door at the back of the shop and up the dark stairwell. Lucius’ hand was on his wand.

As they reached the top, the man turned, mumbling – “I may have let a friend stay – just for a day or two –”

“Open it,” Lucius commanded.

Herr Reichman turned the key in the lock with shaking hands.

Lucius moved past him off the stairs and through the doorway, then investigated each room.

Herr Reichman’s fear was certainly discovery. Lucius’ lips twitched.

The wine glasses, the rumpled bed – “I assume your companion was not your wife,” Lucius said calmly.
“No, Monsieur Renoir,” the other man was actually trembling.

“You will have to find a different boudoir,” Lucius said. “I will return in an hour. The place will be immaculate, yes?”

“Yes! Of course! Can I get some food in for you, Monsieur?”

“I think the cleaning may tax your resources. One hour, Reichman.” And Lucius left.

He sat in a cafe enjoying good coffee. He felt reasonably secure, and surprisingly energetic, given all that he had done. Apparating to Amsterdam, Grenoble, Munich... Thoughts began to occur. He rubbed softly over his arm, where his Dark Mark lay. It had always prickled when touched before, but now it felt dead, inert...Lucius took a deep breath, and thought about it.

And the answer came to him clear and sharp. The Dark Lord had been draining his magic for years.

Now, he had it back.

Much more magic at his own disposal, and no one else’s. This could be very interesting.

He wondered who else had escaped. Nott, he was pretty sure, would have an escape plan. Karkaroff was wily too. He cared not a whit about Crabbe, or Goyle – their own sons had fought against their side.

But then, so had Draco.

His mouth twisted bitterly. He did not know what to think. He could appreciate Narcissa’s comment that Malfoy’s always went for the winning team – had Draco’s defection been a last minute decision? Had he known Potter was a Mage? And if so, since when? That was definitely a well kept secret – he couldn’t fault Dumbledore for keeping that one up his sleeve. If Draco had found out – his behaviour was certainly more understandable. But he hadn’t passed on the information – hadn’t cared enough for family or heritage. It was unlikely that he would be able to sway Draco over to joining him.

Because a path was now unfolding. He needed to spend some time thinking it through. Voldemort was gone. His own magic was more powerful because of it. Potter might be a Mage, but he had seen Voldemort cast something at him before he fell, and the boy finished him off – before he himself had apparated away. Was Potter even still alive?

He needed to get hold of a copy of the Daily Prophet. Daily copies, until the picture was clearer.

He had no expectation that should he be captured, that he could this time wangle his way out; he had achieved that one time too many.

So his options were to live forever in exile, as someone else, or fight back.

He would surely be able to rally a great deal of support – without Voldemort’s madness clouding the issue, there were undoubtedly many purebloods who still held to the original beliefs that their world should be kept separate and untainted by the Muggle world. He wondered which of the remaining supporters had escaped.
And which would challenge him for leadership.

If Potter truly was a Mage – and frankly, was it likely? The boy wasn’t even a pureblood! Though he had to admit the Potter line was well established, and he had heard rumours that the boy was a descendant of Godric Gryffindor. Well. If he was that – and a Mage - it would be a problem. People would give him allegiance without a thought. His own thoughts returned to the battle, and with a start, he realised that the boy had been wielding both staff and wand at the Dark Lord. So. A Mage then; he would be foolish to deny it. And yet the boy had called on Severus – Severus! And for some reason that incompetent Longbottom boy – to help him destroy the body.

Were there degrees of Mage ability? Certainly, he could have had little time to train; there had been no evidence of it in the graveyard three years ago, and nothing to suggest it since. Even an ordinary wizard’s apprenticeship lasted five years or more.

If he was seriously going to challenge the whelp, the sooner the better.

Neville Longbottom had quietly made his way to the hospital wing, then to Madam Sprout and then to the greenhouses. He had called in to Gryffindor Tower, where the common room was full of young people in very high spirits. He collected his cloak, having assured everyone that Harry was alive and being treated, then went back to the sleep room. Quietly, by wand light, he made his way over to Hermione and Draco. There was a foot or so between them; they were curled facing each other, fast asleep.

Neville watched them for a good minute, then quietly left.

He made his way down to the dungeons, and slipped into Snape’s classroom. He knew the man would hate for him to be here, but there were things he needed. He collected a small cauldron and stirrer, then went to the ingredients’ cupboard. It was well warded. Neville put his hand on the wall and begged the castle’s help. The door opened with a quiet click.

Carefully, he filled a small bag with the recipe ingredients on the sheet of parchment in his hand, separating the items into smaller bags within.

He had just re-warded the cupboard when Pansy Parkinson walked in the door.

“Longbottom!” she spat. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

Neville nearly jumped out of his skin, but then noted, with relief, that Pansy had no wand.

“Collecting a few items, that’s all,” he said casually, walking over to the door.

Wand or no, Pansy blocked his way.

“By whose authority?” she said haughtily.

“Mind your own business,” Neville snapped. “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Why shouldn’t I be here? I’m a Slytherin.”

Neville just stared at her.
To his amazement, colour began to rise in her cheeks.

“You have nothing on me,” she hissed, before turning and storming off, heels echoing down the corridor.

Neville made his way to Dumbledore’s office. Again, the castle let him up without any nonsensical confectionary names.

Dumbledore was drinking tea with the remaining Heads of House, Remus Lupin, Charlie and Bill Weasley.

“Sorry to disturb you, Sir. I wanted to pop along to see Harry, if you’ve no objection. I have some ingredients for Professor Snape to make a salve to help with the burns, until we’re able to return his magic.”

“Surely Professor Snape will be returning here to do that,” Charlie said in surprise. “I was just offering to take over from him for the next 24 hours.”

Neville met Dumbledore’s eyes across the room, and saw the exasperation and uncertainty in them.

“You know what Professor Snape is like,” he said mildly. “He asked Hermione to get a cauldron to him, and as he can’t use magic to make it, I expect he wants to monitor the stuff closely,” he lied.

“Well, I’m sure Harry would rather have a friendly face around,” Charlie huffed.

Neville’s lips twitched, but all he said was, “From what I understand from Hermione, he’s not in any state to notice. The next couple of days are touch and go. Mr Weasley – Charlie – he specified, as both Weasley men looked at him, “can I pick your brains? I’ve discussed a recipe for a non-magical burn salve with Pomona – Professor Sprout – he nodded to the woman, who smiled at him encouragingly, “but with all your experience with dragon burns, I wonder whether there’s any other additives to consider?”

They spent several minutes in discussion, then Neville looked at Dumbledore: “When will we be able to start working on the necessary arrangements, Sir?” He had been about to ask about cleaning up Harry’s magic, but didn’t know how much the others knew.

“As soon as Severus is back,” Dumbledore nodded, “we can start on detaching the spells. Bill here might be able to help us.”

Professor Flitwick looked at the cauldron in Neville’s hand.

“How did you get the ingredients? Surely the storage cupboards are warded?”

Yes, Sir, they are. I asked the castle’s help again,” Neville admitted with a blush.

All eyes turned to him.

“And they let you through Severus’ wards?” Minerva exclaimed.

“They know I wouldn’t ask if it wasn’t important,” Neville said quickly.

Minerva turned to the twinkling Albus, and drew a deep breath.

“Quite,” Albus said, twirling his moustache.

“If Mr Lupin is free, or if you can give me the co-ordinates, I’ll go along now,” Neville prompted.
Remus stood up. “Now’s fine. I won’t stop long, if you’re going to be there. There’s a lot of planning to do.”

Neville and Lupin were escorted by an armed guard to the outer area, and looked at Harry through the glass. Harry was suspended above the bed, swathed in bandages; Snape was sat in a chair at his side, but looked up and got up as soon as he saw them, indicating they should enter.

The guards saluted and left, though there were still three guards in the room, all dressed in white decontamination suits, but holding automatic weapons.

They passed through the door.

“How is he?” Lupin asked.

“ Mostly unconscious,” Snape answered shortly. He rubbed his chin wearily. “They are not unhappy with his progress. Nothing unexpected has yet occurred.”

“Let’s be thankful for small mercies, then,” Lupin said, going over to the bed to look at Harry. He turned back to Snape. “They bought the force-field idea?”

“How could they not, when they have the evidence of their own eyes?” Snape sneered. “And the ‘decontamination bars’” – he indicated two blocks of metal that Lupin had placed on either side of the door earlier in the day – “though they are still following their own procedures too, for which I can’t fault them: I would do the same.”

“I’ll go,” Lupin said. “There’s lots to do. Neville has brought a cauldron and insists you will want to observe the effects yourself, but I’m sure you must be wanting to get back. We’ll set up a rota as soon as you give the word, Severus,” Lupin offered.

Snape looked at Neville, who shrugged his shoulders.

“I will be staying until Harry is out of the woods,” Severus said calmly. “Professor Sinistra is, I’m sure, capable of caring for my Slytherins.”

“Of course, Severus,” Lupin said, the surprise clear in his voice.

Moments later, he had gone.

“You haven’t told him?” Snape inquired, as he took the cauldron from Neville.

“It’s not my place,” Neville said.

“How very well-mannered of you,” Snape commented. “I’m surprised the wolf could not smell anything.”

“I don’t think lust has been your topmost emotion,” Neville said, and then blushed to the roots of his hair.

Snape laughed. “I think, given everything you have witnessed, that I deserved that. Now, what have we here?”

Neville explained the burn salve.
“And you got the ingredients where?” Severus asked.

“From your cupboard – in the classroom.”

“It was open?” Severus’ brows drew together.

“No. I asked the castle to let me have access. I know the thought of me in your class must be enough to give you palpitations, but it’s for Harry…” he tailed off.

“That’s almost Slytherin in manipulation terms,” Snape said, as he unloaded the ingredients. He looked at everything, and then back at Neville. “I’ll need to see what the Muggles are using, and then brew this outside. Can you sit with Harry for an hour or two? I’d rather he had a familiar face near.”

Neville felt honoured that Snape was willing to entrust Harry to him.

“No problem. One thing, though, Professor – Professor Dumbledore says that you’ll be needed to help sort out Harry’s magic, so you’ll be wanted back at base as soon as he’s beginning to look better,” he said gently. “We’ll make a rota to be here – his friends, not just Order members.”

Snape nodded, and after a quick look at Harry, a smoothing stroke to the uninjured part of his face, he was gone.

Neville stood and looked at his friend for a bit, before sitting down next to the bed. He’d had a lot of practice visiting unresponsive people in hospital.

He’d go and visit his parents again soon. It’d been a while.

He began talking softly to Harry, going over the events of the last 18 hours from the perspective of those who had remained at Hogwarts.

“This morning, Harry,” he said at last, “was really weird. In the end, after Ron went, there I was lying with Draco next to me and Hermione just the other side. And,” he swallowed, “they both looked really hot, you know? Hermione was in a dressing gown and I don’t think she had anything on underneath. I mean, she was propped up and you could see that line between the breasts. Not that I suppose you’d notice,” he snorted. “You’d have noticed Draco, though, even though you’ve got Snape. I mean, you can’t be bad for looking – for noticing, can you? I could smell him when I leaned over – he was all warm and just a little sweaty smelling – you know, when it’s not a stink but just enough that you sniff your armpits again, and it’s actually just earthy and nice? And Ron had snuggled up to him with a boner and Draco really teased him about it, but….”

He sat silently. “I wish it had been me,” he whispered at last. “I’d like to have known how it felt. If I really liked it. To have felt him in my arms. ‘Spect you think I’m crazy, huh?”

He was quiet for a while.

“I even thought about asking him out. Or Hermione.” He sighed and shook his head. “I went back a bit later and they were both curled up opposite each other. They looked really good together. And I could tell Draco’s got the hots for Hermione, so that’s that, eh? He’s really good looking and he’s actually turned out to be an interesting guy. And clever. Everything Hermione could want. I’m happy for them, really.”

Harry let out a great gasp.

Neville shot to his feet.
Harry’s eyes were open and he was trying to say something, but no sound was coming.

Severus dashed in, as did a doctor.

Harry’s eyes were panicked.

Severus leant over him. “It’s all right, H - Alex. You’re alright. Remember, you’ve a tube in your throat, and you can’t talk. What is it?” he asked gently, “squeeze if you’re in pain.”

Harry’s hand was still, but he was staring hard at Severus through his uncovered eye.

“You don’t want me to do Legilimens?” he asked, in astonishment.

Harry squeezed.

“You do.”

Harry squeezed again.

Severus cast the spell whilst the doctor was checking all Harry’s vitals, and came out a moment later. He avoided Neville’s eyes.

“Professor?” Neville said, “is he all right?”

“His readings are as we’d expect at this stage,” the doctor said, coming forward to peer into Harry’s eye. “You’re doing very well, Alex,” he smiled down at him. “Do you need anything for the pain?”

Two squeezes – no.

“Okay, I’ll leave you to your friends for now,” the doctor said gently, and moved across the room to write up Harry’s chart.

Severus looked down at the battered man. “You want me to pass on that first image to Longbottom?”

One squeeze.

“I’m not passing on the second,” Severus said forcefully.

Another squeeze.

“Was that for me?”

And another.

Severus bent down and very gently brushed his lips against Harry’s. “I’ll bear it in mind,” he whispered. “Rather too much, I fear. You are a very naughty young man.”

Harry’s eyelid fluttered again.

The doctor came over. They all stood looking at Harry for a couple of minutes, but he appeared to have sunk into slumber once more.

“That was a very good sign,” the doctor said cheerfully. “I’d quite expected him to be comatose for considerably longer. Excellent.” And he departed.
Neville looked at Severus. “He wanted you to tell me something?”

“Indeed. What intriguing lives you young people lead,” Severus murmured, turning away.

“Severus! Was it important?”

Snape turned round. “Only you can judge that, Neville. Harry sent me a rather graphic picture of you having sexual relations with Miss Granger.” He paused, watching Neville’s Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed. “And Mr Malfoy,” he continued silkily, “At the same time. From the somewhat impossible angles, I rather think it is a suggestion rather than a memory of something he has actually seen.”

“Oh,” Neville was beet red. And going hard.

“Indeed. It’s not an image I would wish to have blasted into my consciousness, but Harry appeared to feel it of importance.”

“I’m sorry about that, “Neville mumbled.

Severus was pretty sure what had led to the image projection, and wondered whether to comment.

“Wizarding threesomes are not common, but not unknown either,” he said at last. “Albus was in a threesome for about fifty years, I believe.”

“The Headmaster?” squeaked Neville.

“Given my relationship with Alex, I am amazed that you should still consider it odd that your teachers should have sex,” Snape said caustically.

“But he’s ancient,” Neville croaked.

“He was young once,” Snape averred. “Anyway, do you not wish to be having sex at his age?”

“I’d like to be having sex at my age,” Neville retorted, without thinking.

“Ah. Quite,” Snape commented.

There was a rather uncomfortable silence. Neville had to stop himself from apparating out by wish magic.

“You do not like the idea of a threesome with Miss Granger and Mr Malfoy?”

“Fuck, yeah!” Neville burst out, before blushing redder than ever and turning to adjust his trousers.

“Then what is the problem?” Snape raised his eyebrows. He had settled himself on the radiator, where he had a good view of Harry and Neville.

“Is your potion alright?” Neville sidetracked.

“I had already set it brewing. I can see it from here. I will need to stir it in four minutes and fifteen seconds. You do not need to answer my questions if you do not wish, Neville,” he added gently.

Neville settled his eyes on Harry, sleeping peacefully now.

“There’s lots of reasons isn’t there?” he said at last. “Draco’s really good looking. And clever. And all the rest. There’s no way Hermione would choose me over him.”
“There’s a lot of reasons that she might,” Severus commented, “but we needn’t even think of that. We aren’t thinking in terms of either/or, but both, are we not? And that being the case, you complement each other considerably. Draco is pale and ethereal.”

“And I’m a fat hunk.”

“I was going to say that you are muscular, tanned and earthy. Even I can see that the contrast is delicious, although obviously I do not usually consider young men. But we are thinking of Miss Granger. Are you attracted to Draco, or is he just a route to Miss Granger?”

“I do find him attractive,” Neville whispered.

“You cannot feel embarrassed at admitting attraction to a man in front of me, surely,” Snape smirked.

Neville gave a reluctant grin.

“I am pleased to hear it, anyway. I don’t think it could be successful otherwise.”

Severus left the room, and stirred his potion.

Moments later, however, he returned, and continued as if he had not been away.

Neville was surprised to find that he was quite relieved to continue the conversation.

“Are you a virgin?” Snape asked directly.

“Yes,” Neville whispered, looking away.

“It is nothing to feel ashamed of,” Snape said quietly. “It is a fact, neither good nor bad.”

“It’s bad if I don’t know what to do!” Neville blurted. “And twice as bad, because I haven’t been with a man or a woman.”

“Well, a couple of points spring to mind on that one,” Snape ventured. “I’d be surprised if either of your inamoratos have been in a threesome, so in that sense it will be a new experience for all of you. And secondly, do you think either of your prospective partners will laugh at you? Miss Granger, I am sure, will be delighted to have the opportunity to teach you.”

Neville couldn’t help laughing at that, because the truth of it jumped out at him.

Draco, however…

“Has Draco slept with other men?” he asked.

“I do not know, and if I did, it would not be my place to tell you,” Snape said honestly.

“No, of course not,” Neville said hurriedly, “Sorry.”

And that was that.

Neville arrived back later than he had intended to find a party in full swing in the Great Hall. There
were pupils, parents, teachers, and alcohol. The parents had wanted the latter, and felt it perfectly okay for the older pupils to join in in celebration of the defeat of Voldemort.

Neville made his way through the throng until he found a large group of his year mates, all well on the way to being merry. Hermione jumped up and hugged him. Neville was utterly conscious of the discussions he had been having and Hermione’s breasts pressed into his chest.

“How is he?” she yelled over the music.

“Communicating,” Neville yelled back.

He threw up a privacy ward to mute the music and to stop others apart from the small gathering at this end of the table from hearing in.

“Really?”

He nodded.

“What did he say?” Ron asked.

“That I should have a threesome with Mione and Draco,” Neville answered, his heart thumping in his chest. He hadn’t really expected it to arise just like that, but the atmosphere was wild, and it was the sort of situation when he could get away with it.

Ron burst out laughing. “Good one! What did he really say?”

“He couldn’t speak, so he sent Snape a legilimency picture of the three of us.”

“No way!”

Neville nodded.

“Now I know you’re having me on,” Draco leant across. “Snape would have had a fit.”

“No, he gave me advice on threesomes.”

“He did not!” Hermione choked.

Neville nodded.

He was intrigued to note the way Hermione was looking at him, her eyes calculating. His cock twitched hopefully. His glance swivelled to Draco, who was looking disbelieving.

“Want to dance?” Neville asked Hermione, not able to believe his courage.

“Shouldn’t you be asking Draco to join us?” she grinned wickedly at the two.

“If he wants,” Neville said, heart again beating a tattoo.

“I can’t think how that will work,” Draco drawled. He had been chatting Hermione up all evening and could not believe Neville was just going to walk in and sweep her off her feet.

“Too scared to try, or of shocking the pants off them all?” Neville asked, his arms around Hermione from behind.

Draco suddenly wondered what Neville would look like with his pants off and quickly turned his
head away.

Neville, disappointed, shrugged.

“Come on,” Hermione tugged his arm.

Draco turned to Ron as they disappeared into the melee on the dance floor. “What the fuck is going on?”

“You’ve just been dumped, I think, mate,” Ron grinned.

“What was all that codswallop? Why would Snape do a Legilimens on Potter? And I can’t think that Harry is spending his hospital time thinking of other people having it off, let alone wanting Snape to see it, even if he was. What in hell is Snape doing there anyway? I’m really surprised he’s letting the Slytherin’s down, they need him.”

“Sometimes you have to put family first,” Ron answered, having another swig of beer. “I’m glad he knows his priorities.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Snape. Harry.”

Draco stared at him.


Draco’s brain couldn’t seem to put anything together. Snape. Harry. What about them?

He blinked. “Snape’s not Harry’s father?!” he gasped.

“God, I hope not! They’re fucking!” Ron exclaimed. “That would be disgusting! Incest! Yuk!”

Draco stared at Ron.

“Snape and Harry are fucking?” he said in disbelief.

“Reckon they’re in love,” Ron nodded, leaning back in his chair.

“Right, now I know you’re winding me up. And Snape’s got a boyfriend,” he added, triumphantly.

“Yeah, Harry.”

“Not Harry, idiot! He’s been to our house – my Father’s invited him a couple of times, at least. The only reason he’d have Harry round would be to hand him over to Voldemort. And Harry wouldn’t exactly go, would he?”

Ron looked at Draco, then swung his leg over a chair.

“Where are you going?”

“Find Nev and Mione,” Ron said, and plunged onto the dance floor.

Draco had no option but to follow.

He was quite relieved to find that Longbottom and Granger were dancing quite circumspectly.
Ron grabbed Hermione’s arm and, startled, the two stopped dancing.

“Need to talk,” Ron said, in a voice that brooked no argument.

The others followed him at once, forcing their way through the happy revellers till they stood in the quiet of the corridor outside.

“What’s up, Ron?” Hermione said gently, her hand on his arm.

“We need some privacy,” Ron looked round.

They headed off to a nearby classroom and Neville warded the door.

“Okay, what’s up?” he asked. He’d been really enjoying the dance. Would the mood be broken now?

“Malfoy says Snape’s got a boyfriend.”

The others stood there silently.

Draco said snarkily, “Weasley seems to think Snape’s fucking Potter.”

Neville looked at Ron. “You told him that?” He glanced quickly at Hermione. “The enchantment to prevent telling stuff must be broken, then. Is there anything else –?”

They all thought. “I think we all trust each other enough –” Hermione began.

“You obviously don’t trust me,” Draco said bitterly. “I take it Snape and Potter are fucking. Except Snape has someone else too, which rather puts a spanner in your happy little fantasies for them,” he sneered, sounding very much like the old Draco.

“Hey! I told you!” Ron said. “I haven’t blabbed it to anyone else, either,” he said to the other two, “before you start having a go.”

“It wasn’t a matter of trust,” Neville said quietly. “I didn’t tell you in the same way that Professor Snape did not tell me when I asked him today if you had slept with a man. It was private information, for the people concerned to give if they wished.”

Ron’s eyes were bugging out of his head. “You asked Snape if Malfoy had slept with another man?”

“Yes. I shouldn’t have, of course –”

“Why?” Ron goggled.

Neville turned to his old friend. “Sorry, Ron, it isn’t really any of your business.”

“Wha -?” Ron’s head was turning between Neville and Draco.

“Holy shit, you don’t really want to – no! Not with Draco! Nev, come on – Hermione! Hermione’s lovely! Sleep with Hermione!”

“Ron, if you say another word I’ll thump you! I’m not a pound of flesh to trade, you git!” Hermione fumed.

“Yeah, I’ll thump you too,” Draco said, though his mind was reeling. Neville had really asked
about him? And sex? Had he really asked about – oh my god! A threesome? He stared from Neville to Hermione, and back again. He carefully folded his hands in his lap, where he sat on the edge of the table. His mind might think the idea was crazy, but his body was yelling *oh yeah!*

“I’ll just apparate you into Aragog’s kingdom,” Neville threatened.

“Whoa!” Ron held up his hands. “Mione, you know I didn’t mean any offence! My feet are just bigger than my brain, you know me!”

Distracting himself, Draco turned to Neville. “Are you saying – if you feel you’re allowed to say,” he slid in sarcastically, “that Harry is Snape’s boyfriend? The one that came to our house? That nearly sucked Snape off in the study in front of my Father? Hold on, I’ve got the name – Alec something. Johns?”


Draco’s brows twitched together. “Snape is having an affair with a student?”

“Since when did you get all moral?” Ron jeered.

“Snape didn’t know,” Neville gave Ron a hard look. “It’s a long story. Harry was wearing a glamour when they met.”

“But Potter would have known...”

“Yeah.”

“I’m surprised Severus didn’t kill him,” Draco commented.

There was a sharp silence.

“He almost did,” Hermione said. “You remember when he was away after the first trials?”

Draco nodded.

“He was - injured. But I can pretty confidently say that they’re cool now. Severus has made quite clear at the camp that he’s Harry’s partner.”

“Well.” Draco said into the silence.

“Did you say Harry nearly s-sucked Snape off in front of –“ Ron backtracked.

“Well, Alex Johnson did. “

“Jeez, he’s got balls,” Ron grinned. “That’s my Harry!”

“Completely insane, more like,” Draco said. “What was he thinking?”

“That if Snape could put himself at risk, so could he. And he could make contacts, learn stuff,” Neville said. “He didn’t know the first time that some people – like me – could see through glamours. Well, not see through it, but recognise the magical signature.”

“But he did know the second time he went?” Draco was incredulous.

“I think he was willing to risk – what he saw as a small risk – the skill is apparently quite rare,” Neville said, without any sense of pride, “to risk it to get Snape back. Or to at least share his
danger."

“Shit,” Draco wheezed. “Merlin! The house was full of Death Eaters. The risk – wait! Was he in my father’s study spying?”

“And covered it up with a pretend blow job?” Ron suggested.

“I don’t think there’s anything pretend about their relationship,” Neville said quietly.

All eyes looked at him.

“I walked in on them, all right?”

“Really?” Hermione squealed. “What did you see?”

“Hermione!” Ron exclaimed. “You shouldn’t ask such things!”

“Why not? It sounds incredibly hot.”

“You think two guys together hot?” Ron said in a strangled voice.

Hermione turned to look at Draco and Neville.

Suddenly the air was stifling with anticipation.

“Oh yeah,” Hermione said, her voice deep.

Ron leapt off the table he was sitting on. “Right. That’s it! I’m going. Don’t tell me anything,” he got out, holding his hands to the side of his face so that he didn’t have to look at anyone.

The door shut with a bang.

The silence stretched for several moments, the boys glancing at each other and then looking away.

“Do you want to do this?” Hermione asked.

Neville looked at her, then glanced at Draco. “I’ve never been with a woman or a man,” he said quietly, “so I don’t really know. But I’d like to find out.”

“Why don’t you kiss Draco, then, and see if you like it?” she suggested calmly.

Neville, his legs feeling like jelly, walked across the room to stand in front of Draco. It felt like miles to get there, his heart pounding hard in his chest.

“Draco?” his voice quavered. “Would you like me to kiss you?”

Draco looked up at Neville, from his position on the edge of the table. He swallowed, belying his nervousness.

“Well, I’ve never kissed a man either. They say you should try everything once, don’t they?”

Neville bent his head, touching his lips awkwardly to Draco’s. They bumped noses.

Neville stepped in a little closer, tilting his head, and brushed his mouth over Draco’s again. His lips were soft, cool. Neville wondered what they’d taste like. Even as Draco pulled back, Neville’s tongue flicked out and just touched against them, withdrawing back into his mouth to savour the taste. He felt Draco’s indrawn breath, and somehow that little movement gave him confidence.
He pulled back.

“Well?”

“I don’t think that was enough to judge by,” Draco said a little shakily.

Neville looked at him, then reached forward and pulled Draco off the table.

Draco couldn’t believe how big Neville felt standing there in front of him, their chests almost touching. Taller than him, but more than that, broad and... muscular. He had an urge to feel Neville’s biceps.

And why not?

Hesitantly, his hands moved to encircle the muscles. His hands could barely reach a third of the way round. He ran his fingers and palms across the swell and ripple.

Neville smiled, then took Draco’s face into his hands.

Draco looked up at him. He had the feeling that he was clinging on for dear life.

Neville seemed to sense it. “I’ve got you,” he whispered, then his face was coming down. Draco’s eyelashes fluttered, then Neville’s lips were on his again, his tongue moving along the seam of his mouth. Draco’s lips parted. Neville’s tongue slid in, just a fraction, running over the edge of Draco’s teeth.

Draco’s tongue came to meet it.

The sensation seemed to explode.

The next moments were blurred. A maelstrom of feeling, taste, touch. Draco came out of the kiss to find himself panting, hard, and plastered up against Neville, who felt solid, protective, a warm hand on his lower back pressing them together loosely, without any sense of pressure. Just – well – he felt cared for.

“Wow,” Hermione said.

She came across the room towards them. Her hand went out and stroked each cheek as they turned glazed eyes towards her. “I think maybe you don’t need me here,” she said wistfully.

Draco knew without a doubt that he wanted to explore this thing with Neville. It was such an unlikely partnership – or would have been a year ago – that it made an involuntary grin come to his face. To counteract any mistaken impression, he turned a little, towards Hermione, but pressed his side against Neville, leaning in a little. Neville’s hand slipped to his hip, and held firmly.

There really was no reason not to see how this would work. Hermione looked lovely, with her eyes warm, and willing to leave them to each other, despite her own wishes.

“I think Neville needs to kiss you now,” he said, his hand around Neville giving the man a little push. “And then I’m going to kiss you. And then we can decide.”

“A man with a plan,” Neville smiled down at him encouragingly. Somehow that appeased Draco. He felt that Neville, despite his inexperience, despite his mild manner, was going to be the dominant one – and his gut was quaking because something in him had enjoyed giving up control to him, and Malfoy’s were always in control. But here was Neville saying that wasn’t the case at
Maybe this could work.

His back felt cold as Neville stepped away and began to kiss Hermione. He was much less tentative this time, and Hermione...Hermione had slipped her arms up around Neville’s neck without hesitation and her body was plastered along his, her feet on tiptoe.

Draco wondered how she would feel plastered against him, those magnificent breasts pressed against him and the curve of her hips under his hands. His mouth watered and he licked his lips. Somehow, knowing that he would be kissing her any minute now, he felt no jealousy at all, only interest, patience, and he knew without a doubt that this could work.

Suddenly Neville’s hand snaked out and around Draco again, even as he was kissing Hermione, and that was hot too. Neville reeled him in, until they were standing all together, and Draco could smell the other two, see the saliva on their lips. Letting himself go with his gut instincts, he leant forward and tasted it, his tongue against their joined lips. Neville drew back slowly, his tongue touching Draco’s as he manoeuvred Draco into the space in front of Hermione. Draco felt Hermione in front of him, soft and warm and pliant, just as he’d hoped, but Neville stayed behind him, his strong hard body pressed lightly against Draco’s.

“Merlin,” Draco whispered.

“Good?” Neville asked, voice husky.

“Oh yeah.”

Draco looked at Hermione, dark brown eyes glowing and warm, and leant in and kissed her, mouth tentative. She tasted different from Neville, and her mouth was small and delicate, her teeth neat and regular. Had he mocked those teeth? They felt deliciously smooth, and her tongue pointed and feminine - too. He felt Neville’s hands slide down his sides, then Neville’s mouth nuzzling his neck and he couldn’t help it, he moaned, and thrust against Hermione.

Startled to reality, he pushed his hips back, saying a blushing, “sorry,” to Hermione even as he realised that he had pushed back against Neville. And Neville was just holding him there, loosely, but he could feel Neville’s erection and Neville wasn’t hiding it and he felt he could faint with the arousal it all sparked.

Hermione giggled. “Don’t be sorry. I think we’re all in for this, aren’t we?”

“Damn right,” Neville growled, and Draco just leaned his head onto Hermione’s shoulder, snuffling his nose into the neckline of her scoop neck tee-shirt and then planting a soft kiss on her collar bone. “We’d be mad not to,” he agreed.

Suddenly, the door knob rattled, startling them all.

“Nev, can you apparate us to my bedroom?” Hermione asked.

“The castle might like me, but I don’t want to abuse it,” he commented, knowing that the girls’ rooms were spelled to prevent the boys entering. “Don’t object to my room, do you?” and the next minute they were all in Neville’s room.

The lush plants added to the sultry atmosphere as Neville set low lighting and Hermione enlarged the bed. Draco nipped in to use Neville’s bathroom.
Preparations made, they all stood looking at each other a little awkwardly.

Taking a big breath, Neville started unbuttoning his shirt. Hermione sank down on the bed and watched. Draco stood, his eyes following the movements.

Neville pulled it off, and stood there bare-chested, his heart thumping.

“You look amazing, Neville,” Hermione whispered. Draco swallowed. Neville’s chest was solid, those biceps rippling muscle. His stomach was firm and there was a coating of hair on his chest, an arrow pointing down into his trousers. He’d always liked his own lack of chest hair, but somehow the dark layer looked sexual and riveting. He wanted to touch it, stroke his fingers over it, see how it felt. Neville’s nipples, peeking out, were hard and dark. His mouth watered.

Neville moved over to put one knee on the bed next to Hermione, and reached out with a hand to Draco.

Draco stepped forward, his hand going to steady himself on that chest as the bed shifted and Neville’s hand slid around him to cup his arse, holding him up.

Hermione slipped forward, her knees sliding between Draco’s. Her eyes were level with his waist. She only had to glance to see how aroused he was.

But Hermione didn’t glance.

Instead, she ran a finger down his erection, blatant and incredible. He didn’t know whether to pull back or thrust into it, and Neville’s hand on his arse supported him as he wavered.

“Oh what you want, Draco,” Neville said gently. “Same for all of us. Anyone says stop, we stop, alright?”

And it was alright.

Neville came awake swiftly the next morning. He was lying flat on his back and the light was streaming in – he tended never to draw the curtains, it was best for the plants to follow the natural rhythms of the day.

It was warm and cozy and just slightly sweaty. The air smelt of sex and Hermione’s shampoo. Or was that Draco’s?

Hermione was curled up on his arm, her body turned away from him, her bottom making contact with his hip and her breast pressing against his forearm.

Draco was draped over his right side, one leg slung across him and Draco’s head and one hand resting on his chest.

Neville couldn’t help the smile that pulled at his face muscles, even though there was no one awake to see it. Draco would be horrified when he woke up to be nestled on his chest, he knew. Anxious that he had surrendered himself to Neville, and loved every minute of it.

Draco was very vocal.

He would have to handle him carefully.
Hermione’s pleasure was tight and fierce, sharp intakes of breath and taut frame and then languid relaxation afterwards.

Neville’s hand smoothed down Draco’s body, loving the silky skin and supple muscles, the muscular buttocks.

Draco stirred.

Neville kept up the gentle stroking.

Draco’s cock was hardening, pressing into his leg. Draco began to undulate his hips sleepily.

Neville’s own cock responded, brushing its sensitive tip against the sheets as it rose. He could feel the moment Draco came fully awake, the tension suddenly stringing along his body.

Neville continued to stroke.

Somehow the movement seemed to soothe Draco. The hand on his chest slid lightly over the fuzz of his hair, the palm stirring it as delicately as the brush of a ghost. Draco’s hand didn’t stop, finding Neville’s eager erection, grasping it firmly and giving it an experimental tug.

Neville groaned, and kissed the top of Draco’s head, hugging his body tighter to him.

“Still got some energy, then,” Draco mumbled, his mouth finding Neville’s nipple under his tongue.

“I don’t think I could ever have enough of this,” Neville said honestly.

Draco mumbled. His hand was once again exploring the ridges and contours of Neville’s cock, as if memorising them.

“This was the best night of my life,” Neville said, quietly. “If it’s the only time we do this, I’ll never regret that we’ve had it. But – I’m hoping for much more. What about you, Draco?” and he lifted Draco’s chin.

Draco stuck his tongue out, trying to recapture the nipple. His body slid on top of Neville’s, sliding their cocks against each other’s.

Neville knew what he was up to. Trying to distract them. Himself. Not to have to think. But Neville wasn’t prepared to accept that. He could feel that Hermione was awake, and listening. So he placed his hands around Draco’s waist, pulling the smaller man up to straddle him. Hermione shifted round to allow Draco’s leg room to drop between her and Neville, turning to face them. She slid her hand up Draco’s thigh.

“I give you top marks for all those beauty products,” she smiled. “Your skin is heavenly.”

Draco blushed.

Neville had him firm, a hand on his hip, the other under his chin.

“What do you want, Draco? Was this an experiment for you? A one night stand?”

“I don’t know,” Draco said honestly. He turned his head, licking Neville’s palm, loving the feel of the shudder that shook the man vibrating underneath him. The hair on Neville’s abdomen stroked his balls, and he pressed harder against him.
“It was an experiment for all of us, I should think,” Hermione said. She turned her head up into Neville’s armpit, smelling the faint tang of sweat, and not being repulsed. Her tongue stretched out and tasted.

Neville and Draco looked at each other, acknowledging how arousing that was.

Hermione’s palm slipped up Draco’s leg and then shifted him back, lifting him up and over so that Neville’s erection was now in front of him rather than pressing against his arse cheeks. Hermione propped herself up, her hand coming out, trying to take both erections into her hand at once. She shifted onto her knees, using both hands to grab them together firmly, pulling her hands up, then down, slowly. She leant forward and swiped her tongue across both exposed heads.

Draco cried out.

“I’m in!” He gasped. “God, don’t stop!”

Hermione chuckled and sank back on her heels, though her hands were still moving slowly. They looked so small wrapped around them, the pink head of Draco’s cock and the darker red of Neville’s appearing and disappearing as she moved.

It was so erotic that Draco could feel his balls tightening already.

“You’re not supposed to make decisions under duress,” she grinned, not stopping. She leant forward, swiping them again, the cool air on wet skin as her tongue left delicious.

“I think I’m always going to be under duress,” he gasped. “I’ve got this picture burned into my eyelids now.”

“I’m here as long as you’ll both have me,” Neville rumbled, thrusting into Hermione’s hand.

“Me too,” Draco and Hermione said together.

Smiling, Hermione leant forward, her hands still working, to kiss Draco. Neville watched for a moment, then his hand sneaked round their heads, pulling them all together, his mouth moving in to share what was a wet sloppy kiss. His finger slid into Draco’s mouth, then, laved by his tongue, down to Hermione’s nipple. She moaned into their mouths. They’d discovered during the night that she had very sensitive nipples.

Following Neville’s lead, Draco slid his own fingers into Hermione’s mouth, then Neville’s, then trailed damp fingers down her body before sliding them between her legs.

Hermione arched towards them.

It was not long before orgasm took them all, the men coming first, then easing Hermione down, Neville teasing her nipples with tongue and fingers, Draco diving down to pleasure her with his mouth.

It was incredible to see her giving herself over to their touch, to the delight they could give her. Draco was still astonished - he recalled how many times in the Slytherin common room they had called her an uptight prude. How wrong could you be?

Yet, hadn’t everything changed? He had always thought of himself as a dominant person, but Neville – Neville who had been a virgin – had allowed the fact that he had no previous limitations to give him complete freedom, rather than the other way around. Neville had explored and led and was incredibly, almost unconsciously masterful in bed, so keen to help the others find pleasure that
he was patient, attentive, aware, willing to do anything that might arouse them. And Draco had revelled in the attentions, in not having to make all the moves, in feeling cared for. In retrospect, it made him uncomfortable. What did he know of himself?

They lay there, sated, for a while.

“I could do with breakfast,” Neville said at last.

Hermione’s tummy rumbled at that minute, making them grin.

“I think that’s a yes,” she blushed.

“You’ve had a night of passionate sex and are blushing because your tummy rumbled?” Draco said disbelievingly.

“Girls’ bodies aren’t supposed to make noises,” Hermione said in embarrassment.

Draco and Neville, getting up, grinned at each other.

“You’ll be telling us we can’t fart in bed next,” Draco provoked her.

“One night!” Hermione threw up her hands. “Why do men have this thing about farting in bed?”

Neville was pretty red himself. His Gran was rather against bodily noises and in favour of good doses of prunes and the like.

Hermione saw the colour and walked up to them. She leant up and pecked each on the cheek in turn. Neville wondered if the brush of her breasts on his chest would ever fail to arouse him.

“I’ll put up with the wind, you put up with me being bossy,” she smirked.

“You think that’s a fair trade?” Draco said incredulously, as they all made their way into Neville’s shower room.

Three quarters of an hour later, they made their way into the Great Hall. There was a lot of people there, brunch appearing to be the order of the day rather than breakfast, and no eyebrows were raised at their arrival together. Most older people looked far too hung over to care, and those that weren’t were seeing how the Daily Prophet had recorded the previous day’s events.

“Where do you want to sit, Draco?” Neville asked, and that small question seemed to eradicate all Draco’s fears, that Neville would somehow treat him as subservient. Instead, it put the ball into his court, to make his own choices, whilst showing that Neville cared enough to ask.

Smiling, he headed into the room.

At the Head Table, Professor Sinistra looked up, and swiftly left her chair, heading towards them.

It was obvious she wanted Draco, and Hermione and Neville ranged themselves on either side of him, in firm support.

“Mr Malfoy, I was hoping you’d appear soon. Professor Dumbledore said to let you sleep as long as you needed, after all your hard work. Do have a bite to eat – I think everyone needs to clear their heads this morning – and then please come to my office. Your mother arrived an hour ago, and is waiting to see you.”
Dealing With The Aftermath

The next six weeks were a time of relative calm and yet a great deal of change.

Severus stayed at Harry’s side for four days straight, leaving only when Harry had passed through the critical period and was semi-conscious and out of danger.

None of the wizards who had come to visit, to bring supplies to Snape or to offer help, were left in any doubt of the quiet regard in which Severus held the injured man. Severus had quickly learnt every technique employed by the nurses to care for Harry, and had taken over as soon as he was allowed. He neither fussed nor stopped his acerbic tone to others, but Harry was without a doubt the entire focus of his being. He asked his wizarding colleagues for specific potions books, and sat there reading, and then discussing with Neville refinements on the salve used to help heal Harry’s burns.

The doctors were, frankly, amazed, but as they knew the man was a chemicals expert of some sort, and the young man appeared to be a genius herbologist, spouting Latin names and apparently sourcing plants from all over the world, and these people had the sort of technology at their fingertips as yet unknown in the wider world, they held their tongues when wanting to tell them not to interfere with the treatment, and watched the young man’s burns recover much faster than they were expecting.

It was Neville’s quiet words that got Severus to return to Hogwarts, the reminder that only when they had cleaned up Harry’s magic would they be able not only to use magic to help minimize the scarring, but to allow Harry to have his magic back, which must be an appalling loss.

Severus had waited till Harry was awake and told him he must go; Charlie Weasley was waiting to take over, and had been gobsmacked at the affection Severus was showing. Despite the rumours of Severus’ care being circulated by other visitors from the Order, it had not even occurred to Charlie that the care was of a personal nature. He had watched Severus changing the dressings on the unconscious boy, checking his catheter and tracheotomy, and had been horrified that he would be expected to do the same. For a start, he hadn’t realised how injured Harry was.

He was appalled to think of how his body would look, even when healed. He had seen a lot of burns, and Harry’s were truly nasty. He doubted any salve could prevent the scarring they were likely to cause.

Severus bent over and gently kissed Harry. Charlie Weasley, who had considered himself a man of the world, found his eyes nearly bugging out of his head. Snape? And Harry? He turned his head to look at the armed guard, who was looking stoically ahead. The man’s eyes flickered and he looked back at Charlie, then gave an infinitesimal nod, as if understanding the question.

Snape was now speaking softly to Harry, and quietly called, “Charlie.”

He came over, smiling down at the injured man. “Hi Harry. How’re you doing?”

“Harry can’t talk normally because of the tracheotomy. The tube in his throat,” Severus explained. “They should be able to take it out soon and Harry can communicate by covering the hole, but it sounds strange, doesn’t it, Harry?” he smiled down at his lover. “He can nod and shake his head
enough now, so you just need to phrase your questions carefully.”

“This is how you’ve been communicating?” Charlie asked in surprise.

“Harry has allowed me to use Legilimency on him,” Severus answered quietly, “but at present he wants to leave that only to me. He’d rather just communicate on the yes/no basis, or write it out. They have Muggle paper and pens here, which are surprisingly efficient,” Severus commented. He had certainly had a crash course in the basics of Muggle life. “He’s still needing a lot of sleep anyway, which is good for the healing,” Severus gently stroked Harry’s forehead. “Anything you want me to tell Charlie?” Severus asked.

Harry gave a slight nod, and opened his eye wide. The puffiness around the other eye was receding, but it was still half closed.

Charlie could tell that Severus was doing Legilimency, though he had used no wand or verbal spell. Severus sighed. “You are an impatient young man,” he shook his head at Harry before turning back to Charlie. “He’d like to know who was hurt or killed.”

Charlie looked down at his youngest brother’s friend. “You did an incredible job protecting everyone, Harry. We’re all so grateful –“

He could see the impatient look on Harry’s face, and laughed. “Okay, okay! Still as modest as ever. Well, we are all grateful, and you need to know it. There were very few injuries of anyone who’d been in your protective spell, even after you released it – just the Goyle boy – I had no idea they were on our side, how did that happen? – and three of four other young people. All the adults held their own, and Goyle was the worst injured of that lot.” He took a breath, and saw Harry watching him carefully. “There were quite a lot of injuries amongst the parents who came to help, and - and some fatalities.”

Harry looked at him.

“You want to know who?”

A nod.


Harry gave a horrid noise and looked to Snape.

“Ernie’s older brother, he was through Hogwarts about five years ago,” Snape said quietly.

Harry gave a sad little nod, then looked back to Charlie.

“Mr Singh - the father of Parvati and Padma –was badly hurt, but he’s in St Mungo’s. They’ve reattached his leg but he lost a lot of blood. He should be okay though. Mr Mulhooney – his daughter was in second year, I think, you probably don’t know her - and Adrian Cadwallader are dead. Esmerelda Entwhistle and Natalie Hooper – again, you probably don’t know their children – dead too. Quite a lot injured, but mostly all well on the way to recovery now. Even Signora Zabini fought for our side; took a slashing hex to the face: real pity, very beautiful woman. Her husband was there though, and they’re seriously all over each other, so I don’t think it’s going to be a problem for them.”

Harry stared at him.
“I think that’s it,” Charlie said, crinkling his brow. Harry continued to stare at him.

“What?” Charlie looked to Severus for help.

“I think Harry would like to know if any pupils or their parents fighting for the other side were injured,” he said expressionlessly.

Harry nodded.

“Oh. Like, ones fighting for Voldemort?”

Harry nodded again, his impatience and irritation obvious.

“Oh. Well, yes. Quite a lot of injured – I think they’re being treated in Azkaban, as much as I can tell – and even more dead, actually. A couple of kids were orphaned. Tracey Davis and the Bole kid. Sorry, Severus,” he said quietly, seeing their Head of House flinch. “The whole Flint family were wiped out completely – Marcus, sister and parents. It sounds awful to say, but it’s hard to see that they’ll be much missed – they were a nasty lot, weren’t they? Also Summers, Bradley, Robins – and a lot more not linked to the school anymore. He had a number of foreign wizards with him – the Ministry are trying to find out if they were mercenaries, or just committed wizards to his cause – maybe introduced by Karkaroff, perhaps. A lot of them were killed – I think the parents found them easier to knock off because they didn’t know them.”

Harry turned his head towards Severus and the older man took his hand.

“There would have been many more dead, Harry, without the spell you did. Don’t you dare blame yourself!”

Harry nodded, but sniffled.

“I second Severus on that,” Charlie added, his hand coming out, hesitating as he found an uninjured bit of Harry to pat sympathetically.

He moved to stand at the window, giving them some privacy. He noted the guard studying him carefully, taking in his hair, which he’d had braided onto his head, the length tied into a pony tail, the thick muscles of his leather clad thighs, the healed burns on his forearms. He grinned, wondering what the man made of him.

“Looks like you have a dangerous job,” the man commented.

“You wouldn’t believe,” Charlie smiled.

“Can I enlist?”

“What?” Charlie’s brow creased.

“The team you lot are on. How do you get onto it? Is it invitation only?”

“Why would you want to join our team?” Charlie asked, coming to stand next to the man.

“Excitement?” The man said, grinning. He pulled his face to look more serious as Charlie raised an eyebrow. “Look, you have all this cool technology we’ve never even seen. It’s obviously dangerous as hell.”

“And that appeals?”
“Shit yeah! That’s why I joined the army, isn’t it?”

Charlie laughed.

“Plus, you obviously do a lot undercover, get to wear cool clothes, got amazing team spirit going…..”

Charlie looked round at Severus and Harry.

“That doesn’t bother you?”

“Not compulsory, is it?” the guard asked.

Charlie laughed again. “No. Women for me every time. Well, mostly. Never even knew, actually, they had a thing going on. Bit of a shock.”

“Some of us know how to be discreet,” Severus said, making him jump. Charlie hadn’t realised that their conversation was being followed.

“Shit, Severus! I can be discreet,” Charlie huffed. The guard was staring straight ahead again.

Severus regarded him.

“I was drunk that time! I’ve learnt my lesson,” he found himself babbling, as if he was still one of Snape’s pupils.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” Snape said, coming up. He looked seriously at Charlie. “There are spells in place to prevent information from here being passed on – no offence is meant. It is not personal.”

“Fair enough,” Charlie nodded.

He was very surprised when Snape reached out, and he found himself returning a brief handshake.

“My thanks,” Severus said quietly, turning his head towards Harry with a last smile, and was gone.

At Hogwarts, Draco’s mother took to helping in the infirmary. Her practical desire to help and prove herself lasted only until the first patient vomited over her feet. After a week of painful contact, Draco was hugely relieved when Narcissa decided that she had done more than enough to show she was not a supporter of Voldemort, and took herself off, with a warm hug to her son but great relief, to Buenos Aires, where she hoped to establish herself in society, and put this nasty past behind her.

Draco, feeling rather guilty that he felt only the tiniest bit sad at his mother’s departure, dived off to the greenhouses to find Neville.

Neville’s jeans were so well used and strained over his legs that there were several rips across the thighs, exposing tantalizing glimpses of flesh. Draco’s mouth watered. The three of them had been sleeping together every night – although not much sleeping was going on – but he had tried to spend reasonable amounts of the day with his mother, which had left him feeling bored, exasperated, and worrying about what the other two were doing in his absence. Even once they
realised his concern, and promised not to get up to anything sexual without him, he found he didn’t want them interacting together without him either – getting to know each other better in the way that even friends do when they become intimate. And they had known each other well for years already. So he was quite surprised to find that Neville was alone.

“No Hermione?” Draco asked.

“I expect she’s in the library,” Neville said calmly, “she’s not that mad on Herbology, and with lessons restarting tomorrow I expect she’s making sure she hasn’t forgotten anything,” he continued, his voice laced with humour.

“Oh. Right.” Draco said, embarrassed that he felt relieved that the others weren’t spending every minute together.

“How’s your mother?” Neville asked, as he delicately snipped some cuttings.

“Gone.”

“What?” Neville turned quickly to look at Draco.

“She’s decided to go and start a new life in Argentina,” Draco said expressionlessly.

“Without you?” Neville said, his voice shocked.

“Would you want me to have gone?” Draco said, hurt creeping into his voice.

“No!” Neville put down the seccateurs, wiped his hands on his arse, which, Draco noted, stretched the soft denim so tight over Neville’s groin that he could just make out the outline of his cock. His heart thumped.

And thumped louder as Neville walked over and stood in front of him. Again, Neville made him feel small, yet there was something so protective about him.

Neville’s hand came up to his cheek, and he gently kissed Draco.

“I don’t want you to be anywhere but here,” he said. “I suppose I - that is, I don’t want to criticize – “


“Did your mother ask if you wanted to go?”

“No.”

Neville looked at him, his hazel eyes warm and caressing. “I just don’t understand it,” he said quietly. “I know I’m not in a position to talk, I don’t know how parents act, but – how can she leave you? I mean, she was here like a shot to see you were okay.”

“And to ally herself with our side,” Draco said cynically.

“Draco, I’m sure –“

“Yeah,” Draco said, his hand creeping to Neville’s waist, “I’m sure she was pleased to see I was ok. But now she’s seen that, that’s enough. I mean, let’s face it, she hasn’t seen much of me for years. Not all term time, and then not this Christmas, and, well, they’ve often been away when I’m home anyway.”
“I suppose,” Neville said. His hands had slid down to Draco’s sides, as suddenly the air between them was incredibly tight, and hot.

“You are so – beautiful,” Neville said.

“I’m not a girl,” Draco protested.

“No, I know,” Neville said. “You’re all supple planes and smooth muscles. Hermione’s all curves and ample and luscious. I can’t believe how lucky I am,” and he kissed Draco again.

Draco was half hard and heading harder fast. He wanted Neville to pull his trousers down and bend him over the potting bench and fill him up in this lush, heady heat, but at the same time, he felt guilty, because Hermione wasn’t there.

“Can we do this?” he asked shakily, mouth open under Neville’s, words ghosting over shared lips.

“This?” Neville said, hand tracing over Draco’s buttocks, bringing him close into his body, but keeping a fraction of taunting distance between them. “Do you want to get all hot and sweaty with me, Draco? Do you want to feel your muscles burn and your body ache? Feel your hands enclosing the thick length –“

“Merlin! Nev, please,” Draco groaned, his cock hard as a rock and now pressed against Neville’s leg. “You know I do! God! But -” he knew how he had felt thinking Hermione and Neville were at it without him, and couldn’t bring himself to do the same to Hermione, despite his need to let Neville take charge of him and make him forget everything.

“Hermione?” Neville whispered into his ear, biting the lobe.

“Yeah.” He rested his head on Neville’s shoulder. “I don’t know what the etiquette is in a threesome –“

Neville chuckled, holding him loosely. “I think we make up what suits us as we go along,” he whispered. “So come along –“ and he stepped round Draco, to the door, opening it.

“Where are we going?”

“To get hot and sweaty.”

“With Hermione? In the library?” Draco found his voice squeaking in an embarrassing way.

“No, much though I’m sure she’d like you inside her again, she’ll worry about work,” Neville said prosaically, though his actual words made Draco harder than ever.

“Where are we going?” he asked, as they rounded greenhouse 4.

“Here,” Neville said, and ushered Draco into a large tunnel-shaped structure.

“It’s a polytunnel,” Neville said proudly, raising the lighting level. “They’re letting me try to grow some of my more exotic discoveries in here. It’s all mine.”

Draco tried to be inspired by the hot space; condensation appeared to be dripping down the curved plastic walls, even though there were no plants in it yet.

“What are we here for?” he asked, wiping his brow.

“Draco, I promised you the chance to get hot and sweaty with me, to feel your muscles burn and to
have your body ache,” Neville grinned.

“Bastard! You promised me my hands around your thick –“

“A thick length of spade handle, actually,” Neville said, his face split ear to ear. “Thought you might like to work off a bit of energy and help me dig this over. The heating charm’s been on a few days and the ground should be much easier to work with now.”

Draco stared at him. “Are you mad? You expect me to dig?”

Neville’s smile faltered. He pulled up an old crate that was at one end, and threw his cloak over it. “You can sit there and watch me if you like, or go back in. I’m planning to spend a couple of hours in here,” he said, and took up his spade, walked over to the far end, and started to dig.

Draco could tell from the way he kept his back turned that Neville was hurt. But really! Did he really expect Draco to dig?

He watched Neville for several minutes, watched him get into the swing of the moves, turning the soil easily, digging deep. Neville’s shoulders seemed to have relaxed, as if he found it all calming.

“Why the fuck don’t you use a spell? Or get the house elves to do it?” he asked at last.

“I like digging,” Neville said without turning round.

“How can you like digging?” Draco said in exasperation.

Neville turned round. “You come and dig for ten minutes and then I’ll tell you.”

Draco stared at him. Neville turned back and went on working.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Draco exclaimed, picked up the spade, and started digging.

It was much harder work than he had anticipated.

After four minutes, he looked across at Neville, who had already dug a largish length of trench, to see him moving over to the box. So he’d had enough already, had he? His eyes gleamed. But Neville just took off his shirt, wiped his brow on it, and went back to work.

Draco gulped. Neville’s body was all bulging muscle and light and shadow over rippling skin. Draco’s desire, which had been deflated by the disharmony, rushed up at him leaving his mouth dry and his eyes apparently glued to Neville. Suddenly the digging took on a different perspective; the digging gave Neville that magnificent body.

He turned back and began working some more. He couldn’t believe what hard work it was. He was, as Neville promised, sweaty, and aching already, even though he’d barely done anything. And he was sure he was going to get a blister on his hand.

Before he could say anything, Neville began to speak, even as he worked. “I like to dig because I find it calming, and I can think really clearly when I’m digging. Also, I don’t like the gym much – I’d much rather be outside, digging, or other manual work. At least you’re achieving something apart from building muscle. And I get to know what the soil is like, if there are stony bits, or sandy bits, old roots, and so on. And in somewhere like here, you get to know what every inch of the place has to offer each plant – if there are draughts, or hotspots – whether it’s cooler nearer the edges or hotter because the ceiling is closer. All these things will affect how the plants grow, and
It’s far easier to find out by doing this than by the trial and error of letting the plants die.”

Draco was amazed. So many things he hadn’t even thought of. He put his spade down and walked over to Neville, standing patiently until the Gryffindor turned to acknowledge him.

“I’m sorry, I’m a conceited idiot,” he said, his hand unable to resist grasping Neville’s bare forearm.

“’Snot for everyone,” Neville smiled down at him.

“Would I get muscles like yours if I dug a lot?” Draco’s hand slid up that delicious bicep.

Neville laughed. “You would. Do you want muscles like mine?”

“I don’t know. Would you like me like that? I look really weedy next to you.”

Neville laughed a bright, brilliant laugh. “You do not look weedy. You’re slender and toned, and delicious. If you had bigger muscles, I expect I’d love them too. I like you, Draco,” Neville said warmly.

Draco blushed. “God! I always thought I was really manly before – before this.”

“You are manly,” Neville said firmly.

“You think?” Draco said, with unaccustomed shyness.

Neville leaned forward. “Draco, I am going to take your cock in my mouth later, and feel every ridge with my tongue, and tease that joining bit that drives you mad, and I’m going to hold your balls in my hand and rub them gently, and then I’m going to suck them into my mouth while Hermione sucks your cock, and then I’m going to ask you whether you don’t feel manly. Your manly bits are heavenly,” he licked his tongue delicately over Draco’s lips.

“Are you trying to make me come here? Just from talking to me?” Draco asked breathlessly.

Neville laughed, his chest rumbling. “I haven’t got Snape’s voice,” he smiled.

“Yeah, he has got an amazing voice,” Draco agreed, leaning in to Neville. “Do you think Harry – “

“Whoa! Let’s not even go there!”


“I don’t mind having a go,” Draco said, “but I’m going to get blisters any minute.”

“Cushioning charm?” Neville raised an eyebrow.

“Well, how was I to know?” Draco said, back to his normal waspishness, but this time there was no sting.

An hour later, Draco ached everywhere, just as Neville had promised. Neville took one look at him and called for a house elf. One popped in, and Neville asked for juice and sandwiches.

“Abusing the staff, Nev? Hermione won’t like it,” Draco teased.

“If we stop to go to the kitchen, it’ll be too dark by the time we’ve dithered. I’d like to get this section finished,” he indicated an area with his hand.
Dobby appeared with a tray loaded with a selection of sandwiches and cakes as well as juice.

Dobby looked unhappily at Draco.

Actually, Neville thought, Dobby looked pretty unhappy altogether.

“Dobby? What’s wrong?” he asked.

Dobby looked at Draco again.

“You know Draco fought on our side, you can trust him, Dobby. I do,” said Neville.

The words washed through Draco’s heart, so unexpected, simple, and wonderful. He hadn’t known he’d needed them, he knew Neville would never have involved himself with him otherwise, and yet – that was so good to hear.

As if released from an oath of silence, Dobby started to wail, bashing his head against the box on which he had just set the food. The plates and glasses rattled and the profiteroles rolled off their carefully crafted mountain.

“What on earth is it, Dobby? Do please calm down!”

It took a lot of calming him, but the cause of Dobby’s grief came tumbling out at last. Harry Potter had asked Dobby if the elves would be willing to help defend the castle, but they had never been asked to help. All the elves were devastated. And Harry Potter hadn’t been to see them at all and must be very cross with them indeed.

Neville was appalled that no-one had talked to the elves about the battle and its aftermath. But one thing he did know.

“Dobby, I don’t know if you know, but I’m able to talk to the castle a bit.”

Dobby’s eyes widened, staring up at Neville in awe.

“I felt a bit like you at the battle, actually,” Neville said, hunkering down next to the elf. “Harry wouldn’t let me come and fight, even though I really wanted to be there. Even though I felt it made me look a coward to be back at the castle when everyone else was risking their lives.”

Draco was listening, enthralled, although all of Neville’s attention was on the elf. He hadn’t really thought about how Neville must’ve felt that day.

“But Harry had asked me to do a really important job, one that needed doing, and one that he knew I could do. He asked me to help hold the wards with Professor Dumbledore.”


“Yes. And even though it’s not a very glamorous job, it needed doing, didn’t it?”

“Oh yes, Master Neville, Sir,” Dobby assured him. “You was needing to keep all the children safe, and the castle safe for all the little witches and wizards that will be coming here in the future, when you and Master Malfoy and Mistress Granger have been making babies, Sir.” Dobby nodded furiously, causing Neville and Draco to gawk at each other over his head.

“So, you agree that keeping the wards and the castle safe was important?” Neville asked again.

“Yes, yes, Master Neville,” Dobby’s head was nodding backwards and forwards.
“Well then, Dobby, I hope you’ll forgive me for my very bad manners for not having thanked all the elves before, because I could feel all the help the elves were pouring into the wards at ground level and under the ground, in the watercourses coming in and all the supply chains. Can you forgive me for not having thanked you before? I am so very sorry.”

“Master Neville must not be thanking Dobby,” huge tears were forming in the elf’s eyes. “We was not even being asked to help with the fighting,” Dobby sobbed.

“No,” Neville said gently, “you all did exactly what you most needed to do, to keep the castle and the children safe, and all without anyone having to ask you. It was wonderful of you. Thank you so very much. Do you think it would be possible to get all the house elves together so that I could thank everyone?”

Dobby was now sobbing on Neville’s shoulder. Draco had never seen a house-elf touch anyone before, unless ordered, and was struck dumb by Neville’s masterly handling of the prickly creature.

Neville went on to explain that Harry had been injured and was being cared for elsewhere, and he was sure that Harry would be every bit as proud of Dobby and the elves as he was.

Every house elf at Hogwarts was summoned to the Great Hall the following night, and thanked and cheered by all for their efforts in the defence of Hogwarts, and later on still, were all awarded a special medal (which counted not as clothes!) in thanks from the wizarding world.

Neville received very warm and personal thanks indeed from Hermione for championing the house elves.

Over the next weeks, Draco, Hermione and Neville settled into their relationship.

They were not obvious about it, and the majority of people thought that they had merely become good friends. Draco had learnt not to be jealous, but still loved to sleep curled up on Neville at night.

And they did indeed, some years later, fulfil Dobby’s expectations with regard to their future offspring.

One of the people who first realised was Vincent Crabbe. Draco had regularly visited Greg in the infirmary, and hadn’t been surprised to find Vince at his bedside. By the fourth evening, he asked if Greg needed his help further – he surely ought to be well enough to leave the hospital wing?

Vincent had looked at him.

“What?” Draco said.

“You’re not even sleeping there. Do you think I’d risk Greg?”

Draco’s brows drew together.

“You’re scared to go back there?”

“Aren’t you?”
“No! That is – that isn’t why I haven’t slept there,” Draco said, telling himself his face wasn’t
flushed.

“Right. Did you go for Granger or Longbottom?” Vince asked.

“What?!” Draco spluttered.

Greg held up his hands from his sitting position in the bed. “You don’t have to tell, Draco.”

Draco looked at these men who had been his friends for such a long time, had abandoned their families...

“Both,” he said.

“At the same time?” Vince whispered.

Draco nodded, swallowing his embarrassment.

“Good,” Greg said.

“Good?” Draco’s brow twitched.

“You’ll be happy with them,” Greg said, as if it was as clear as day to him.

Draco looked at him. “Yes, I think I will,” he said calmly, and smiled.

Vince reached over and shook his hand.

It was all very strange.

“Still got the problem in Slytherin, then. I wish Snape was back,” Greg said.

“You can’t expect him to be when his other half’s hurt,” Vince reasoned.

“Do you know everything?” Draco goggled.

“When you’re thick people don’t think you notice anything,” Goyle shrugged.

“Amazed as I am by your perspicacity, Mr Goyle, I’d prefer it if you didn’t broadcast my private
affairs,” Snape continued, appearing from behind the curtain.

“Shit!” Draco said, his heart thumping from the surprise. He’d even been listening for other
people. “How did you do that?”

“Language, Mr Malfoy. Years of spying and haunting schoolchildren do tend to lead to the
development of some useful skills,” Snape continued.

Vincent had stood up and, unfazed, was extending his hand. “It’s good to see you, Sir. Are you
recovered? And – well, you know who. But not You-Know-Who,” he said quickly and
confusingly.

Severus shook the hand. “I am recovered, thank you, Mr Crabbe. Mr Goyle, how are you faring?”

“Fine, thanks to Draco,” Greg gave a big smile to his friend.

“We both owe Draco a Life Debt,” Vince said.
“What?” Draco interjected, “Don’t go saying things like that in front of witnesses, Vince! It’d be binding if you really did! You don’t owe me one, of course, and I don’t want one from Greg. He’s my friend.”

“We do,” both boys said together. “Sounds drippy, but my life is nothing without Greg,” Vince said quietly, “so we both –“

Draco was holding up his hands to try and stop them saying it and making such a commitment.

“You’ll be relieved to hear, Draco,” Snape said smoothly,” that the nature of a Healer’s Gift means that the onus is on you to save life, and a Life Debt is never payable.”

“Oh,” Vince said, sitting down. “And we’ve been waiting for the right moment too.”

“Thanks anyway,” Draco gave them a quick grin. “I’m honoured.”

Greg looked at Snape. “Can we speak?” he asked.

Severus strengthened the privacy ward that he had broken into earlier.

“You may now. What can I do for you?” he said gently.

“How is Potter? Only – only if Draco hadn’t helped me, he might not have been so badly hurt that Draco couldn’t help him? Or did I use up all Draco’s power?”

It was obvious that the young man had been worrying himself silly over this.

“I couldn’t help him,” Draco said quickly. “It wasn’t a matter of using up my power, I promise.”

“He is – improving,” Snape said tactfully.

“Oh, good,” Greg breathed out a huge sigh.

“He asked after you, too, you know.”

“Really?”

Snape nodded. “Now,” he said, “I understood Professor Sinistra had everything under control. Tell me why you may not return to your rooms?”

The next few weeks for Snape were unbelievably busy. The situation in his House was extremely complex. Draco had led any students whom he believed could be a threat during the battle into one of the secret underground rooms, assuring them it was for their safety. It had kept the students safe and prevented them taking part in the battle, but it also meant that they were all totally in the clear, and therefore were now in a position to act as spies if they so wished. Snape was relieved that their futures had not been destroyed even before they left school, effectively giving them a fresh start in life should they wish to take it. It was his duty to ensure they knew that this option was open to them. It was unfortunately inevitable that some of them were already committed to Voldemort’s views. Some, he knew, were grateful to Draco, others were likely to slit Draco’s throat behind his back – and his too. He had never openly promoted the views of either side in his role as Head of House, but many of the students with Death Eater parents had known he was active still, and now knew that he had been a spy. Many of his House were impressed by the Slytherin cunning and skill
it had taken to act in this role, but it only took one to cast an Avada Kedavra. It also meant it was essential to keep his relationship with Harry, and Harry’s condition and whereabouts, whilst he was unable to defend himself, absolutely secret.

And Snape also had sympathy for these children – many had lost parents, older siblings or other relatives – and their whole world view had been turned on its head. Their future hopes had been dashed and Harry Potter, who was not a pureblood, was reported in every paper to be a Mage. He knew he was no longer the man to counsel these students, but knew too that they would be real risks for the future if they weren’t given support now. He was therefore glad that Professor Sinistra stayed on as his Deputy. She was also a Slytherin, but neutral in political terms; her approach was not exactly warm, but his Slytherins would not have felt comfortable with warmth.

He was greatly relieved to know that many were accepting her quiet moments of talk, and were benefiting from her cool, uncritical help. He wished it could be him helping them, but the consequences of spying were far-reaching.

School had started back in session, and with surprising ease, normality returned to his day to day life.

His evenings and free periods, however, were spent in the exhausting task of trying to untangle the curses from Harry’s magic. The work was slow, laborious and draining. It required the combined skills and power of Albus, himself and Neville, one of them keeping control of the magic itself whilst the other two tried to unwind the foul spells. They had only managed three in one evening as a maximum, and the worry about it was making Severus even more fraught.

He had visited Harry, and his wounds, whilst clear of infection thanks to the salves and the Muggle antibiotics, were ugly. He didn’t think it fair for such a young man to have to suffer such ugliness on his body; it was rarely seen in the wizarding world. People like Alastor Moody kept their scars, but that was almost a matter of pride to him, he knew: there was no need for the old Auror to look so rough. Progress was limited also by Albus’ condition. Spending extended periods with him, Severus noted for the first time how old the man had become. Normally he projected such a hale and hearty image, that one was not aware of his frailty. But then, one usually only saw him for short times.

Severus was wondering how to manage things when he caught Neville’s eye one evening and realised the lad was thinking pretty much the same things that he was.

They had extricated two curses that night, and Dumbledore had had to hide that he was tottering on his feet.

“I’m really sorry, Albus, Severus,” Neville said quietly, the familiarity which had become part of their encounters in no way detracting from the respect and courtesy in his tone, “but I’m afraid I can’t stay any longer tonight. I’ve been working on a joint project with Hermione, but she’s done all the work. She’s waited up for me the last several nights to do the bits we must do together, but it’s been too late. I’ll be able to come earlier tomorrow,” he promised.

“Oh course, dear boy,” Dumbledore said jovially, masking his relief. He moved swiftly to his desk and sat down.

Severus looked at the time. It was already twenty past ten. He was exhausted himself, and wavered between visiting Harry or having a long hot shower, a whisky and an early night. He decided to visit Harry.
Unfortunately, he was stopped by Flavian Smythe, one of his fourth year pupils who had lost his father in the battle, who was lurking outside his office with anxious eyes. He had obviously been waiting for some time.

By the time Severus had had a long talk with the young man, over hot chocolate (with a dash of whisky in his own), it was too late to visit Harry. Severus had a quick shower, and then lay in bed. It was cold and lonely without Harry’s limbs curled around him, the soft black hair tickling against his chest. It was odd how quickly he had become accustomed to sharing his bed. Severus’ hand strayed to his groin. He hadn’t come, or even thought of sex, since before the battle.

One furious and strangely unsatisfactory orgasm later, he rolled over and slept.

Ron Weasley felt completely at a loose end. He felt itchy and irritable, and out of sorts.

He had been horrified the night after the battle to think of Neville, Hermione and Draco – well, not horrified, he admitted to himself. Uncomfortable. And maybe a wee bit – jealous?

Not that he wanted to have sex with Malfoy, or even Neville, of course.

It’s just that – well, Neville wasn’t supposed to be the sort of chap to have amazing sexual experiences, was he? He was Neville, for Merlin’s sake!

Ron had left that room and gone back to the party and drunk rather a lot. And then, during the course of the evening and the night, he had had sex with three different girls. Which sort of got back at Neville and Hermione for their fun.

Only that was stupid, he knew, and besides, he frankly didn’t remember much of it, and had had to get up straight after coming with the last one to go and throw up, because all that movement with all that alcohol was not a good thing. Anna hadn’t been amused.

But that wasn’t the worst of the humiliation. He cringed as he remembered that he had actually been boasting about his conquests at brunch the next day, and Bill had told him quietly that he was out of order, and had he worn a condom and ensured that the girls were all using *Contraceptus*?

The following hours were the most embarrassing of his life. He hadn’t worn a condom at all, and Bill forced him to go find all three girls, which had involved embarrassing conversations in Hufflepuff and Ravenclaw. Two of them hadn’t had any protection, and just in case, Bill made him go with all three (thankfully one after the other) to see Poppy, whose restraint had been worse than if she had given him a bollocking. She just looked absolutely exhausted and Ron could see all the patients that she’d been dealing with, and he had even thought of *Contraceptus* the day before, before he was all drunk and out of control, hadn’t he?

And the worst of it was feeling about two inches tall in front of Bill.

And Bill hadn’t grinned and shrugged it off like Ron had thought he would, at the end of it all, but told Ron that Weasley men were known to be highly fertile, and that he had a responsibility not only to the girls he slept with, but to the family, to bring only children that he really wanted to father into the world, and that he couldn’t expect his mother to be bringing up all his by-blowes which she would undoubtedly attempt to do, because Bill was as sure as hell Ron wasn’t responsible enough to do it himself.

Then Bill had gone off with Charlie, leaving Ron feeling like a schoolboy and definitely not one of the men in the family.
And he’d been having nightmares about the battle.

He hadn’t killed anyone, but he had cast *Avada Kedavra*.

It hadn’t worked, and now that made him sort of relieved and sort of fearful that he was a useless wizard without enough power. But at the time – he had cast it as almost one of his first spells – it had left him feeling terrified, unprotected. He knew he’d made some good strategic moves, when the panic had worn off a bit, but he’d also cast some spells that he didn’t want to think about, but were gracing his nights. Nasty spells. And now he could hear the people screaming, actually see their faces in his dreams, even though he didn’t remember having the time to notice them when it was actually happening.

And he’d gone to see Harry, the day after he’d spent all day visiting Madam Pomfrey with the girls, and he’d looked at the horrible state Harry was in and thought that he’d done stuff like this – not the same, but painful nasty stuff - and other people were suffering like Harry. Except they mightn’t be, if they’d been given medical help, but frankly, after the battle the Death Eaters weren’t being treated in any hurry, and everyone had obviously thought that was alright.

But Ron couldn’t decide what he felt. If he’d been injured, and on the losing side, would it have been ok to leave him untreated? Obviously, he’d want to be done, and obviously, one could understand the victors treating their own side first. But what should happen then? He’d seen people kicking the captives – well, he’d kicked a man himself, before he found himself about to kick a cowering woman, and then the bubbling elation in him had dissipated like froth on a potion and he’d walked away. But he hadn’t stopped anyone else – he’d just extracted himself and left them to it.

He felt, all in all, unhappy with himself –with everything in the last few days.

Well, he was pleased that Harry had offed Voldemort, of course.

But that, in a way, was odd too.

Defeating Voldemort had focused their lives ever since he could remember.

And although he had had no doubts in Harry – especially once he’d become a mage, he’d never really got to the point of thinking about *after*.

About existing in a Voldemort-free world.

What did that mean for his life plans?

Did he still want to be an Auror?

There’d be only ordinary criminals to catch now, wouldn’t there? Once they’d rounded up the remaining Death Eaters? The odd idiot like Mundungus who’d nicked a catchment of cauldrons, or that sort of thing.

Did he really want to give over his life to dealing with that sort of rubbish?

The likelihood was that the Auror Corps would be recruiting far fewer applicants now that the threat of Voldemort was over, anyway.

He knew his friendship with Harry and his role in the battle and the build up to it could be influential in getting him in if he wanted to use them; but at the back of his mind was how he had reacted in the battle. His feelings about causing pain. His loss of clear focus under pressure.
He didn’t want to put himself in that position again.

He thought back to sitting with Harry on that first visit. He’d been horrified, yes. But if he was honest with himself, after the first fifteen minutes, he was bored. Harry was unconscious, after all. And Snape was there, making him feel uncomfortable, like he was in potions and had again forgotten to do something. And it was interesting to see the soldiers and their weapons, of course, but he didn’t know soldiers wore white funny outfits and they looked really stupid.

He hadn’t used to feel bored when he’d sat beside Harry’s bed in the Infirmary before, and it took him a while to realise what was different.

He’d always had Hermione with him, sitting talking and laughing, or just company while they read.

Now, Harry was not even a wizard and Hermione didn’t need him or want him, and he felt – alone.

It was an odd feeling, to someone who’d grown up with family milling everywhere and then living in a dormitory. Somehow it was the fact that his brain felt free – there was no one to support his thought, to flick an idea off and get some instant comeback. Which, given Hogwarts was bursting with students and his family, was odd. But he seemed to have isolated himself away from the most important people in his life without meaning to at all.

He’d been back to see Harry several times, relieved as his friend recovered and could talk to him, and the old camaraderie was there. But it was quite obvious, even though Snape had gone back to school, that Snape would always be Harry’s first confidant, just as Hermione was friendly, but Neville and Draco had become hers.

He had no urge to settle into having a regular girlfriend, despite the embarrassing events resulting from his over-endeavour.

So somehow, he had to adapt to being on his own.

Over the following weeks, he looked at all of his lessons in a new light. What use were they to him in the future? Was he interested enough to follow up on any of them? Did he want to consider a wizarding apprenticeship? What in?

Really, he decided, he’d like to earn some money.

He put that thought into a framework the first time he left the castle, several days after the battle, when the sixth formers had been given the freedom to go into Hogsmeade, and he was meeting up with Seamus and Dean at the Three Broomsticks. He was accosted by reporters on the way, several times in the pub, and the amounts of money offered to know Harry’s whereabouts, or to get them an exclusive interview, got more and more outrageous. He was so furious – and so were Dean and Seamus – that they left the pub long before they’d had anywhere near enough to drink, and stormed back to the castle, through a throng of reporters who seemed to have appeared en masse, having discovered that people who had actually been involved in the action were out and about. The fame he had always wanted was not what he wanted at all.

Furious, they stormed up to see Dumbledore.

Dumbledore, who had been dealing with the press within an hour of the battle taking place, was not pleased. He had had the agreement of the Wizarding Press Association that students would not be questioned – and this abuse, on the first time that they went out in public – was the last straw.

He called on the Wizengamot to place an injunction on the press, citing the safety of the Hero of
the Wizarding World, and also, of all the students. Seamus had been knocked over in the rush of reporters, and the photographed evidence of the cuts to his hands and elbow, and torn clothes, was sufficient for his request to be granted. It didn’t stop the press speculating, though, that Harry had been killed or so severely injured that he could not be photographed.

The importance of getting Harry’s magic back – of getting Harry back to Hogwarts – was more pressing than ever. It was surely inevitable, despite all their precautions, that Harry’s whereabouts would leak out.

Lucius Malfoy read every wizarding paper, which were specially delivered to a Post Office Box in Munich, with a great deal of interest. He had also employed several spies, and made contact with a number of his Death Eater allies.

He was very much enjoying his increased magical strength. Now, he just needed to assess the situation and know where to strike best.

Harry’s Muggle doctors were very pleased with his recuperation. They asked Severus and Neville if they could test their salve on others – as it was designed to work without magic, the men agreed. Neville decided to plant some of the necessary plants in his new greenhouse, just in case they needed to brew greater quantities.

Harry’s wizarding protectors were kept to a rota of eight order members, in an attempt to minimize the likelihood of his location becoming known. A safe house was set up around the corner from the camp into which the members floo-ed or apparated, and then they walked around the corner and into the camp, so as not to arouse suspicions amongst the Muggles from any direct apparition. As Harry became more and more alert, he enjoyed seeing what Muggle clothing his team of visitors had chosen to wear.

After a month, no attacks had occurred and the army guards had become familiar with their Order counterparts. First names were used, and now the door was left open so that the guards outside could chat with those inside, even though they stayed outside as first defence from the corridor. A dartboard had been set up, used by Order members and occasionally by the soldiers, and once he’d got to the stage of being able to get out of bed, even Harry had started to play. When one of the commanding officers had turned up and seen it, Harry had said that it had been a very good idea of one of the soldiers to help his recovery, encouraging him to stand, concentrate, stretch slightly, etc. The physiotherapist had been called in, and given approval, much to the amusement of the soldiers. Harry had become very accurate.

The swelling of his face was being pressured into place by a plastic half mask, but his eye had reappeared and was, thankfully, undamaged. Harry had had laser eye surgery, curing his short sight, as an unusual solution to the difficulty of how to cope without glasses, as the arm and ear piece had rubbed against bloated flesh. Harry loved being able to open his eyes in the morning and see, and somehow, the need not to turn to find his glasses made the knowledge that he was also not reaching for his wand easier to accept.

Harry had been too ill, initially, to think too much of his absent magic – everything felt wrong with him, so the lack of magic didn’t stand out. But as his leg responded to physiotherapy and he was able to walk and move easily again, and as his other injuries began to heal, the hollow feeling inside became ever present. Harry had asked Severus how they were getting on; he had seen the tightness in his lover’s mouth, heard the curt, “Slowly,” and vowed not to ask again. Severus
looked exhausted, and Harry knew it must be hard enough coping with his Slytherins and teaching, without having to work on Harry’s magic as well. He told Severus to visit him less, and tried not to feel hurt or lonely when Severus didn’t come for a whole week, and then ten days.

Severus had seemed distracted and hurried when he had visited, on that last occasion, and Harry couldn’t help the feeling of disappointment that night after he had gone, or the hot tears that slid down his cheeks as he lay on his air cushion, the tightness in his throat as he tried not to make any sound in his distress. Tonks had been his guard that night, and had carefully stroked his hair and uninjured cheek after she and the soldier guard had caught the sound of the second quiet sniff, and exchanged worried glances. A doctor had come, patient and soothing, assuring Harry that such emotional outbursts were perfectly normal and they were expecting it, before a needle had slipped into his arm taking him into oblivion.

Harry had therefore not been totally surprised when thirteen days passed, and Severus had not come.

He did not know that Severus had been attacked in Hogsmeade by two junior Death Eaters, Withington and Turley, that although Snape had taken both men down – without killing them, so that they could be interrogated at the Ministry – he had had to spend thirty six hours in the infirmary having a severe fracture of the ankle fixed. He was only aware that his wizarding visitors seemed a little cagey, and had forgotten to bring him the Prophet for several days in a row.

Harry was in the middle of some exercises when Kingsley Shacklebolt arrived one day.

“Kingsley! Good to see you! What brings this honour?” he grinned at the Auror. Kingsley’s serious face wiped the smile off his.

“What is it?” he said nervously, sitting up.

“Could we have some privacy?” Shacklebolt said, causing the physio to scuttle out with a brief smile to Harry.

“I’ll go,” Moody said, hauling himself up, “if you’ve come to take over my shift.”

“You can stay, Alastor,” Shacklebolt said, staring at the remaining soldier. The soldier stood there unflinchingly.

“Joe can’t leave, he’s on orders to stay,” Harry said quietly. His voice had not yet regained the clarity of tone it had had before, and Harry wondered if it ever would. He slipped his hand into the drawer and pulled out a little metal globe. “Use this. It prevents listening in. Sorry Joe,” he nodded at the guard.

“No problem, Alex,” the guard nodded gratefully.

Harry set the globe on the locker and looked at Moody. “Set a ward,” he said quietly.

Moody nodded and did so.

“What the fuck is that thing?” Shacklebolt demanded, looking at the globe.

“Nothing at all,” Harry grinned, “but it’s easier for them to believe the silence is caused by some field created by that, than that you’ve done it.”

“Are they really that stupid?” Moody growled.
Harry looked at him. “No, they’re very clever. It’s logical for them. They make lots of tiny devices that have great power that you wouldn’t understand at all. This makes sense to them.”

“If you say so, laddie,” Moody shook his head disbelievingly.

Harry felt cross with the old Auror for his dismissive attitude, particularly because he’d been considering his future.

And what it would be if he never got his magic back.

If this world was his world.

“What is it?” he turned to Shacklebolt.

“I’ve had a word with your doctors,” Shacklebolt began.

“Yes?”

“We want you to come back to Hogwarts. I’ve found a specialist nurse who’s a witch but works in Muggle hospitals. She can take care of you. We’ll bring you back to see the specialists whenever you need to.”

“Okay,” Harry said, surprised. “This is a bit sudden. What’s the sudden hurry?”

Shacklebolt was silent.

“What? What’s happened?” Harry said urgently.

“There’s been a Death Eater attack. We’d prefer to look after you at Hogwarts. Now you’re up and about.”

“What? An attack? Where? Was anyone hurt?”

“Two Death Eaters were captured, but after questioning it seems they were acting independently, their attack was opportunistic rather than premeditated. No one was seriously hurt,” Shacklebolt said.

“Ok,” Harry said slowly. “When am I to go?”

“Now,” Shacklebolt said firmly.

An hour and a half later, Harry had said hurried goodbyes and thanks, and the helicopter carrying him and Shacklebolt was circling to land near Hogwarts.

Within the castle, Severus was waiting in the hospital wing to see Harry. He could hear the hum of the rotor blades through the open window. How long could it be? Ten minutes, for Harry to get out, walk through the grounds and up to the castle? Maybe a bit longer. Probably a lot longer once anyone saw him. Snape smoothed his robes once again, then berated himself for so doing. Dumbledore would be waiting at the doors to the castle, he knew. A private room had been set up for Harry in the hospital wing, and extensive privacy wards. Two Aurors were already waiting in the infirmary, but fortunately his damaged ankle gave him a good reason to be lurking there. In theory, he was waiting for a check up, but of course priority had been given to the arrival of Harry Potter. He could not wait to have Harry well enough to be back in his bed every night, back in his arms. That might not be at once. He knew Harry had a lot of recovering still to do, but hopefully
over the last couple of weeks he had improved. Harry would understand why they were so slow untangling his magic when he saw how exhausted the business was making Albus. He was already working on potions to help Harry’s scars, once he had magic to help it along.

Harry exited the dark interior of the military helicopter and was temporarily blinded by the dazzling sun reflecting off the lake. He turned to look at Hogwarts, heart thumping with joy to be home, to see Severus soon.

His legs trembled and shook. He grasped Shacklebolt’s arm.

“Alex?” Shacklebolt used the false name as the doctor who had overseen the journey came to shake Harry’s hand. Harry looked over his shoulder, and gulped, blinked, shook his head, and gulped again.

“Alex? Are you –“

“Take me back,” Harry said, voice urgent.

“What?”

“Alex –“

“Take me back!” Harry began to stride towards the Chinook.

He winced as Shacklebolt grabbed his arm.

“Oh, Merlin, sorry!” Shacklebolt said quickly. “Look, what’s the problem? You’ll be fine –“

“I won’t,” Harry gasped, his head shaking. “I won’t. I can’t –“

“Come on now –“ Shacklebolt tried to turn him.

The doctor hovered.

Harry looked up at Shacklebolt and hissed, “Don’t you understand? I can’t! I can’t even see it! Only the ruin!”

And tears pouring down his face, Harry stepped aboard the helicopter again.

Shacklebolt stared after him in horror, then followed him back on.

“Take us back,” he said to the surprised soldiers waiting, and moments later the Chinook took to the air, and whirred its way once more across the valley.
Harry didn’t speak once on the return flight, just sat huddled into himself. The crew had obviously radioed ahead, because he was led straight back to his old room.

“Hey there mate, didya miss me that much?” the guard said in a friendly voice.

Harry acknowledged him with the smallest nod, before locking himself in the shower-room.

He sat there on the floor, back against the wall, numb.

He should have known.

He should have worked it out.

Kingsley was trying to talk to him through the door, but Harry needed to be alone, to face this alone.

After several attempts, which Harry ignored because he didn’t want to be rude to Shacklebolt, just wanted the man to go away, he heard a whisper that he couldn’t catch, then the door clicked open and Shacklebolt’s shadow crossed him.

“H – Alex –“

Harry was on his feet, fury welling in him like an exploding volcano.

“How dare you! How fucking dare you use – that – against me!” he shouted, looking at Shacklebolt’s wand arm.

Shacklebolt seemed to realise what he had done and stepped back.

“I just –“

“Get out! Get out!” Harry screamed. “I can’t believe you did that!”

“Can I get anyone?” Shacklebolt asked carefully as he began to pull the door to behind him.

“No! Can’t a man have a fucking minute’s peace?” Harry roared.

The door shut with a quiet snap.

In the castle, Severus would have been pacing if his ankle had hurt less. What the hell was the hold up? They should have got Neville to meet Harry at the gates, and apparate Harry up. They were trying to let all the students keep to their normal lessons, though, as there were still the NEWTS at the end of the year.

“Professor Snape, can you come through?” Madam Pomfrey called from her office door.

Had Harry floo-ed up, then?

Severus strode as best he could into the office, the limp nevertheless visible.

Madam Pomfrey shut the door.
There was no Harry, but Albus’ head was in the fire.

“Headmaster? What’s going on?” Severus bent over and asked.

“Come through, Severus,” Dumbledore invited.

Severus stepped through, brushing off the soot even as he exited.

“Where is he?” his eyebrows twitched together as he realised that Harry wasn’t there.

“I don’t know,” Albus admitted. “Filch was waiting at the gate. He says Harry and Shacklebolt got out, and then they boarded and flew off again.”

“What?”

“I know, it doesn’t make any sense to me either. Unless....”

Unless what?” Severus demanded. He had a very bad feeling in his stomach.

“Harry wasn’t given much time to think about it,” Dumbledore said slowly.

“What was there to think about?” Severus snapped. “Shacklebolt said he had employed a nurse – “

“Yes.”

“What, Albus?! What are you thinking?”

Albus sat behind his desk, and with a wave of his hand a pot of tea appeared.

Severus ground his teeth in frustration.

“I have not seen Harry...” Dumbledore began.

“Well, you were about to. What has that to do with anything?”

“I understand that he was badly scarred –“

“Well, that’s why we need to get his magic sorted,” Snape cut in.

“He’s a young man, Severus. His face was hurt –“

“He has a mask on that is sorting that –“

“Ah.”

“’Ah’ what? For Merlin’s sake!”

“Perhaps he was embarrassed.”

At Severus’ uncomprehending look, Dumbledore sighed. “About his appearance,” he continued.

“But I’ve seen him throughout. So what?” Severus’ brows drew together.

“Yes, you have, and you are prepared. But his school-mates have no idea how he looks. Perhaps he suddenly realised when he arrived.”

“Harry is no coward! And about something so inconsequential –“ Severus growled.
“Of course he isn’t a coward, but he is human.”

Severus turned away. He knew Harry was badly scarred. Harry had never mentioned it – neither of them did. But maybe Albus was right. Harry was a young man. Maybe he did feel self-conscious.

Severus needed to talk to him.

Would it help Harry to know Severus didn’t care? That wasn’t strictly true, of course – Severus did care. He had loved Harry’s smooth skin and he hated to think of him damaged. He was doing all he could to minimize it. But at the end of the day, Harry was Harry. God knew, he accepted Severus with all his faults.

“Will he have returned to the same place?”

“I don’t know. We must wait to hear from Kingsley.”

“That Muggle transport can take a long time,” Snape said, remembering the last journey when he had accompanied Harry, terrified the young man would die. He could not stand here for a couple of hours waiting to hear, he’d go mad. He strode to the door. “I’ll be teaching. Please let me know as soon as possible, Headmaster,” and he left.

Three hours later Severus stood outside the shower-room door. All Kingsley could tell them was that Harry said he couldn’t see the castle. Severus and Albus had stared at each other in horror.

How had they been so stupid? How had they failed to realise that without magic....

Harry had said hello and asked Severus to go away.

Severus had been about to spell the door open when the guard coughed.

Severus looked up at him.

“I wouldn’t, Sir,” he said carefully.

“Excuse me?”

“The other gent – black guy with the ear-ring – somehow unlocked the door and Alex went ballistic.”

Severus stood there, thinking.

Harry did not want them to use magic.

Well, he could understand that. He must be feeling so powerless. Cut off from their world.

He looked at the guard. It was embarrassing to have to try and plead with Harry with the man standing there. He didn’t know where the globe thing was that they used for pretending they had a silencing field set up. But Harry needed the guard more than ever now.

He pulled a chair up and turned his back to the man, hating having his back to anything. He cast a quick protection to ward him against any spells cast from behind him.

“Alex,” he said quietly. “We need to talk about this.”
On the other side of the door, Harry was still sat against the wall. He had shifted a little, to counteract the numbness in his feet and arse, but he felt almost like he was planted into the floor. Half of him wanted Severus to blast down the door and sweep him into his arms and tell him it would be alright, and the other half had spent the last few hours thinking that if he didn’t get his magic back – and if they hadn’t done it yet, how long could it take? – then there was no way Severus could want him. Not a Muggle. Someone who could not even enter their world.

He couldn’t even talk to Severus properly. He knew the guard would be there outside.

“How long before you can get my – power – back?” he asked quietly.

Severus’ heart plummeted. Did Harry have to ask just that question? “It will be a while,” he said honestly.

“How long is that, Severus? A week? A month?”

Severus held his breath. *Half a century, the way they were going. “We need to figure out a way to speed up the process–”*

“How long?” Harry asked.

“I can’t say.”

“A year?” Harry’s voice cracked. At the silence, “More than that?”

“Alex, let me in.”

“Please go away, Severus. I need to think.”

“You don’t need to be alone to do that.”

“Please.”

Snape sat back on the chair, his shoulders slumping. He ran his hands shakily through his hair.

“Alright, I’m going,” he said at last, standing up and leaning against the door. “But this conversation isn’t over. We’re all working on sorting this out. We’re all with you, do you understand? You’re not alone.”

There was no answer.

Severus sighed, and put the chair back.

“Shock was it, Sir? Going back?” the guard asked.

Severus shrugged.

“We’ll keep an eye on him. They’ll make sure there’s no razors in there, Sir, don’t worry.”

Severus hadn’t even thought that Harry might consider topping himself until that suggestion. Surely Harry wouldn’t -?

“I’ll call the nurse, Sir. Someone will be with him,” the soldier nodded, and began to speak into his mike.
Severus said a brief thank you, and left.

The next day, Harry asked to see the Colonel, the doctors and the physio. He asked for a programme of training to be set up to allow him to learn the use of Muggle weapons and tactics, in particular hand to hand and close range combat.

The Colonel, under strict orders to not only protect the young man but to cater to his every whim, was intrigued. He had long ago expected calls for champagne, satellite television, DVDs, treats of all sorts. There had been none. The man had taken no advantage of his situation at all. But this request was bizarre: how could he not have received this training already? He was a wizard, yes, but surely...The young man sat there, still and firm and with quiet resolution. The Colonel wondered what had happened when they had tried to return the young man the day before. He had had a full report, of course, from the helicopter crew and medical staff, and as the guard had predicted, any implements that he might use to injure himself had been discretely removed. Now he was asking for weapons training.

Well. He would give him what he asked, but keep a very close eye on him. He would intensify security too – the Prime Minister’s office had told him that there had been an attack on one of the team.

Harry actually enjoyed focusing himself entirely on this new training. He didn’t have to do running in full gear – in fact his normal dress was the pressure suit that he wore to help with the scarring from the burns, coupled with low slung combat trousers in a lightweight fabric – specially tailored not to cut across the burns line. Harry made no comment on the special treatment. He needed to be sure he could defend himself, and that was all there was to it.

He found he was good with knives, and wondered whether his accuracy with darts had helped him in that. He had special sheathes made so that he had a lightweight knife attached to each calf, and practiced throwing them at targets from a multiplicity of positions. He started to run again, around the base, surrounded by a pack of soldiers. His determination to succeed was fuelled by a number of factors.

He knew he could not leave the camp, without endangering his life; and his life was important if only because the wizarding world saw him as a figure head. He had allowed Colin Creevey to take a still photo of him, from the good side of his face, with a brief piece written by Hermione to accompany it, to assure the wizarding world of his well-being. As a cover, Colin had done a whole range of still photos of the Heroes of the Battle, proclaiming that this Muggle tradition was to be celebrated as a new art form. Many wizards were rather taken with the atmospheric effects of still photography, and there was quite a debate in the Arts pages about it. Colin was achieving a great deal of trade in consequence, and the pressure was off a bit as a result.

Unfortunately, the Ministry decided that with Harry well, and the threat of more attacks, there should be a morale–raising official celebration of victory, with a Ball at the Ministry.

The Ball was much enjoyed by many; Severus was furious at being forced to attend, although he understood the politics of allowing the public to see that the last person who had been attacked had not only brought down his two attackers but had recovered fully. Severus would much have preferred working on Harry’s magic, but with Dumbledore and Neville as guests that wasn’t possible. His absence, as the last ‘victim’, although un-noteworthy in its own right – he was known to be curmudgeonly – might create further anxiety given the absence of Harry. The school had
acted all along as if Harry would be present, and the Ministry was filled with what seemed to be as many reporters as guests.

Severus agreed to show for an hour, and left precisely on the dot.

Unfortunately, he had been accosted rather publicly by one of the Italian wizards who he had fucked in the Christmas holidays, who had sold his story to the press and been smuggled into the Ball. The resulting pictures – of the man draping himself over Severus’ chest – and the ‘full story of their passionate threesome’ made headlines on page 2 of the next day’s Prophet – only having been knocked off the front page by the sad absence of Harry Potter from the event.

An Order member had brought the paper – having read only the front page, and thinking Harry would be amused by the story telling of the outrage of the wizarding world that the Shaolin monks where Harry was taking a retreat and furthering his magical knowledge even more, had refused to allow his peace to be disturbed in any way and had not allowed even the invitation of the event to be given to the young Mage.

Harry had grinned as he read about himself, though he was actually miffed, as no-one had bothered to invite him. He understood that he couldn’t go, couldn’t go to the Ministry, couldn’t show the wizarding world that he was now truly the hideous freak that his family had always called him. Scarred, and magic-less. He understood it all, but it still hurt. Not as much as it hurt to see a small black haired wizard in Snape’s arms, and the report of their sexual encounter. Harry told himself it wasn’t true. But there in the small print Paolo said how much he loved kissing Severus’ scar lines, and Harry had to run to the loo and slam the door, holding back the bile that rose in his throat.

He determined all the same to talk to Severus about it. When he next came. Apparently Severus had time for attending balls but not for visiting him, he thought to himself bitterly, as yet another ten days had passed.

Harry stripped off his suit to climb into a cool bath – he wasn’t allowed to shower because the jets might damage his weak skin. He realised he had left the paper on the bed, and went to open the door.

Two of the guards were looking at the article. Harry knew that to Muggles, the photos would not appear moving, but the article was about wizards and the like. He hoped they would think it a fancy dress ball.

“No wonder the poor sod’s upset,” one of them was saying.

“Explains why the old guy hasn’t been visiting,” the other commented.

Harry stood frozen in the bathroom doorway.

“You can’t blame him really, can you?” the first one continued. “I mean, he shags a young fit guy half his age – lucky him, if that’s your scene. Now he’s saddled with the creature from the blue lagoon, or something.”

“Oh, that’s cruel, mate!” the other laughed.

“Well, come on! If you were dating a Page 3 bird and she got crisped till she looked like a horror movie, would you stay? And it sounds like the old guy’s a hero himself, so he can have any arse he fancies, can’t he? No argument, is there?”

“Thank you for your views. Can I have my paper?” Harry said, voice cold.
Both men turned round, looking like naughty schoolboys.

“Oh, mate, I didn’t mean –“ one began.

Harry was wearing only a towel, and looked down at his crinkled flesh.

“Maybe I needed the reality check,” he said quietly, holding out his hand for the paper.

“There are other fish in the sea,” the other one said. “I’ve heard some guys like it if you look a bit – well –“ he stammered, blushing.

“Battered? Ugly? Vile? Thanks,” Harry nodded and marched into the bathroom and shut the door.

“Shit,” one of the guards said.

“Yeah. Could do with a smoke after that.”

“Only an hour till we change shift. Maybe he won’t be out before then.”

He was wrong. Harry opened the door, making him jump.

“Get me a mirror, please,” Harry asked.

“Hey mate, you don’t want to –“

“Yes, I do. Thank you,” Harry said with icy politeness. The guard wondered how such a shortarse could be so scary.

An hour later, Harry had spent a good long time looking at his body.

The guards were right. He did look like something out of a horror movie.

He asked his Auror guard to contact Hogwarts when he left, to see if Neville would visit.

Neville apparated to the safe house where Severus was just coming through the floo.

“Oh,” Neville said awkwardly, “I was just going to see Harry.”

He looked carefully at the older man, who had completely ignored the furore and sniggers in the Great Hall following the revelations in the Prophet. He hoped Harry hadn’t seen the paper.

They walked around to the base together, thoughts about the story flitting anxiously through Neville’s head and tying his tongue.

When they arrived at Harry’s room the Order guard looked up and smiled. “Ah, you got the message, Mr Longbottom. Good.”

Snape looked at Neville.

“Harry asked me to come,” he explained.

“I did,” Harry said quietly, his head appearing over the side of the bed. He had an exercise mat spread out on the floor on the other side and had been doing some of the repetitions the physio had
given him. He looked at Severus, eyes shuttered, and gave Neville a small smile.

“Severus, can you give me a few minutes with Neville?”

Severus nodded. The Order member grinned. “Want to come and have a cup of tea with me in the canteen, Professor? They do some good chocolate cake here.”

“How long do you need?” Severus said calmly. “I cannot stay long, unfortunately.”

*Of course not,* thought Harry, bitterly. “Ten minutes?”

Severus nodded, and went out. *No kiss, not even a touch,* Harry thought.

Neville saw the Prophet beside the bed. *Oh shit!*

But what Harry asked was, “How long do you think it will take to untangle my magic, Nev?”


“Severus wouldn’t answer me when I asked him when he last visited,” Harry continued. “I don’t mean to put pressure on, I know – things – are busy, I just – I just need to have some idea. Please.”

Neville sat down. Harry had had a desk brought into the room, which now resembled a cross between some sort of bedsit and a medical facility. Harry sat opposite.

“The problem is Dumbledore,” Neville explained, rubbing a hand over his face. “Not that it wouldn’t take a long time anyway, but it’s exhausting him. Severus and I are really worried about him. He’s just completely knackered after we’ve removed one or two spells. We tried for three on the first few days, but – it’s just not fair on him, Harry.”

“Is he ill?” Harry asked, taken aback by the reply.

“I think he’s just – old. I’ve been trying to lighten the load – the castle seems to be giving me more of the wards –“

“Really? Are you alright with that?”

Neville looked at Harry. “Well, I don’t have any problem holding them, or anything, but – well, what do you think it means?” he asked anxiously.

The conversation was not going where Harry had wanted it to, but Neville obviously needed to talk. And actually, it was good to focus on someone else’s worries.

“What’s bothering you?” Harry asked, and then looked sharply at Neville. “Are the wards always held by the Headmaster?”

“I don’t know. The Heads of House can obviously strengthen them – and probably anyone friendly, like it let you and me. But – I mean – what do you think is going on? I can’t be the next Headmaster!”

Harry looked at Neville. “I think you’d be brilliant, frankly, but – I agree,” he grinned, “you are a bit young!”

“But I’m not clever, or anything!” Neville shook his head.

“Nev, you’re really powerful, you’re brilliant at Herbology, you’re kind and good. Shut up a
minute –“he smiled, seeing Neville about to interrupt. “You haven’t found it easy, but that’s a good thing. You’ll understand the difficulties other students will have.”

“But, but...”

“What?”

Neville looked embarrassed. “Apart from the whole, it can’t possibly mean that I should be Headteacher, even if it did – what about my life, Harry?”

Harry looked at him carefully. “You’re worried that it won’t fit in with Draco and Hermione?”

“Yeah,” Neville said sheepishly.

“All going well there, then?” Harry smiled.

Neville smiled too, a warm sweet emotion flooding his face, as if he couldn’t hold it back. “I didn’t know it was possible to be this happy,” he whispered.

“You need to trust them, Neville. Talk to them about it. Hermione will be good at researching. Draco might know stuff about how it operates ‘cos his Dad was a governor. There’s always going to be times when you have even more to sort out when there’s three rather than two of you, but the benefits outweigh that, surely? And Hogwarts is sort of an anchor, isn’t it? Maybe the castle will let you hold the wards without being Headteacher. Find out how much the holder is able to go away. Dumbledore was sent away, wasn’t he, back when Umbridge came: what happened to the wards then? And he’s always popping off to the ministry and stuff, isn’t he, so it can’t mean you can’t get away. You’ve been apparating all over the place, haven’t you, and still holding the wards?”

“You’re right,” Neville said, brightening.

“See? It’ll all work out. Talk to Hermione and Draco. Maybe the castle is just feeling you out for 50 years into the future, or something. It let me help with the wards, so maybe it just tries people out.”

“Would you like to be Headmaster?” Neville asked.

Harry looked away, his hand turning into a fist on his knee. “I don’t think so,” he said, and Neville was surprised at the relief he felt. Obviously, Harry was a much more suitable candidate, but he was surprised, given the worry he had been feeling on the matter, how possessive he suddenly felt about it.

“Anyway,” Harry added, “it might not be an option, if I’m a Muggle. Please, Neville, give me a timescale,” he turned his eyes, green and so sharp without the glasses, on his friend.

“We need to find a way to speed it up –“

“Neville. A month? A year? Five years?”

“Probably – probably nearer that higher guess,” Neville said, “at the current rate. We’ll improve on it, Harry, I promise.”

Harry held himself still.

He was a Muggle.
He would be, for five years, give or take a century. What did it matter? Five years? He would be heading into his mid twenties. It could be longer. Would it be possible to even put it back after all that time? What was he in the meantime? How would he live? He had no qualifications in the Muggle world. The Dursleys! Think how joyful they would be! The magic had finally been knocked out of him! How ironic, that Voldemort had done exactly what his most hated creatures wanted.

He felt hysteria bubbling in him, and forced it down.

“Harry –” Neville began.

Severus knocked and opened the door.

“Are your discussions finished? If not, I ought to get back.”

Of course, Harry thought. Severus knew that Harry was going to be a Muggle. He had known and said nothing. Just distanced himself. Not visited. He was cool now. Well, Harry shouldn’t be surprised. He had nothing to offer Severus now. No power, no magic, and as the guards had said, he was fucking disgusting to look at. To touch. Severus hadn’t ditched him, but he had let him know in very Slytherin fashion; Harry should have realised when Snape didn’t come. He’d been stupid. Severus had shown him now, though, with those pictures with Paolo.

“We’re done,” Harry said. And they were. This was it. He needed to finish it. Make Severus feel comfortable about it. The man deserved that, at least.

“Neville, see you soon,” he gave his friend a quick hug, as much as he could. His skin still couldn’t stand any pressure.

Surprised, Neville returned it, and left.

Severus’ hurt that Harry had wanted private time with Neville even when their own time together was so limited increased; he’d told himself in the canteen how stupid he was, that Harry was perfectly entitled to talk to Neville alone, but he hadn’t thought they needed to have secrets, and it hurt. Seeing Harry hug Neville – more contact than he’d had with his lover, the thought made him feel even madder. He knew there was nothing between the two – well, there was. It wasn’t sexual, but there was friendship, strong and firm. He wanted that. He thought he’d had it.

Harry sat down again, on the other side of the table.

No greeting. No kiss, no touch.

“Severus, I wanted to ask if you could make me a poison to go on the tips of darts. Something like a _Petrificus Totalus_, in poison form. Do you know of anything? Could you make it?”

Diverted, Severus asked, “Tell me exactly what you want it for?”

“It’s obviously going to be sometime before I can use – ordinary – defences,” he glanced at the guard, and Severus hastily threw up a wordless and wandless privacy ward, twisting the little orb on the beside table as he did so.

“Thank you,” Harry nodded. “Did you know, I can’t even feel whether you’ve done it? I need to see you touch the orb too,” he said with a hint of bitterness. “Anyway,” he continued, “I’ve got quite good at darts, so I thought if I had some in a special holster, on my arms or legs, they could be quite useful.”
“It’s a good idea,” Severus nodded. “You’d have to reapply the potion every day, and ensure no contact with your own skin, but I’m pretty sure I can adapt a formula for that.”

“Thank you,” Harry said, leaning back in his chair.

“You’re very cold,” Severus said quietly. “Are you still cross with me for last week?”

“What happened last week?” Harry’s brow drew together.

“You didn’t want to talk to me.”

“That was the week before,” Harry said quietly.

“Fine,” Severus agreed. He looked sharply at Harry. “You’re cross because I haven’t been able to get here?”

“I’m not cross,” Harry denied. He took a deep breath. “The thing is, Severus, I’ve had a lot of time to think, and it’s silly pretending we have a relationship going. I hope you’ll still be happy to make that potion for me, for the darts, but – “

“Hold on! What the fuck are you saying?” Severus snapped.

“Just that I think a relationship is not really on for either of us at this point, is it?”

“When the hell did you decide that?”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think in here – “

“Harry, look, I know we don’t get any privacy here, but – “

“Severus. It’s over.”

“The fuck it is!”

“Well, there’s an appropriate choice of word,” Harry muttered.

“What are you going on about?”

Harry passed Severus the folded copy of the Prophet.

“What?” Severus snapped.

“The Ministry Ball last night?” Harry suggested.

“You’re cross because I went to the Ball?”

Harry couldn’t believe the cheek of the man.

“If you want to know, yes!” he stood up and shouted. “You have no fucking time to visit me, but obviously time to cruise at a Ball! Do you know I wasn’t even fucking invited?” Harry swore.

“You weren’t?” Severus said, dazed. “But you couldn’t have – “

“No, I know I couldn’t,” Harry cut in. “Still, it might have been nice if anyone had asked whether I preferred to be spending my time with the Shaolin monks – “

“Is that the story they made up?” Severus snorted. “They just need to keep everyone ticking over
happily, Harry, you know how it works.”

“I do. I asked Neville to come today because I wanted the answer you wouldn’t give me when you last bothered to visit. Maybe five years, he said. What do you think, Severus?”

Ah, Severus thought, calming his irritation with Harry. Didn’t the idiot boy realise that it was better for him to work on sorting his magic than visiting in this sterile wasteland? So this was what it was really all about. Well, he’d be terrified of living without his magic, too.

“Look, Harry, we’ll speed it up. It will take some time, but –“

Severus, I’m really grateful for your work on my magic. I’m hoping you’ll be willing to continue despite our breaking up.”

“We are not ‘breaking up’.”

“Yes, we are,” Harry said determinedly.

“For fuck’s sake, why?”

“I’ve had plenty of chance to look around. There are lots of hot soldiers here, Severus. I see them all day, running round, hot and sweaty. In the gym, muscles bulging. Let’s just say my eyes have been opened.”

Severus felt his jaw dropping, and had to physically shut his mouth. “You’re feeling better and you’re horny,” he interpreted.

“Maybe,” Harry lied. He’d never felt less horny in his life. His heart was breaking in his chest. He wished Severus would stop this pretence of wanting to carry on.

Severus came round the table and tried to take Harry in his arms. “You want me to give you a blow job?” he tried to nuzzle Harry’s neck.

Harry felt his nose against new fresh skin, and it hurt. He pulled away sharply. “Stop it!”

“Why?” Severus demanded, angrily, fearfully.

“That hurt!” Harry yelled.

Severus dropped back, horrified.

“Harry, I’m sorry –“

Harry turned away, shaking. Tears stung his eyes, and he brushed them away.

Severus saw the movement and his heart clenched. God, he had hurt Harry again! But all he could think, on top of that, an insistent thrum in his head, his heart, his body, was that Harry wanted to leave him.

The guard, who couldn’t hear but was watching carefully, stepped forward.

“Everything alright, Alex?”

Harry didn’t turn back, and the shaking hand and slight sniff shook Severus to the core.

“Fine. Please see the Professor out.”
“Alex –“

Harry turned round, ignoring the tears running down his face. “Just colleagues, please, Professor,” he said quietly.

“What is this about?” Severus said desperately.


Severus pulled page 2 from the crumpled mass, dropping the rest. His own face stared up at him, Paolo’s lithe body plastered all over him.

His stomach clenched. “You’re jealous?” he bit out.

“Jealous? Should I be, Severus? Tell me he’s lying. The Prophet always lies, right?”

Severus straightened. “I slept with him one night, with another guy.”

Harry looked at him. “At that conference you went to at Christmas break.”

“Yes.”

So while Harry had been suffering agonies for having hurt Severus, Severus was actually having a great time having threesomes with beautiful Italians.

“I wasn’t fucking you then,” Severus reasoned, and that was it, Harry exploded.

“You’ve never fucked me! And you never will, alright!”

“Look, I know you need me to be –” gentle, Severus had been going to say. Not only had he more or less raped Harry, but Harry’s body was now fragile too.

“I don’t need you!” Harry shouted. “What am I, a pity fuck? You think no one will want to do me? Even the guard told me there were people who’d want to fuck me.”

“I’m sure many people find the idea of fucking the Boy-Who-Lived a real turn-on,” Severus sneered, hiding his hurt.

“Get out!” Harry yelled.

The guard took Severus’ arm.

“Time to go, Sir,” he said firmly.

“Let go of me,” Severus hissed.

“Only if you’re coming quietly,” the guard said, but released him at the door.

Severus slammed out of the room.

Harry sank down, back to the wall, and sobbed.
Snape walked into the Headmaster’s study later that evening, finding Neville and Albus already drinking tea. He took a cup.

“Mr Potter wishes us to hurry up,” he said calmly. “I suggest we get his Remedial Magic class, and anyone from the Order who is free, to have a look at what we are doing and see if they can come up with any suggestions.”

“Oh, he spoke to you too, Severus?” Neville responded. “He asked me how long it would take.”

“And you said?”

“More like five years than one? It is too slow. It’s a good idea to get ideas, don’t you think, Professor Dumbledore?”

“Everyone will know Harry’s problem,” the old man said cautiously.

“If it takes us five years on our own, they’ll know anyway,” Neville reasoned. He turned to Snape. “How was he? You came in just after I’d told him.”

“As impatient for it to be over as I am,” Snape said after a moment. “I’m sure you also have other plans for your evenings for the next five years, Mr Longbottom.”

Neville looked at Snape. He rarely called him ‘Mr Longbottom’ anymore, or Harry ‘Mr Potter’, when they were in relative privacy like this. It must be quite hard, seeing Harry and always having someone in the room. He could understand Snape wanting to get Harry’s magic back as quickly as possible and get him back to Hogwarts.

“Very well, I’ll make arrangements. Tomorrow night?” Albus asked. They both nodded.

Unfortunately, the session gave rise to no workable ideas. The suggestion that more wizards attempted to work on the writhing mass of magic at once was deemed unfeasible: even with only two trying to untangle the curses, a segment of curse had nearly broken off. To be trying to tease out smaller and smaller sections would be even more difficult.

Hermione had watched the process and an idea was pulling at her brain, but however much she searched she couldn’t come up with anything good. The curses were wound so tightly around each other, as well as Harry’s magic, that she was not the only one horrified by the difficulty of the task. The only good suggestion that had come at all was that Neville or Snape should try and hold the magic, so that someone else could try to do the untangling. This would mean that only two of the three powerful wizards were needed at any one time, giving them a break on a rota. Bill Weasley, who had originally been involved in trying to come up with plans for extracting the curses, was keen to try, and proved good at the job, though he too was stunned not only with how tiring it was, but with how exhausted Dumbledore had become. He and Neville had shared a look when they thought the old man wasn’t aware, only to have Dumbledore say, somewhat testily, “What did you expect, my boys? I am over one hundred and fifty! My time is drawing in.”

“Sir?” Neville said quietly. “Can I talk to you privately?”

“I need to go anyway,” Bill said, shaking Dumbledore’s hand and smiling at Neville.

“Well, my friend,” Albus said, “have I been allowing you to carry too great a burden?”
“What? Oh, no, it’s not that, Sir.”

“You are shocked that I have allowed you to take so much of the wards?”

“Not shocked, exactly, Sir. Surprised, yes. And I have a few questions.”

“Yes. Of course you have. Well, we’d better have some tea, I think,” the old wizard said, puttering about.

They settled in front of Dumbledore’s fire, and Neville could tell that it was partly to treat him as an equal, rather than facing him across the desk.

“Fire away, then, Neville,” Albus smiled, taking a bite from a slice of fruitcake.

Neville rubbed his hands on his knees. “I’ve got about a hundred questions; can I ask a batch at once? It might help things along.”

“Whatever you wish, of course.”

“Well, I’m wondering why the castle is letting me hold them. I know the simple answer is, if you’ll pardon me, Sir, that you’re a little tired. But why me? Are they only held by the Headmaster, or potential ones? Because the castle can’t possibly think that I’m the next Headmaster, can it? And what happens when you go away? Can you go away much? And – well, this one is rather personal,” he said carefully.

“Fire away! Excellent questions!”

“Well, does the Headmaster – or whoever holds the wards – do so until they die? I mean, can you retire? Give up holding them? Because if you wanted to release them, just be Headmaster, or to go away and enjoy what – well, you said yourself, if you’ll forgive me, Sir – what time you have left – of course I’ll be very happy to hold them, until there’s a new Headmaster or new holder. I hope that hasn’t come out all wrong,” Neville said anxiously.

Dumbledore sat back in his chair, and looked at the young man before him through the steam arising from his second cup of tea. “It came over as a very well thought out, very generous offer, Neville. I am honoured by it.”

“Well, I’m glad it sounded all right, but – well, Sir, what do you think?”

“I think you’ve given me a great deal to consider. Headmasters and mistresses have often stayed in post till they’ve died, but now that I think about it, I know that is not always the case. Elgin Doddle retired to devote himself to writing a very useful book on Arithmancy, though of course it has been superseded since. And Jeremiah Dobbs left to go to the Americas. Angelica Amesbury – but – well, as you see, they did retire, but – to be honest, Neville, I’ve always assumed the next Headmaster picked up the wards, but that certainly bears researching, doesn’t it?” He considered the young man carefully. “And how would you feel about being the new Headmaster? Do I detect that you aren’t keen?”

“I think it would be wrong,” Neville said quietly but firmly. “I’ve talked to Harry about this, as the wards obviously recognise him too. He – he’s kind enough to say I’d be a good Headmaster, but – it wouldn’t be right, for someone like me to be in charge of the staff, directing the school, when I know nothing. But I could hold the wards. For the meantime.”

“You want to get away from Hogwarts?”
“I’ve been happy here. If – if there weren’t other people involved, I’m sure I’d be happy to stay. But their happiness is important to me, which is why I can offer my help on a temporary basis, but don’t really want to commit further at this point.” Neville was bright red, but he was determined not to be ashamed of his relationship. And Severus had said Albus had been in a threesome.

“You’re very wise, young man,” Dumbledore said; “I was always inclined to put career first, you know, and it put a terrible strain on my relationship with Freida and Dilys. They were very patient with me, but I have a feeling that your lovers will not be so calm-tempered.” The old eyes twinkled, and Neville let out a snort of laughter.

No, Draco would not be a patient partner, perhaps even more so because he was so fearful of his desire to be submissive to Neville, to allow Neville to care for him. Hermione might be less quick-tempered, but she was as stubborn as a hippogriff when she felt she was in the right.

Neville got up. “Think about the offer, Sir. It’s a horrible thought for you not to be here, in charge of Hogwarts, but a worse thought to think that you may have wanted to do something in your life that your sense of duty to the castle prevented you from accomplishing.”

To Neville’s surprise, Dumbledore stood too, and shook his hand in both of his. “Your parents would be very proud of you, dear boy, very proud,” he said warmly.

Neville gave a red-faced nod of thanks, and left.

Severus had cut his brain off from thinking about what had happened. The thoughts, feelings, were there, curled up tight in his chest like a Pandora’s box waiting to explode, but he’d had a lot of practice at keeping that lid shut, and he did so for four days. He went through the routines of his life, teaching and caring for snotty-nosed kids who for some reason still seemed to look up to him, or fear him just as they always had done. His tongue was as acerbic as ever, but no worse. He went, in the evenings, to battle with Harry’s magic, and was able to keep the challenges of the task quite separate from the man for whom the work was being done. He had even started brewing the poison for Potter’s darts.

He was proud of his calm and his control. He began to wonder if perhaps he had over-rated his feelings for the boy. It was a relief to know that though his pride might have taken a knocking at being dismissed, it was really not going to be so hard to start a new life.

He was, after all, now considered something of a hero.

On the Friday night, he arranged for Sinistra to be in charge, and, ignoring her smirking look, left the castle and headed to London. He visited several clubs, ending in a loud and noisy gay dance club where muscled young men moved sinuously and erotically to the music. He wore leather and silk, and was recognised and feted. He was pawed by several gorgeous young things, and spent half a dozen dances with his hard cock grinding into the arses or bellies of scantily clad admirers. He was just about to take the black haired beauty that was sucking his nipple through his shirt into the back room when he decided that black was a dull look, and moved away to dance with a blond haired muscle-bound older man. He found the blond eye-lashes strangely disturbing, but the man was built and confident, and three hours and several sexual activities later they lay sated on musky hotel sheets in an ugly room.

The man had fallen asleep on his back and was snoring. Snape propped himself up on his elbow and studied the man’s body dispassionately. There was a chain around the guy’s neck – Damon. Well, maybe he occasionally wanted his partners to know who they were fucking.
The body was good; the man – *Damon* – must have spent a lot of hours building it.

So why did he feel so dissatisfied?

He’d come three times, for fuck’s sake! Wasn’t that enough?

The answer was no, it wasn’t. He was used to a small body tucked against his own, small hands soothing over him sleepily at odd moments through the night. He was used to feeling his mind blown to Merlin’s Kingdom and back, and warmth.

And love.

Shit! Shit, shit, shit! He loved the stupid boy. He’d known it for ages, of course, even though they’d never said the words to each other.

Well, there was no *each other* about it, was there? he thought bitterly. Whatever he’d presumed the boy had felt, he’d been wrong. He should have known.

Potter had only had boys and himself at Hogwarts to choose from – he was hardly likely to fancy Hagrid or Flitwick or Filch. His previous experience had shown he liked big muscular guys, he thought, remembering the massive Derek. And now he found himself surrounded by fit, testosterone-fuelled young men, all living on top of each other. He had no responsibilities to the wizarding world anymore, could do what he pleased.

And he obviously felt pleased to do some hunky Muggles.

And now that Harry had no Magic himself, the things that had attracted him in Severus – his magical strength, his knowledge of the Dark Arts, were irrelevant. Severus was just an ugly man, with nothing to offer in the life Harry would have to lead for the foreseeable future.

Severus had been the idiot clinging on to something that never was.

*But he was jealous,* a voice said in the back of his head. *If he didn’t care, why was he jealous?* But then, he’d been cross that Severus had gone to the Ball without him – that he hadn’t even been asked. That *was* shitty, and had Severus known – but he hadn’t known, and there was nothing he could have done about it anyway.

A particularly loud grunt made him dig his bed companion in the ribs.

“What?” Damon mumbled.

“Piss off.” Snape bit out.

“What?” the blond lifted his tousled head.

“You heard me. Get out,” Snape said coldly.

“It’s the middle of the fucking night!”

“What, are you scared the bogey man will get you?” Snape said sarcastically.

“Fuck you!” The man got out of bed, pulling up his tight trousers.

Severus couldn’t be arsed to answer. He got up and went to the bathroom, getting himself a glass of water, and watched to check the man didn’t nick anything.
“Always heard you were a bastard,” Damon grumbled.

“Then you knew what you were letting yourself in for.”

“You this much of a wanker with all your bed partners?” the man asked.

No, Snape thought, he wasn’t. Not with Harry....

Rage and frustration suddenly welled up. He hurled the glass at the man, missing his head only because the man ducked.

The glass smashed in a hail of noise and shards.

“You’re a fucking madman, not a hero!”

“I’m a fucking murderer, and that’s what made me a hero,” Snape sneered, “you arse-licking, vain little prick. Get out.”

The man went.

Harry was glad that the pictures didn’t move when he saw the snaps of Severus pressed against several gorgeous, scantily clad men in the Prophet next day.

So he’d been right. Severus had been being noble and had been waiting for Harry to release him. At least he had given Harry some Slytherin hints. Harry might have held on to him for a very long time before Snape had stopped pitying him enough to finish it. The thought of Severus kissing him, touching him, out of pity made him want to barf.

He folded the paper carefully and began to warm up.

He had been working himself into the ground, exercising, practicing with knives and darts. He hadn’t really done any practical hand to hand combat, though he’d been allowed to watch the other soldiers, because his skin was too fragile, but he had spaced short sessions of everything else with reading in between – mostly survival manuals for caring for himself in extreme circumstances. They were actually fascinating. He had asked for practical work on some, had learnt to trap animals for food, how to skin and cook them, preserve and use everything. How to identify plants to eat and avoid – he actually excelled on this, he obviously remembered some of his Herbology after all. Then he realised that a lot of his knowledge in the area also came through Potions. Which reminded him of Severus.

The physio arrived and started working through Harry’s programme with him. Harry wanted to push it further and further and got frustrated and angry.

“Look, Alex, give yourself a break! What’s the rush?” Fred, the physio, said.

“I should be able to do this! I can do it,” Harry gritted, forcing his body on.

“Right, that’s it. Stop right there,” Fred said calmly.

Harry kept going.

Fred physically restrained him.

Harry started to struggle.
“Alex! Stop it!” Fred’s sharp voice cut through Harry’s determination.

He stilled, got to his feet and walked to the window.

“I beg your pardon,” he said stiltedly, after a few moments.

“No problem,” Fred replied easily, sitting down on the bed. “You just have to listen to your body. You’ve done so well—“

Harry snorted.

Fred leant back on his hands, thinking. “You don’t agree?” he asked.

Harry turned to look at him. “I’m a wreck.”

“Well, I’ve been doing this job for twenty years and you’re in my top ten patients for recovery speed, given your injuries,” he said.

Harry nodded, not looking at him.

“Have you been out of here?” Fred asked, suddenly.

“Once. It didn’t work.”

“We could get you permission to go down the pub. Some of the lads would go with you, I’m sure. I think you need to get out of here for a bit.”

“I don’t think that’s allowed,” Harry shook his head, though he couldn’t stay here for five years, could he? “Anyway, I don’t think I’d be very welcome.”

“Why not?”

Harry turned to stare at the grey haired man. He turned fully, and pointed to his face.

“Are you scared to go out in public?” the man said gently.

Was he?

“I don’t know,” Harry said honestly. “I haven’t considered going out. Meeting people. Didn’t think I’d be allowed.”

“You do know your guards are to protect you, not to imprison you?”

“They can be the same thing,” Harry shrugged wistfully.

“Look, why don’t I ask about you going out? If you go with a group of the lads—“

“Right. Like they’d be so thrilled at my company. The poofter from the Blue Lagoon.”

The guard at the door shuffled his feet.

“Has someone said that to you?” the physio stood up. “That’s completely unacceptable—“

Harry’s eyes briefly met the guard’s. It was one of the men who had commented on his looks.

“No,” Harry said. “Of course not. But it’s what I am.”
The guard coughed, and they both turned to look at him.

“Be very happy to provide escort to the pub, Sir.”

Harry looked at him. “Thanks,” he nodded, “but I don’t think it’s going to happen.”

“Well, I’ll check that out. Why don’t you ask some friends who haven’t yet seen you to visit? Get you used to meeting people.”

Harry was about to answer in the negative when he suddenly wondered if he could invite Derek and Andy. His spirits lifted briefly at the thought, then sunk again as he realised that he had the wrong face on. But then...he strode into the bathroom and looked in the mirror.

“Would that be allowed?” he asked.

“Sure.”

Harry looked at the Auror guard.

“I’ll check it out,” the man said.

“See if Kingsley Shacklebolt has a moment to speak to me about it,” Harry asked. “I need to think about it, too.”

Later that day, Harry picked up the mobile, a mix of trepidation and pleasure in his heart. He pressed in the numbers,

“Derek? Hi! It’s Alex...Yes really...am I well? Uh, not exactly...No! No, Severus hasn’t done anything to me! We’ve parted company, actually.....I’m sort of in hospital again... Yeah, I know I should have told you...I was unconscious for - yeah, alright, no excuse. No, no, I’m getting better now...Yeah, I’d really like it if you can come but it’s a bit of a journey ...you’re great, thanks, Derek....The trouble is, well, I don’t think you’ll recognise me... I got burnt...yeah, on my face, and some on my body....well, it’s healing, but I’ve got one of those plastic masks, and a body suit. And – I just look different. My hair’s black.... You always wondered how I dyed it? Well, we can discuss that, if you can bear to talk to an ugly mug who looks like a stranger....Here, I’ll give you the address. You’ll need to bring ID, ok? It’s a military hospital. Yeah, best not to ask. And don’t tell anyone except Andy that I’m here, ok? There’s safety reasons. I’ll explain as much as I can. Yeah, love you too, mate. See you tomorrow.”

The visit with Andy and Derek went really well. They were horrified not to recognise him, but then Harry showed them his tattoo – the very mark of identity that had caused the problems with Severus. He really should have been a lot more careful before having had that done! Still, he liked it. It was part of him. Derek was good at asking questions and then accepting when he couldn’t have answers. He offered Harry home and work without a second thought – office work, light outdoor work – anything to keep an eye on Harry. As he said, it was Harry’s business too.

That made Harry think about Sebastian Flight – about all the investments he had made and sod all use it had been. He wondered what the value of his shares were now and if there was any mail to be picked up from his mail collection box.
Paradoxically, the high of seeing his friends had led to a huge crash in the following week. Seeing the love between Derek and Andy had just rubbed in his own loneliness. Harry hurt. He sunk into himself, trying to ignore it.

What else could he do?

Harry was unaware of how concerned his team of trainers and doctors were about him. So worried that they approached Hermione.

Hermione had seen the first story in the Prophet about Severus, and treated it with the same disdain as the story on page 7 of the same issue about her forthcoming marriage to Ron, based entirely on a picture of her hugging Molly. The paper was full of nonsense for weeks on end, and everyone took everything with more than a pinch of salt. She hadn’t seen the second round of photos; life had been too busy. There were the NEWTs coming up, and she was researching methods for Harry to get his magic back. She couldn’t put her finger on whatever it was on the edge of her brain, so settled for the belief that it would come to her eventually – and in the meantime – research. And also, having a very active love life, she had to admit, was very time consuming. For a start, she went to bed about three hours earlier than she would have done normally, and still got less sleep....

So it was a surprise when Draco came and sat with her and Neville at supper time and shoved a copy of the Prophet in her hands.

“Oh, God, who’s being pilloried now?” she groaned, not bothering to open it.

“Wo ho, hot Snape!” Dean grinned from over the table. “My god! Did I just say that?”

“Well, he looks incredible – and the way he moves – there should be a health warning,” Lavender fanned herself.

“I can’t believe the governors haven’t objected, though,” Seamus chimed in, “it’s pretty explicit stuff.”

“What?” Hermione demanded critically, grabbing the paper, “teachers aren’t allowed a private life?”

“Er, it’s not very private,” Seamus gave his eyebrows a wiggle. “He was at Ten and a Half.”

“Not Nine and Three Quarters?” Hermione wrinkled her brow.

“It’s not a station, it’s a gay wizards’ night club,” Seamus filled in.

“Why Ten – oh! No!” blushed Lavender.

“Oh yeah!” laughed Seamus and Dean.

“Is it named after anyone specific?” she giggled.

“Apparently, the guy who owns it.”

“He must be fibbing,” Ginny said. “It couldn’t fit, could it?” she whispered.
“Ginny Weasley!” Hermione teased. “Don’t let Ron hear you talking like that!”

“What’s that?” Ron plumped down next to her.

“Don’t say!” Ginny begged, blushing.

“Where are these pictures?” Hermione said, flipping through the pages and changing the subject.

“Page 4,” several voices chorused.

Hermione opened the page and gasped.

Her eyes flew to Draco’s.

Neville grabbed the paper and Ron looked over to get a look too.

“Is that Snape?” he growled.

“Sure is!” Seamus grinned. “Who would’ve thought, eh? Getting a bit of an advantage out of his fame, eh?”

“You have to admit, he can move,” Dean studied the pictures.

Ron’s face was getting redder and redder.

Hermione wondered how to divert the explosion.

“Hey, Ron,” Lavender called, “you’re as red as a beetroot. Don’t like the sight of two guys getting the moves on?”

Ron looked up, about to snap out an answer when Neville shoved him in the ribs. He glanced at Neville and then gulped. “It’s not that,” he shook his head.

“Yeah, bit of a shock seeing Snape’s arse in leather trousers, I agree,” Seamus grinned. “D’ya thing he wears them under his robes?”

“Oh, let’s not go there, mate,” Dean shook his head.

Hermione stood up, Neville and Draco following. “Ron? Want to join us? We’re going over that Transfiguration stuff.”

“Transfig -? Oh, yeah, right. Just grab a bite. Where’ll I find you?”

“My room,” Neville said casually, “I’ve cleared a bit of space.”

“See you in five, then.”

Draco, Hermione and Neville were kissing gently on the bed when Ron knocked.

He waited till they called him in. “You decent?” he said, hand over his eyes.

“We’re only kissing, Ron,” Hermione said, sitting up on the bed. Neville was behind her with a hand around her stomach, Draco sprawled elegantly.

“Can’t you keep your hands off each other for five minutes?” Ron complained.
“Well, if we hadn’t been kissing we would have started talking about it without you, and that would have pissed you off even more,” Hermione said practically.

“Oh. Probably true,” Ron said, throwing himself down in Neville’s armchair and stretching his long legs out. “So. What the fuck are we going to tell Harry about that deceiving shit?” he asked.

“You’re jumping to conclusions,” Draco said quietly.

“Really? I know the Prophet makes up a crock load of piss but it doesn’t usually doctor photos.”

“Severus may have good reason for doing it.”

“Like getting to fuck some other guys?” Ron sneered.

“Like providing cover. Preventing anyone suspecting anything between him and Harry.”

“Why would they suspect anything?”

“Well, Weasley, that’s the nature of suspicions, isn’t it? People have them and usually try to find proof.”

“They don’t normally have them out of the blue,” Ron argued.

“Maybe someone passed on word that Snape had accompanied Harry after the battle,” Neville suggested.

There was a silence.

“So you reckon Harry knows?” Ron asked, slightly mollified.

“He usually has the Prophet, I think. He just can’t see the photos moving.”

“Can’t the Muggles see?” Ron asked.

“Harry’s copies are spelled still. He’s not supposed to let them see them anyway, given the nature of the stories, though that must be tricky at times,” Hermione said.

“It’s a good thing they aren’t moving, “ Draco commented. “Even if you knew about it, those pictures –“

“Yeah.”

“I think I’d better go and see Harry,” Hermione said. “I haven’t been for – shit! It’s a couple of weeks, I think. You guys have been going, right?”

Ron turned his head away. “Actually, I haven’t been for three or four weeks.”

“What? Ron, why not?”

“Hey! You’re not my mother, you know, to bully me!”

Hermione looked at him. “Didn’t think you’d need bullying to see Harry,” she said quietly.

“Well, I thought he was coming back, didn’t I?” he said defensively.
“I’ve been every week,” Neville said. “He was a bit quiet the last couple of times, but he’s been really working hard physically. We talked about his training and stuff.”

“I think I’ll go tonight,” Hermione said, getting up. It’s only half eight.”

“I’ll go talk to Snape – if he’ll say anything,” Draco rolled off the bed gracefully.

Draco made his way down to the labs. He had known Severus most of his life, but that didn’t really mean he knew the man – hell, the man he had come to discover in the last six months wasn’t the person he had grown up knowing at all. One thing that crossed both characters though - Snape was a private man. He would probably resent their interference. But that stuff in the press - if it wasn’t what they thought –

He found the Potions Master finishing up a detention with some small kids; Draco slipped into the back of the class and waited.

Having dismissed the pupils with dire warnings as to the likely retribution should their behaviour reoccur, Snape looked across to Draco.

“Mr Malfoy. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Right. So he was Mr Malfoy. That didn’t bode well. He tried to take a light tack.

“Hi, Severus. You got a minute or two? I could do with a word in private.”

Severus sighed, but got up, tidying the pile of scrolls. “You can do these for me, then,” he said, shoving the pile at Draco. “I have to be with the Headmaster in twenty five minutes.”

“Fine. What are they?” Draco looked quickly at the parchments.

“Third year mangling of the qualities and uses of herbs from the iridicae family,” Severus sighed. “I trust it is within your capacity?”

“I think I’ll manage,” Draco nodded, glancing at them.

Severus led him into his office, and shut and warded the door. He sat down at his desk. The formality was off-putting, but Draco attempted to be unflustered. He withdrew the folded page 4 from his pocket, and put it in front of Severus.

“I didn’t know if you’d seen this, Severus.”

Snape glanced at the pictures.

“So that is the cause of today’s sniggering. How very juvenile.”

He tossed the page into the bin.

“Aren’t the governors likely to object?” Draco asked.

“I am allowed a private life,” Snape said so coldly that Draco didn’t mention the view expressed earlier that it was rather public to be called a private life.

“Does Harry know?” he asked instead. “I mean, it could be a bit upsetting –“
I neither know nor care whether Mr Potter knows, and I’m sure it is a matter of complete irrelevance to him. Is that all you wished to say? I am at a loss to understand why you should believe yourself to be arbiter of my actions,” Snape said in freezing tones.

Draco sat there, heart thumping, and wondered what in hell was going on. Part of him wanted to run out of the door, but his Malfoy upbringing made him more impervious than most to the power of icy civility.

“Have you and Harry argued?” his brows drew together.

“I have allowed you the liberty of using my first name; you are under the mistaken impression that you are free to discuss my private life. If you have no matter of import to discuss, I will say good evening. You may leave the marked essays on my desk in the classroom. I doubt anyone will attempt to steal such rubbish. See yourself out.”

Draco left.

Hermione wasn’t faring much better with Harry. Despite the late hour, one of Harry’s doctors recognised her as the woman who had arrived with Harry, and said they were very concerned that Harry was suffering from depression, that this was not at all unusual at this stage, but there was concern that it was compounded by personal matters as Harry and the Professor had had a shouting match a couple of weeks back.

Harry blithely told Hermione that he and Severus had parted company and spent half an hour telling her why it was a very good thing. Harry had had his bed pushed against the wall, and they were both sitting on it, Hermione leaning against the wall and Harry curled up on his good side, facing her, looking tiny and pale.

Hermione listened and nodded, and when Harry had ground to a stop, Hermione looked at him and asked, “So he dumped you?”

“No. I said it was probably a good idea for us to go our own ways,” Harry said stoutly.

Hermione said nothing.

Harry fidgeted, twiddling the silky strip on the top of the blanket.

“So why did you do that? You love him,” she said gently.

Harry’s eyes shot to her face and away again just as fast.

“We’re not suited,” he said, not looking at her.

“In what way?”

Harry was quiet.

“You’re not going to make this easy for me, are you?” he asked. “Can’t I have any dignity?”

Hermione’s hand reached out and stroked his hair tentatively. Harry didn’t pull away. It was the first loving touch he’d had in weeks, and he desperately needed it.

“Where does dignity come into it?”
Harry sat up and stared her straight in the eyes. “Okay. Let’s do this. Look at me, Hermione.”

Hermione looked.

“What am I looking for?” she asked. “I see you.”

“Look at this,” Harry said, pointing at the mask and the swollen flesh it covered.

“That mask is going to make it much better soon,” she said carefully. “I know it’s not great now –“

Harry slipped off the bed and undid the zip of his body suit.

“Help me take this off,” he said determinedly.

“Harry-“

“Please.”

Hermione helped ease the suit away from Harry’s body, exposing his upper torso.

“Look at me,” he said, turning round, arms raised a little.

Hermione hadn’t realised how bad the scarring was. She knew Severus and Neville had made an ointment. “The salve –“

“This is a miracle, according to the doctors,” Harry said, pointing at the mangled flesh. “This level of healing. Without plastic surgery. I should be very grateful. I am grateful,” he added. “It’s still fucking ugly, isn’t it?”

It was. The burns, interlaced with the knife scars, were definitely ugly.

“Snape surely doesn’t care –“ Hermione swallowed. She thought of all the pictures of Snape and he’d had a beautiful man in his arms in each of them.

Unfortunately Harry had come to the same conclusion. “I’ve seen all the photos,” he said. “They’re all gorgeous, aren’t they?”

“It’s probably a load of nonsense, Harry –“

Harry shook his head. “He told me himself he’d fucked that Italian Paolo. In a threesome. At Christmas, Hermione.”

“Oh, Harry –“

“Yeah, well. He was free to do so, wasn’t he? And he obviously likes beautiful guys, and why shouldn’t he have them? I’ve never fitted that category and I sure as hell never will in future. I was probably convenient; fair enough. But I’m not going to be a pity fuck,” he shook his head, pulling the fabric up his arms again. Hermione stood up and helped ease it into place, smoothing her hands down Harry’s front.

“He cares about you -”

“Yeah, right.”

At Hermione’s look, he nodded, sitting back on the bed. “Okay, he cares a bit. He’s doing stuff with my magic and I really appreciate it. But I’ve hardly seen him, since I’ve been in here. But he
found time for the bloody Ministry Ball. Which, by the way, I wasn’t even invited to.”

“You weren’t? That’s outrageous! But he had to go, Harry, really, didn’t he? What with you being absent, it was even more important that the victim of the attack was shown to be well, and – “


“Severus – Harry, don’t tell me you didn’t know there was a Death Eater attack? It was in the paper.”

“I - someone told me there was an attack, but that the perpetrators were caught. Getting the papers is a bit erratic – depends if who’s on remembers. But – that’s not the point! Are you telling me Severus was injured?” Harry said urgently.

“Yes, his ankle was smashed to bits. He’s fine now, but you see why he couldn’t come.”

“God! He never mentioned it,” Harry said quietly. “Why didn’t he tell me? He could have sent me a message – he didn’t even mention it after.”

“Maybe he didn’t want to worry you.”

Harry looked at her. “Hermione, he’s had to touch this disgusting body and he’s checked my catheter bag when I had it and – “ he shrugged. “So, he looks after me but I’m not equal enough to look after him when he’s hurt. Not that I could have, but not to even let me show I cared - no wonder he doesn’t want me. I was just a burden. Thank God he gave me some hints before I made even more of an idiot of myself.”

“Harry! I’m sure you’re on the wrong tack!”

“Leave it,” Harry whispered.

“Harry – “

“I’ll survive. Yeah, it hurts. But it wouldn’t work, even if I wasn’t a freak, would it? I’m a Muggle, Hermione! Snape’s as wizardly as you can get. And – well, I think he’s attracted to power. There was Riddle, and Albus. So I’m not really in the picture, am I? There’s too much against it. But anyway, I’ll live. You’ve got to go on living, haven’t you?” and he slid down onto the bed on his side. “Tell me about your life,” he changed the subject, and Hermione knew that was all she’d get from him.

As Hermione left the room half an hour later, she found herself worrying seriously about Harry’s words. In particular, the ‘you’ve got to go on living, haven’t you?’ comment was tumbling round in her head. Because Harry hadn’t sounded very convinced.

“Miss!” The guard who had been in the room was following her down the corridor.

She turned and waited.

The man towered over her, big and masculine with his automatic weapon still in his hand. She looked at him enquiringly.

He shuffled a bit. “Look, Miss, I’m not sure if it’s my place to say this, and I couldn’t hear what you were saying, but Alex was showing you his scars, right?”
“Yes,” Hermione nodded encouragingly.

“I’ve heard the doctors talking about him, and they’re worried about depression and what not.”

Hermione nodded.

“The thing is – has he broken up with that geezer?”

Hermione wondered if she should prevaricate, but there didn’t seem much point. “It looks like it, yes.”

“I – well, I think it may be our fault,” he said sheepishly. “Not that we meant anything by it, but I don’t want him to top himself ‘cos of what – “ he ran his hand over his chin.

“What happened?”

The guard explained about Harry overhearing them discussing the paper and his appearance.

“Yes. Thank you for telling me this. I’m very grateful,” Hermione touched his arm briefly.

“He’s a nice lad even if he is queer,” the guard said carelessly. “Never come on to any of us, or anything. Not even the couple of gays that’ve done duty. No trouble ever, no airs and graces. Hard to believe what they say he’s done.” There was a hint of inquiry in his voice.

Hermione held her head up and tried not to be offended by the man’s prejudice. “He is that hero. I can tell you, you and me, and your family and your girlfriend and your mates – we can all be enjoying our lives because of what he’s done.”

The guard looked at her and nodded. “Yes Ma’am.”

He saluted, and marched back down the corridor.

Hermione wanted to cry.

Draco, Neville, Hermione and Ron met up later. It was getting on for midnight, and Hermione was wrapped in a bathrobe. Ron was pretty sure she was naked underneath, as he saw the long stretch of her leg as she folded them across each other. He felt a heavy moment of loss, and envy, but he had to acknowledge that Hermione had never looked so alive as she had since she had taken up with the unlikely duo.

“Snape’s as tight as a jarvey’s arse,” Draco said, coming in from the shower room bare-chested and rubbing his hair with a towel.

Ron had never seen his hair anything less than perfect. Draco with it spiking all over the place looked weird. And surprisingly human.

“That is a hideous turn of phrase,” Hermione said primly. “How does anyone know how tight –“

“Don’t go there, Hermione, not with Draco,” Neville said with a grin, turning from watering his plants. “What did he say, then? I have to agree, when he came to work on Harry’s magic I don’t think he said five words more than he needed the whole time. And they were ‘Good evening, Headmaster,’” and ‘Good night’, “he added.

“Basically, he told me it was none of my business, and basically none of Harry’s either. And that
Harry wouldn’t care what he did.”

“Harry’s chucked him,” Hermione said, moving back to sit against the headboard, bringing her hands around her knees. She swiftly pulled the robe around her as all three men stared at the legs and shadowy area between exposed as she moved.

“What?” Neville asked.

“Harry dumped him. He’s really depressed. I think he was already feeling low because Severus wasn’t visiting him, and then he saw the pictures of the Italian man.”

“But that’s a load of Prophet cobbler, he knows that!” Ron exploded.

“Apparently the Prophet got it right for once. Snape admitted to Harry he’d slept with the guy at the conference at Christmas.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Yes. And not just Paolo. And then Harry overheard the guards saying how disgusting he looked and nobody could ever fancy him and it was no surprise Snape would look for it elsewhere –”

“You’re having me on!” Ron exclaimed.

Hermione shook her head. “One of the guards came up to me afterwards to tell me. He was worried Harry would top himself.”

“What?! Harry – he wouldn’t!” Ron exclaimed.

“I don’t think he would,” Hermione said quietly, “but I think he’s so depressed because he’s facing up to not only losing Severus, but to never having anyone ever again. He thinks he’s disgusting. And – and he called himself a Muggle.”

There was a prolonged silence as people digested all this.

“But why would he get rid of Snape?” Draco asked. “I don’t think Snape would care too much physically, he’s not exactly a beauty –”

“Every person Snape’s been photographed with has been really good looking,” Hermione commented. “Harry thought Snape had deliberately given him Slytherin hints – not coming very often, having his picture in the paper with beautiful guys.”

Draco had thrown the towel into the bathroom and slipped on a silk pyjama shirt which he left unfastened. He sat himself on the bed next to Hermione. “Actually, that’s a pretty good assessment. It would be a Slytherin way to do it. Then Severus wouldn’t get the rap for dumping the injured hero.”

They all sat there glumly. Neville had deposited his watering can and was sitting on the desk chair. He’d rather be holding Hermione or Draco, but he knew if he climbed on the bed as well Ron would get uncomfortable.

“If that’s the case, why would Snape be all uptight? He could just say that Harry had dumped him,” he said.

“I don’t know what’s best to do, but Harry’s hurting,” Hermione said sadly.
It was a chance encounter that brought things to a head.

Ron was returning from a session with a Hufflepuff girl – he might have slowed down a bit, but he hadn’t given up sex entirely – when he rounded a corner at a fast pace and bumped into Snape. He held the Potions Master upright, and stepped away, smiling his apology. “Sorry, Professor! I didn’t hear you coming.”

“Twenty points for being out after curfew and twenty for not moving about the corridors paying sufficient attention to the welfare of others,” Snape barked.

Ron laughed. “You’re having me on! Good one! God, thank God we’re past all that!”

“Another twenty for your cheek, Mr Weasley.” Severus drew himself up.

Ron straightened. He was as tall as Severus, if not an inch or so taller.

“I thought –“

“You thought what? That you no longer had to behave in this school? That it was no longer my duty to impose discipline?”

“I can’t see why you need to be this unreasonable,” Ron said quietly. “I am an 18 year old man. I think I can take responsibility for finding my way safely around the corridors.”

“I see. As ever, you feel your friendship with the glorious Boy-Who-Lived means you do not have to obey normal school rules.”

“Snape, what is this about?”

“A further ten points. You will address me correctly, Mr Weasley.”

“Very well, then, I will,” Ron snarled. “You are a cruel, heartless, faithless, uncaring bastard, Sir!”

“Fifty points for casting aspersions on a teacher’s character, Mr Weasley.”

“Aspersions? The bloody truth!”

“You have no idea what you are talking about –“

Ron had enough presence of mind to throw up a privacy ward. If he was going to be hung he’d do it big style. He grabbed the front of Snape’s robes and flung him against the wall.

Snape tensed, but then let it happen. He could get the boy off with a wordless spell. But why was the Weasley so wound up?

“No?” Ron gritted in his face. “I don’t know that you’ve cast Harry aside like a dirty shirt? That you think yourself so beautiful that you won’t sully yourself with a scarred person who’s fucking stupid enough to care for you? That you dropped him fucking hints so you wouldn’t have to do your own dirty work? You utter bastard! You’re the fucking hero now and can have any arse you like? Well bully for you! You wanker!”

“For your information,” Snape said silkily, “Mr Potter ended our relationship.”

“Yeah, and you fucking set it up, didn’t you, so that you didn’t have to take the rap!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Snape snapped at last.
“Don’t give me that shit!”

Severus suddenly shoved Ron away.

He was much stronger than he looked, Ron thought, as his feet tangled in themselves. He just kept his balance.

“Come with me,” Snape demanded, striding off.

What now? Ron wondered. He realised he had pinned a teacher against the wall. A trip to Dumbledore and expulsion, quite likely.

But instead, five minutes later he found himself in Snape’s private study.

“Explain.”

“You ditched Harry. Well, maybe it was only meant to be a brief fling for you, but you didn’t have to be so fucking cruel about it.”

“I am not following you. Explain what you mean, and where you got your information.”

Suddenly, Ron wondered if Snape were indifferent after all. He looked at the man, the tension in his shoulders, his posture.

“Tell me this, before I do: do you care for Harry? Because, if not, you’ve humiliated him enough already, and I’m not saying another word.”

Snape shut his eyes briefly, then walked over to the shelves. He took down a bottle of whisky and a glass, poured himself a stiff one and drank it down.

“I’ll have one of those, thanks for offering,” Ron said. He was beginning to feel hopeful.

Snape turned and looked at him. Ron refused to allow the steely glare to put him off.

Snape let out a snort, poured a second glass, and handed it to Ron. Ron had drunk quite a bit of whisky with his brothers, and sipped it appreciatively.

Snape sat down.

“Well?”

“I need your affirmation about whether you care for Harry before I say anything further,” Ron repeated.

Snape looked away.

Ron lost patience, tossed back the drink and stood up. “Thanks for the whisky. I won’t waste any more of your time.”

“I’ve still taken a hundred points –“ Snape stalled.

To his surprise, Ron laughed. “Well, Professor, I hope your mean little heart is very happy.” His hand was on the door handle.

“I thought it was quite evident that I am – fond – of Mr Potter,” he said at last.
Ron turned round and leaned on the door. “Evident to who? Harry? He sees your picture in the paper and you tell him you’ve fucked the other guy while he was dying in agonies thinking he had hurt you? He sees other pictures of you with other beautiful guys – “

“Those were after he had asked me to leave him alone.”

“Right. And why did he do that?”

“I’m too old for him. Too ugly. He no longer needs my assistance. He’s surrounded by virile young men and has realised that there is a whole world of potential partners out there.”

“Really?” Ron’s sneer could rival Severus’ own. “Those same virile young men whom he heard describing him as something out of a horror movie? Who told him someone might shag him because some guys found ugly hideous people an interesting fuck?”

“What?!?” Severus roared, leaping to his feet.

“Harry thought you were being Slytherin in telling him you wanted to part. He didn’t know you’d been hurt and he thought that what with not visiting, and then going to the Ball with that pretty bimbo – I thought he looked like Harry, by the way, was that why you fucked him? – that you were telling him you wanted out?”

“I wanted out?” yelled Severus. “Why the hell would he think that?”

“Because he thinks he is completely disgusting. That’s how he described himself to Mione. That there’s no way you could want him. That you like beautiful young men and he never was and never will be one. On top of that, he thinks he’s going to be a Muggle, and therefore you wouldn’t even consider a relationship purely on that alone.”

“Why should I not consider a relationship with a Muggle?” Severus’ brows drew together.

“Have you ever had one?”

“That is not the point.”

“It is to Harry. You’re sort of an archetypal wizard, aren’t you?”

Severus walked to the shelf and poured himself another glass, then came over and topped Ron up.

“Are you sure about this, Mr Weasley?”

“Are you sure, Snape? Harry’s determined not to be anyone’s pity fuck.”

“God!” Snape ran a shaking hand over his face.

He looked at the clock on his wall. A hand pointed at ‘Too late’. He hoped he was only too late to visit Harry tonight, and not too late to save their relationship.
The next day seemed to go on forever. Severus was grateful that he had only one period in the afternoon. He made his preparations, changed his clothes, and floo-ed to the safe house.

He walked down the corridor to Harry’s room, surprised to see only one guard, sitting on a chair with a book. The man was still aware though, and stood up as he approached.

“Sir!” he saluted.

“Why has security been stepped down?” Severus demanded.

“It hasn’t, Sir. Mr Johnson is in the gym.”

“Which is where?”

A few minutes later Severus was heading down another corridor. He saw the guards outside and nodded, then pushed through the door.

The next few moments happened in a shock of slow/fast motion.

Harry was bent backwards over a pile of mats, a man with a knife at his throat.

Severus performed a wandless *Expelliarmus*, slamming the man away and into a wall, following it up instantly with *Petrificus Totalus*. In a swift and graceful curl he had swung round and petrified the guard at the back of the room who was raising his gun. The two guards outside crashed in at the noise and Severus petrified them too.

“Severus!” Harry screeched, as the ex Death Eater strode over to the first man, murder in his eyes.

“It’s training! He wasn’t going to hurt me!”

Severus halted, looked at the man, and then Harry.

Harry walked over to him, tentatively putting a hand on his arm. “Truly. It was my first hand-to-hand combat session. He’s the instructor.”

Severus reached out a hand, suddenly shaking, and gently turned Harry’s head.

“He hurt you,” he said, noting the tiny red mark where the knife had bitten.

“I’m learning to defend myself,” Harry said, a small smile on his lips.

Harry for once, was dressed only in a singlet and loose shorts. It had been a pleasure to feel air on his skin, and was also aimed at preventing his instructor forgetting his injuries.

Severus stepped close, inhaling the hot, sweaty scent. His head dropped into the curve of Harry’s neck, and he licked at the moisture there.

“Sev’rus?” Harry’s voice shook.

“You’re a bloody idiot,” Snape growled, “and so am I. Tell me you don’t want this,” and he took Harry’s face carefully in his hands and kissed him till Harry was panting and hard and straining so tight against Severus it was as if he was trying to meld their bodies together as they stood.
“How could you think I wouldn’t want you?” Severus whispered against his mouth, his hands still cupping Harry’s head.

You can’t,” Harry said, tears forming in his eyes, Severus’ hands preventing him from brushing them away. “I’m hideous. I don’t need your pity.”

Snape thrust against him. “Does this feel like pity?” he hissed.

Harry couldn’t help the moan that bubbled in his throat, the movement of his hips thrusting back. It had been so long. He thought he’d never have this again.

“You can’t,” he repeated.

Severus’ hand swept down his back, cupping Harry’s arse and pulling him against him, even as he turned the smaller body slightly so that Harry’s burnt side had no pressure. “I’m going to show you just how much I want you,” he whispered. “I am going to pull those shorts down and I am going to suck your beautiful cock right down my throat and suck your brains out. Then I’m going to fuck your wonderful arse like I should have done months ago, until you know just how much I want you.”

“Oh God,” Harry moaned, “I think I might come just thinking about it!”

“Well, you’re going to come and come and come again, so start when you like,” Severus bit gently at the edge of his mouth, a smile in his husky voice.

A tiny noise to one side made Harry turn.

“Oh god! All the guards! They can hear every word!”

“Good. I want everyone to know you’re mine.”

“Severus!” Harry laughed, red-faced, pulling back. “Now you’ve got some explaining to do,” he grinned, looking at the men.

“You’d better help me out with the explanations,” Severus looked seriously at Harry.

He released the spells on the men.

“Holy fuck! What did you do to us!”

“It’s the new weapon, isn’t it Severus?” Harry said calmly.

“Yes,” Severus agreed, following the lead.

“It works really well. Sorry, guys, that Severus used it on you. He thought you were hurting me.”

“Which is unacceptable,” growled Snape.

“What the hell is it? What did you do? “asked the trainer.

“Are you alright, Sir?” Harry said worriedly.

“Fine! Tell me what you did?”

“It’s sort of classified.”
“Yeah, no shit! When are we getting it?”

“It’s still on trial,” Severus said smoothly.

“What the fuck did you do?” one of the others asked again. “You don’t even have a weapon.”

“It’s been implanted,” Harry said, deciding he’d been reading way too much science fiction since he’d been in hospital. “It responds to Severus’ thought waves.”

“Fucking hell!”

You made it chuck Sarge across the room, and then froze the rest of us? What else can it do?”

“Shit, that felt weird! Like I could see and hear, but not move anything? That’s scary, man.”

“Useful when you want to take someone prisoner, to get information,” Harry suggested.

“Damn, but it gives me the creeps. Is the implant in your brain? You agreed to have it done?”

“This is classified,” Harry said again. “If you want to know you have to let the Professor hypnotise you to stop you telling anyone.”

“You can do that?”

“He can,” Harry said firmly.

“Alex, a word,” Snape said, leading him across the room.

“Hypnotise them?” Snape asked.

“Use Legilimens on me, and you’ll see what I did to stop anyone talking outside of the Remedial Magic class. It was wandless and wordless.”

“Why don’t I just obliviate them?”

“I hate tampering with people’s memories,” Harry shrugged. “Seems unfair. They were only doing their jobs, and the Sarge will have bruises and wonder how he got them if you do that. But it’s your call.”

Severus looked at Harry.

Then went back and obliviated them all.

“Right, er, good. Well done, Alex,” the trainer said.

“I’m very impressed with how he’s doing,” Severus shook the man’s hand.

“Er, yes. Thank you, Sir.” He turned and looked at the guards. “What are you lot doing in here? It’s not a circus act, you know! Get back to your posts!”

“Yessir!” Two guards left at once.

The trainer left with a confused nod.

Harry walked across to the mats, picking up a towel to wipe the stale sweat from his face. “Why did you do that?” he said in disappointment.
“You gave me the choice,” Severus reminded him.

Harry nodded.

Severus stood close. “I thought you were embarrassed about them seeing us - overhearing us?”

Harry looked up quickly. “Oh! Oh yes! They – you got rid of that memory too?”

Severus nodded.

“Oh, good.” Harry said with relief.

Severus grinned wickedly. “I also made a little _suggestion_ to them – that they don’t enter this room for at least a couple of hours.”

“A – a couple of hours?” Harry gulped.

“Mmmm. I’ve got a lot of promises to keep.”

“Oh God,” Harry’s heart was thumping and his shorts were tenting again. Holding on to common sense by a fraction, he looked across at the remaining guard. “What about him?”

Severus looked around and strode across the room. The man, who was still trying to fathom if he had dozed off for a minute, because he couldn’t recall the exact moment the Professor had arrived and surely he should, stood to attention.

“Sir!”

Snape regarded the man. “You’ve been with Alex a lot.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You know I’m his partner.”

Yes, Sir,” the guard answered, wondering where this was going.

“He’s been in here three months or so.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Depressed recently.”

“That’s not my area –“

“No sex for three months. How would you feel?”

The guard’s eyes darted to his and away again.

“Uh –“

Snape leant in close, whispering in his ear. “He’s not going to be depressed any longer. I’m taking his treatment in hand.”

“Sir?” the man said shakily.

“You need it spelt out? I’m going to fuck his brains out. Now, you can stay here and watch, or you can go and play cards with your mates outside. Personally, I don’t think they pay you enough for
you to have to watch if it’s not your cup of tea. But maybe it is. I’m going to do it whether you’re here or not. You’re here to protect him, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” the man said, voice strangled.

“I can protect him.”

Snape held out a pack of cards. “The choice is yours. Either way, tell them outside no-one is to come in for two hours. Understood?”

Yes, Sir,” the guard gulped. He stood there dithering. He looked at the pack of cards that Snape had transfigured. They had a distraction spell on them too, though the man wouldn’t know that. Snape started stripping off his jacket as he walked across the room.

The soldier grasped the cards, and left.

One hour fifty minutes later Snape lay next to Harry on the stack of mats, carefully wiping the sweat and other bodily fluids from his lover with a dampened towel.

“All right?” he asked smugly.

Harry turned his head, his breath still heaving.

His smile was dizzying. “You know I am. That was – wow.”

It had been wow. Severus had the image of Harry, arms spread out, clinging on to the climbing bars, as he held him up and drove into him over an over, imprinted on his brain. He knew he would be seeing it regularly in the lonely nights whilst they were parted.

“Are you sore?” he asked gently. He had brewed a special lubricant months ago, that was particularly slippery and contained muscle relaxants, for the time when he and Harry finally overcame their anxieties following what he had done to Harry. Severus had realised that it didn’t have a magical component, and should be fine. In the light of Harry’s other injuries, he didn’t want to forget the damage that he had previously done, but somehow, there was no doubt that they both wanted everything, needed everything, and his cautious care had been part of the larger parcel of making sure that he didn’t hurt any of Harry’s injuries, didn’t rub new skin or cause pain. It had been surprisingly easy to overcome the worries, surprisingly easy to express everything they felt for each other.

“Aching,” Harry said honestly. “In a good way,” he grinned. He lay completely flat. “I don’t think I can move a muscle.”

“Well, we have five minutes –“

“Not long enough,” Harry said.

“Insatiable boy,” Severus smiled down at him. “I was going to say to get you dressed and decent before they come in.”

“Oh, good,” Harry mumbled.

“Have I worn you out?” Severus teased, delighted.

“I think you could say so.” Harry touched Severus’ face gently. “You alright?” he asked, his eyes
dark and warm.

“More than,” Severus said huskily.

He slipped off the mat and quickly dressed; Harry lay flat out all the while, and with a grin Severus lifted Harry’s hips enough to slip the shorts back on him. “Want the vest, or have you another top?”

“I need a shower, just haven’t the strength,” Harry grinned.

Severus pulled him to his feet and eased the vest over his head. “You’ve got full use of your arm?”

Harry nodded. “Just the burns on the other side pulling restrict movement a bit. Apart from looking yuck, of course.”

“I understand it matters to you, but it doesn’t to me,” Severus said quietly, hands loosely on Harry’s hips. “Yes?”

Harry looked at him and dipped his head, resting his forehead on Severus’ chest.

Severus gave an outrageous sigh. “I suppose I’ll just have to prove it again....”

Harry sniggered.

“Come again,” he said.

“Oh certainly,” Severus said throatily.

Harry laughed, and swatted his arm. “You know what I mean. I know you’re busy. I just miss seeing you. And all the rest,” he grinned, as Severus was about to interject another comment.

There was a knock on the door. Severus stepped away, and a guard peeped in. Harry, leaning back against the mats, noticed the man’s eyes did a quick glance and then peeled away.

“Uh, there’s a class just arriving to use the room, Sir,” he mumbled.

“Certainly,” Snape said, giving a glance at Harry as he pulled on his jacket.

Harry took three steps before his legs gave way. Severus grabbed for him, but not before Harry’s knees hit the floor.

The guard shouted for the others as he rushed forward.

Harry leant his head against Severus’ shoulder as Severus knelt on the floor propping him up.

“Harry?” Severus’ voice was alight with anxiety.


“Certainly,” Snape said, giving a glance at Harry as he pulled on his jacket.

Harry took three steps before his legs gave way. Severus grabbed for him, but not before Harry’s knees hit the floor.

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“Harry?” Severus’ voice was alight with anxiety.


Severus held on to him, whilst the guards rushed in and looked on, guns dropping slightly as they assessed that there was no immediate danger.

“Right,” one said decisively, ”get two of the lads out there to get the stretcher, Hunter.”

“I don’t need –“ Harry began.

“Right,” the guard said. “Stand up, then, soldier.”
Harry forced himself to his feet. Somehow it was worse than before and his vision began to dim.

Severus and the guard caught him.

“Lay him down, recovery position,” the guard was saying, carefully helping Harry down to the floor.

“’m okay,” Harry was mumbling, even as he slipped back down. “Don’t need recovery. Just give me a sec.”

The guard allowed him to lie on his back, kneeling beside Harry.

Harry’s vision was returning and he could see the worry in Severus’ face.

“Sorry to be such a twit,” he muttered. “Stupid fuss.”

“Yeah, well,” the soldier growled, “the Prof can take the blame. Shagged the legs off you, eh?”

Harry and Severus’ heads snapped to look at him.

“That door ain’t soundproof, you know,” the guard said.

“Oh god,” Harry groaned, slipping his arm over his eyes, even though it seemed an incredible effort. “They all know?”

“Well, the queue’s only just arrived, but the three of us have had to listen to you enjoying yourself, mate. And you certainly did, didn’t ya? Didn’t know old guys had such stamina,” he said in amusement, looking at Severus.

“Oh god,” Harry said again.

“Yeah, you said that plenty of times already,” the guard said cheerfully.

Harry peeped between his fingers, to see the guard grinning widely.

To Harry’s horrified embarrassment, the door burst open and two doctors and two nurses shot in, followed by two soldiers pushing a trolley.

“Well, you’re conscious,” said the first doctor, whilst the other was busy taking his pulse and another shoving a temperature reader in his ear. “What’s happened, then? Can you tell me where you’re hurt? Where’s your trainer? I want to know exactly what you were doing.”

Harry’s eyes met Severus’, and even the older man had a red tinge to his cheek.

“I’m fine,” Harry said meekly, trying to sit up, only to be told firmly to lie still.

The doctor was examining his burns and wounds.

“Honestly,” Harry said, exasperated and flushed, ”there’s nothing wrong.”

“I think it might be overexertion, Ma’am,” the guard offered, smirking.

“Overexertion? I told you you were pushing yourself too hard,” the doctor said strictly to Harry. “Where is that trainer? We are going to have words!”

“It’s not his fault,” Harry interrupted. “The Professor arrived and – and –”
“Alex wanted to show me a few moves,” Severus said smoothly.

The guard snorted, and grinned at Harry over the doctor’s back.

“Well you should know better!” the doctor said severely to Severus.

“Yes, Madam, you are of course right,” Severus bowed to the woman slickly.

Harry’s blood pressure had been taken.

“Did you get plenty of fluids whilst you exercised?” the other doctor asked.

Severus choked. “Not enough, I suspect,” he responded.

One of the nurses brought over Harry’s water bottle, and he was helped to sit up whilst he drank.

“I can walk back now,” he said, although truthfully he still felt exhausted. Who knew sex was so tiring?

“You will not,” the doctor said. She motioned over to the soldiers who had brought in the trolley, and with the nurses they lifted Harry smoothly onto it. A blanket was placed over him.

Harry lay back.

“You need to go,” he said to Severus regretfully.

“Yes, I’m fine,” Harry assured him. “Best day since before – “ he grinned.

“Indeed. I will come back as soon as I can. No more nonsense, hmm?”

Harry gripped his hand. “Read me,” he said quickly.

Severus looked at Harry, and ignoring the waiting people, performed a silent Legilimens.

He was bombarded with emotion, rather than images.

And they were Harry’s feelings. Relief, that Snape had come back, that Snape wanted him. Delight. Joy. Satisfaction. Happiness.

And love.

Harry was baring his heart.

Severus took a deep breath. He felt he needed to swell his chest to hold all that feeling.

He slipped back out and looked at Harry.

“It is as if I am looking in the Mirror of Erised,” he said, gripping Harry’s hand tight. “We walk the same path.”

Harry’s face lit up, and Severus knew that however much he would recall the memories of Harry in passion, the look on his face then would be etched in his heart forever.
Harry was so far gone on joy and exhaustion that he barely noticed, let alone cared, about the stares of the soldiers queuing outside as he was wheeled past.

Hermione’s parents hadn’t seen her for so long that they asked if she was able to come home for a visit, now that the war was over.

Hermione wanted to see them.

She wondered how Draco and Neville would get on without her. It was going to be difficult to do, to leave them; there was the fear, however much she might discount it, that they could manage without her – that they would find they preferred to be without her.

But one of them was going to have to do this sometime, to go away, to let the other two function without them – without that trust, it would be a pointless and painful relationship. It was best to look to the bright side - if one was away, the others would not be lonely, would have the comfort of each other. Ron had needed other women, but she sensed that Neville and Draco would be happy with each other, not need others outside of their threesome. That had to be better. And if they enjoyed exploring their relationship without her, then maybe when she returned it would benefit them all; at the least, maybe they would be glad to see her.

So she had gone.

Neville had sent a plant for her mother.

Hermione hadn’t decided whether to tell her parents about her unusual relationship or not. They were quite liberal in their views, but it had to be a fair shocker to know your daughter away at boarding school was not only involved in real battles where people got killed, but spent every night in bed with two men.

The thing was, Hermione was pretty sure she’d be happy to be with these same two in fifty years time, and so she wondered whether it might be a good idea to introduce the idea to her parents now. On the other hand, if the big scheme of things panned out, there was no hurry.

Having said that, she wanted her parents to meet the men who were so important to her, and Draco and Neville, both purebloods, to meet them, and to see a little bit of life in the Muggle world. She was sure Draco would love computers!

On the third evening, Hermione had gone to meet some old friends from her primary school days, enjoying a couple of glasses of wine and pleasant chat. It was harder than ever to feel anything in common with these old friends, although the pull of their shared pasts were still there – it was just that Hermione couldn’t share her present or her future with them, and there seemed little point in continuing the contact.

She returned home feeling both a little low at the closure of a door, and yet confirmed in her commitment to the wizarding world.

The next morning they set out for a walk. There were rhododendrons in bloom, and the sun was warm despite the coldness of the wind. They’d headed up into the hills, along a footpath they’d walked many times in Hermione’s childhood.

“It’s a pity you’re going back tomorrow,” her father sighed.

Hermione took his arm and smiled at him. “I’ll be back again,” she promised.
There was a moment’s silence, and then her father said, gruffly, “Well, you can bring your young man with you next time.”

“Pardon?” Hermione said, turning to look at her father even as they continued walking.

“There is someone, isn’t there, love?” her mother asked.

“Why do you think that?” Hermione asked, stepping over a fallen log.

“You keep drifting off every now and then. It’s not like you,” her father said.

Oh. Hermione knew she had done so – that her thoughts had kept turning to her men, wondering what they were doing, whether they missed her as she was missing them. She had been surprised at the fierceness of her feelings.

“Sorry,” she said, giving her father’s arm a squeeze.

“No need to be sorry,” he patted her hand, “it’s just –” he glanced at her mother –

“What?” Hermione asked.

“What?”

“Well, Mione,” her Mum said, “you told us about Ron, but you haven’t mentioned this chap at all. Is there some reason you think we won’t like him? We were wondering if he was one of those anti-Muggle lot. That maybe you’d fallen for the enemy, or something. It does happen.”

“Oh, lord,” Hermione groaned. “Have you been worrying about this?”

The silence was her answer.

“You shouldn’t,” she said. “I’m grown up now.”

“Well, we know that, but we’ve plenty of friends that tell us we’ll still be worrying about you when we’re collecting our pensions and you’re a middle-aged fusspot like we are.”

Hermione chuckled, then sobered. She was silent.

“You can tell us anything. I think,” her Dad said. “We may not like it, but we’ll always try to understand, love. We know you’re in a different world. You’re not carrying, are you?”

“Carrying?” Hermione had thoughts of drug mules that she’d read of in the paper the day before.

“He means pregnant,” her Mum said in gentle exasperation.

“No! Of course not!”

“No of course not about it, if you’re sleeping with the guy. I expect potions and spells must occasionally fail just like our methods. Or have you taken up with a gir -woman?”

“Mum!” Hermione laughed.

“Well, we’re trying to be open-minded here.”

“And your mother wouldn’t let me get to sleep last night guessing why you wouldn’t say
“anything.”

They’d reached a bench overlooking the sweep of the town in the valley below, and sat down. Mr Granger pulled some chocolate from his pocket.

“Better than chewy sweets,” he smiled as he snapped a bit off.

“And I’ve got some sugar-free gum for afters,” her mother said.

Hermione enjoyed the sensuous slide of the chocolate over her tongue.

“The thing is – well, I think you might be shocked.”

“Is it a fleeting fling? Something we would never have known about if you hadn’t come home?” her Dad asked.

“No,” Hermione said firmly. “I very much hope not. I’ve just been wondering whether to say anything.”

“Well, get it off your chest,” her father said breezily. He rummaged in his backpack that was now at his knees, and poured them all a cup of hot tea from the Thermos he produced.

Hermione coddled the plastic cup in her hands.

“Well, there’s lots of bits to worry you,” she admitted, “but the thing is, I’ve never been happier in my life.”

“That’s a good start, then,” said her mother. “Stop keeping us in the dark, Hermione. It’s not a girl so it must be a man. It’s not a teacher, is it?”

“No,” Hermione laughed. “There’s Neville. And Draco. They’re both my age.”

She held her breath.

“You’re seeing two men?” her mother said.

Hermione nodded.

“Oh,” her father said. He sipped his tea. “I admit to being surprised. I thought you had quite a strong sense of fairness. Well, you told me I wouldn’t like it.”

Hermione looked at him. “Fairness?”

“It’s a bit cruel, love. Playing one off against the other. Can’t you make up your mind?”

“Oh! No! I –” she blushed.

They were both looking at her.

She pulled herself up, and took the plunge. “I didn’t explain very well. They both know.”

“Oh. Right. And they don’t mind? That you see the other one?”

Bright red now, Hermione said, “The thing is, Dad, I’m seeing both of them. At the same time. All three of us are seeing each other. We get on really well.”

Hermione took a big drink of tea in the ensuing silence.
“Like with Harry and Ron? Before you went out with Ron?” her father asked, though he sounded as if he wasn’t expecting a positive answer.

“No, not like with Harry and Ron, Dad,” she said gently.

“Are you saying you sleep with both of them?” her mother asked.

Holding her head up, Hermione nodded. “Yes, but it’s more than just sex,” she said, blushing.

“Do you – love them?”

“Certainly heading that way,” Hermione gave a shy smile. “I was thinking that I hope we’ll all be together in fifty years. And longer. I’m very happy with them, Mum.”

Her father stared ahead at the view.

“Dad?”

“Hmm? Oh, taking it in. Is it – is it a common arrangement in your world?” he asked tentatively.

“I don’t know about common. Professor Dumbledore was in a threesome for fifty years, apparently.”

“Oh. So it’s respectable then?”

“Would it matter if it wasn’t?”

“Just make your life harder, I was thinking. You already have people prejudiced because of us. Are they like you?”

“We’re all very different,” Hermione smiled. “Neville and Draco are both purebloods, so I’d really like them to meet you, to see what a happy childhood I had growing up Muggle.”

Her Mum gave her a quick smile of thanks.

“Neville – you’ll have heard me talk about him – he’s a Gryffindor, same as me. His parents are both in hospital – they were tortured when he was a baby and basically they’re vegetables, and Neville was brought up by his Gran.”

“Poor lad!” Mrs Granger said. “Do they hope to find a cure?”

“I think Neville knows the possibility is infinitesimal, but there’s always hope,” she nodded.

“And Draco?”

“Draco’s family – well, his father – was a follower of Voldemort. He’s gone on the run. His mother came after the battle but she’s gone off to South America to start a new life. His father is a really nasty piece of work – powerful, rich, no morals. We met him in Flourish and Blotts, years back, remember? Long blond hair and sneer? He’s probably setting up a new anti-Muggle organisation as we speak,” Hermione said bitterly.

“So their families are from opposing sides,” her father commented.

Hermione nodded. “And I’m in the middle – the sort they were fighting about. But we’re all on the same side.”
Mr Granger poured the last of the tea into their cups. “It must have been hard for Draco to go against his family. Were you together then? Was that a factor?” he asked curiously.

Hermione shook her head. “He found out he was a Healer – that’s a really powerful wizard that does what it says on the tin, you know?” she grinned. “They have to treat everyone, regardless. So the old philosophy was irrelevant. And there have been so many things to show him that the beliefs in pureblood supremacy were rubbish. Anyway, we’ve obviously known each other since the start of Hogwarts, but we were working together all this year and it sort of came out of that.”

“How’s Ron taken it?” Mrs Granger asked, stretching her legs out.

“He’s getting used to it,” Hermione smiled.

“Does everyone know?” Mr Granger asked.

“Surprisingly few, I should think,” Hermione answered. “We don’t hide it, but we don’t flaunt it. People just assume we’re friends.” She looked at her father. “Does it bother you? That people should know?”

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “I suppose every father worries about his daughter being thought –“ he hesitated.

“Easy? A trollop?”

“You know what I mean,” he shrugged.

“I know,” she patted his back. “To be honest, I don’t think most people see beyond the brainbox image to even think I know about sex, let alone do it, Dad.”

“Well, I hope you don’t forget you’re a woman, as well as a clever girl,” her mother said firmly, making both their heads whip round.

“Mum!”

“What? We’re shopping tomorrow, love, for some feminine goodies. Two men to keep happy? Every excuse for a nice bit of lingerie!”

“Joan!”

“Mum!”

“Hush you, Rob, I might get something for myself too!”

“Mum!”

“What? I’m not allowed sex? Or witches only wear clumpy boots and old fashioned long drawers?” Hermione giggled.

“What?”

“Traditionally, wizards wear nothing under their robes.”

“Really? I’ll never be able to look Mr Weasley in the face again,” Mr Granger said, looking horrified.
“Well don’t look anywhere else, dear,” Joan sniggered.

“Mum!” Hermione exclaimed again, outraged and amused.

“What? The wizarding world is fascinating! So what do your boys wear, love?”

“Mum, don’t go there! Students always wear clothes.”

“Very proper! But there’s always room for some nice undies, isn’t there?”

“For Neville and Draco?” Hermione squeaked.

“For you to wear for them,” her Mother whispered. “And yourself, of course.”

They stood up and Hermione thought the embarrassment was over – although, frankly, the idea of surprising the boys with some saucy underwear was definitely a good one – when her mother, now in full sail, said, “So, Hermione, when you say a threesome, is it – that is, are you the pivot, so to speak? Both boys and you? Or do the boys - ?” she paused delicately.

“Joan! You can’t ask that!”

“Do each other?” giggled Hermione.

Joan nodded conspiratorially.

“Oh yes.”

“When you’re there?”

“Joan!”

Hermione nodded.

“Oh my!” Joan fanned herself. Hermione’s giggles filled the air, along with Rob’s mumbled, “Don’t you go getting ideas, alright? God, she’s a handful!”

Both women were chuckling for the next twenty minutes.

As they came down the hill again, clearing the trees, Hermione’s eyes became riveted on the vista below.

Her father looked at her and smiled. “You always liked to play in that playground after we did this walk when you were little,” he said.

“Centrifugal force,” Hermione breathed, her eyes fixed on the roundabout.

“What’s that?”

“A centrifuge. Mum, Dad, where would the biggest one be? A research facility? Hospital?”

“We could look it up on the internet,” her mother suggested. “What do you need one for?”

“We can ask the Prime Minister’s office,” Hermione said to herself. “I’m sure they’ll arrange it.”

Her parents looked at each other over her head, raised their eyebrows, and accepted that their daughter really did have a rather interesting life.
Hermione fire-called the Headmaster that evening, outlining her idea. She had debated going straight back, but felt that the call served the purpose, and she was rather keen to go shopping with her mother.

She returned the next morning at breakfast time, the first day of classes, slipping onto the bench next to Neville. Draco, she noted, was sitting with Crabbe and Goyle. He often did, though there was much more mixing of houses than before.

“Hi,” she brushed her hand against Neville’s on the bench.

Neville gave her a dazzlingly warm smile back, making her feel sure all was well.

“Everything ok? Had a good time?” she asked, her breast pressing briefly against his arm as she reached over him for the marmalade. She felt his shudder of awareness and smiled to herself.

“Yes, and yes,” he said, voice deep. “But even better now you’re back,” he whispered into her ear. “We missed you.”

“Me too,” she brushed a hand briefly against his thigh as she adjusted her napkin. She looked across to the Slytherin table and smiled at Draco.

“How’s your parents?” Ron asked, munching through a full fried breakfast on the other side of the table.

“Fine. Fine with everything,” she looked meaningfully at Neville.

“Really?”

“Yup. Mum loved the plant. Wants to meet you.”

“And -?”

“Oh yes, him too,” she said quietly.

“They’re not upset?”

“Mum’s intrigued, Dad’s hoping I’m not a tart.”

“Oh, Mione –“

“He’ll be fine. Did the Headmaster talk to you?”

“Yes. I don’t understand really, but Snape seemed to think it was a brilliant idea. We’re waiting to hear from the Muggle Ministry.”

“Good.”

Someone else sat down on the bench and Hermione allowed herself to be pushed closer to Neville than was strictly necessary. They both relished the contact all along the line of thigh, hip and side.

“You’ve got something in your pocket digging in,” Neville said after a moment.
“Thought the girls said that to the boys,” Ron grinned from across the table. “Hey! Ginny! Tell those two kids to shove down a bit! People are getting squashed up here!”

“Spoilsport,” Hermione flashed a grin at Ron across the table when the others weren’t looking.

“What? Hey! Did that in good faith!”

“What is that thing?” Neville said quietly, his hand touching Hermione’s thigh briefly.


“Und – Hermione!” He leapt up to follow her. He leaned in even as they were walking down the rows between the benches. “You’re not – you’re not wearing – stockings?” he growled into her ear.

“Might be,” she said, looking ahead.

“Oh god,” Neville groaned. He looked down at her feet. She was wearing neat shoes with a small heel, and he could see black delicate – “Oh god, you are,” he groaned again.

They passed through the main doors, to find Draco waiting nonchalantly across the hall, leaning casually against one of the arched columns, taking to Greg and Vince. He had Arithmancy with Hermione, whilst Neville had Care of Magical Creatures, which he had continued to take, one of the few in the class, although Greg and Vince were also participants.

Draco gave Hermione a lazy smile, then glanced at Neville. He straightened. “Neville? You alright?” he said fiercely, coming over.

“No,” Neville moaned.

“Have you eaten something? You were alright an hour ago,” he said worriedly.

“That was before I discovered that she’s wearing stockings. Black stockings,” Neville gulped.

Draco’s eyes shot down to Hermione’s feet, taking in the fine hose. In one move he’d swept Hermione and Neville behind the column. “Keep watch,” he said briefly to Greg and Vince.

“Sure,” Vince chuckled.

Draco pressed into Hermione, Neville a solid wall behind her. “May I?” he asked huskily, and lifted the hem of her robe.

“It’s for later,” she grinned.

“After teasing us all day?” Draco growled, as his hand began to slide up the silky fabric, over her thigh.

“Alright?” Neville asked, not to miss out. His hand was tracking up her other leg.

They both reached the stocking tops and moaned.

“God, that’s hot,” Draco said, pressing into her. “A quick kiss?” and his mouth was on hers. Tongues touched, then Neville’s mouth was there too.

A hand slid over her breast, over her robe. Hermione’s nipple hardened instantly.

“This new too?” Neville asked, his hand sliding again over the round swell.
“New undies,” Hermione gasped.

“No knickers?” Draco’s voice was shocked as his hand moved to the curve of her buttock, and found nothing.

“I’m not Pansy,” Hermione chided in amusement. “I’m wearing a thong.”

“I’m going to be hard all day,” Draco gritted. “You must have a free period? Lunch time? I want to see what you look like so bad,” his hips were undulating against her, pushing her back against Neville, who was doing pretty much the same thing in reverse.

“Oh Merlin,” Neville gasped. “The feel is wonderful, hadn’t got as far as thinking about how incredible you’ll look.”

Hermione, in no doubts about the boys’ interest, was very pleased indeed that she’d bought the treat for them all. Several varieties, in fact.

“People coming,” Greg said apologetically.

Carefully, Draco and Neville dropped Hermione’s robe into place, smoothing it down to get a last feel.

“Welcome home,” Neville said.

Draco stepped back and kissed Hermione’s hand in an intimate, rather than formal gesture. “He speaks for us both,” he said, lips against her fingers. “We’ll be sure to make you know how very welcome later.”

Hermione slid her free hand into Neville’s and squeezed it.

Yes, home was with these men.
New Threats

Hermione’s centrifugal force idea had provoked a lot of interest; Severus had even smiled warmly at her and thanked her, once he understood the principles involved. It had been decided that to create such a force with magic, whilst possible, might have unexpected entanglements with Harry’s own magic, and so the assistance of the Muggle government was sought, as Hermione had initially suggested.

There was a lot of technical discussion that even Hermione had to concede was way beyond her comprehension, though it was very interesting. She’d had no idea when she had made her suggestion that centrifuges had become important elements in nuclear power production, and there had been grave concern about their interest in them. Finally, the Prime Minister himself had been briefed, and had given his approval with the proviso that they were accompanied by a team of inspectors. Hermione realised once again the gap between her worlds. Because the Muggles didn’t seem to even consider that the inspectors were pointless when the wizards could obliviate them. Nevertheless, she had accompanied Snape, Neville, Bill and Shacklebolt when they had taken the bin full of Harry’s magic to the secret research station where the centrifuge was housed. They all had to sign the Official Secrets Act, which again, was rather amusing in the circumstances.

“But how does it stop you telling?” Bill asked her afterwards, as they walked down a long blank corridor, trundling the bin with Harry’s magic in it on a porter’s trolley behind them.

“It doesn’t.”

“What? Then why do you do it?”

“You can be prosecuted—go to prison—if you break faith with the agreement,” she explained.

Bill waited for her to say more.

“That’s it?” he said, incredulous, at last. “You can say what you like, just get your knuckles rapped after the damage is done?”

“That’s about it, yup.”

“But—I don’t understand.”

“Taking an oath, or giving your word, is considered important in the Muggle world,” Hermione tried to explain. “Although, unfortunately,” she admitted, as Bill opened his mouth, ”the people likely not to care are the ones who are most likely to abuse it.”

“Well shit! I would have thought that didn’t need brains to realise.”

Hermione laughed.

“Without magic to enforce it, what would you do?” she asked with interest. ”Muggles in England often use an oath with a religious base too, although that isn’t valid for a lot of people these days.”

Bill shook his head, but they had arrived at the laboratory, and were shown the centrifuge and the other equipment in the facility by two scientists.

“We’ll need them to help,” Severus said to Shacklebolt, after staring at the set up. “I’m not going to risk doing this wrong.”
Shacklebolt nodded agreement. The equipment was so far out of his scheme of reference that he itched to get out of there.

They were amused to be handed lab coats, although Severus seemed to approve the precaution. The scientists were asked to keep away from the material they were about to unload.

Carefully, the scientists staring in awe, they removed the magic and its entangling curses from the bin, floating it in the air between them. It writhed and twisted, startling colour and evil intent all evident.

“What in hell is that?” one of the scientists breathed.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” the other exclaimed, scurrying round to see it from all angles. “Some form of gas – but how are you containing it and manipulating it? And what’s all that black stuff? Jesus, it gives me the creeps! It looks malevolent!”

“Indeed,” Snape said non-commitally. “We need to be able to remove the black from the core. Will this machine be able to do that?”

“Possibly,” the other man nodded. “It should certainly be able to loosen it up. What do you plan to do with each part?”

Severus and Neville looked at each other. “If you can assist in the separation, we can deal with that,” Neville said with quiet authority.

“Let me put it this way, then,” the other asked, “does it matter if the black stuff or the red stuff gets damaged? And if so, which?”

“May we place this in the container?” Severus said, gritting his teeth, “it is not easy to maintain it in this position”.

“The black stuff,” Hermione explained, as Neville and Severus manipulated the mass into the centrifuge, “is highly toxic. Worse. Don’t touch it, sniff it, let it get in contact with anything. Once it’s separated, we need to contain it, but that we can deal with, you need have no worries.”

“Damage to the equipment?” the man said anxiously.

“We will ensure there is none,” Hermione said. “You need have no fear on that score. It is only dangerous in contact with living material.”

The scientists nodded. “And the red?”

“Is more precious than I could ever explain,” Severus interjected, as the last of the magic slipped into the container.

“We need to keep it whole, just extract the black,” Hermione explained.

“Better not set the speed too high, then, and see how it goes,” the scientists nodded.

Neville suddenly jerked. He looked up, eyes wide.

“Neville?” Hermione asked quickly.

His eyes met hers, fear in them. “It’s Draco.” And he was gone with a clap and wash of displaced air.
“What the -?” the scientists stared in amazement at the blank space where the young man had been standing.

“Does he have a telepathic link with Draco?” Snape said sharply.

“Not that I knew of,” Hermione said. What was happening? If Draco was in trouble, how did Neville know? How come she didn’t? And why hadn’t Neville taken her?

Neville landed in Diagon Alley, wand drawn, to the sounds of a woman sobbing and begging, a crowd of silent onlookers, Draco, pinned around the neck by a man with a wand at his throat, and a second man who had a silent and terrified child in his arms, wand pointed directly under her chin.

“Don’t hurt her,” the woman was sobbing, “please, please don’t hurt her! Take me instead. Please!”

The man holding Draco had a split lip. Draco had a grazed cheek.

“See? You come without any more fuss and the little witch goes free.”

“Let her go now,” Draco gritted.

“Well, we need a bit of insurance, don’t we?” the man said. “We’ll drop her back once we’ve delivered you to your father. I’m sure he’ll be delighted to see the traitor to the cause. To his blood. To his family,” the man hissed in his ear.

Neville could see Draco’s eyes moving, assessing everything, and he moved slightly, just enough for Draco to see him. He saw the relief register briefly on Draco’s face, then the slight shift of gaze that told Neville to take care of the man with the child. Neville nodded.

“I don’t think I want to see my father,” Draco drawled. “We have nothing in common apart from a name famous for corruption. I have every intention of changing that.”

“Really?” laughed the man, hot breath fanning his neck. “I think your father will have other ideas. And he’ll be so pleased with us.” He began pulling Draco along, the other villain with the child doing the same.

Neville’s brain was working at super-speed; why hadn’t they apparated with Draco? The idea came to him fast – Lucius Malfoy was too far away for them to manage. Were they trying to get to a floo? With all these people to see where they went, attracting more and more attention? It became clear that this was opportunistic – he had no idea why Draco was here, but if he hadn’t known where Draco was going to be today these men sure as hell wouldn’t have had any advance warning either.

It was only afterwards that Neville realised the extent of his trust in Draco – he never for one minute imagined that Draco might have arranged to meet with his father’s allies or was a spy for his father.

Draco planted his feet, despite the tightening hand around his neck. His face was a shade of red that really didn’t suit him, but then strangulation really didn’t suit anyone.

The mother was still sobbing and the crowd were shouting, but the guy with the child had his wand well placed, and from the twitching of the girl’s fingers Neville realised that the _Petrificus Totalus_ that the man had obviously already cast on her was wearing off.
Several things happened at once. There were the cracks of several apparitions. Neville saw Aurors’ robes out of the corner of his eye. The spell lost hold and the child struggled. The men panicked.

“Kill them and go!” the man holding Draco screamed.

Neville did something he had never done before, never tried before, just running on his gut instinct, gut need. He cast a wordless, wandless *Avada Kedavra* at both attackers at once, not pointing at them, but focusing the spell in his mind at the image of the two men.

He felt the huge pull of magic, heard the screams and commotion, and then his sight was dimming and the world went black.

He came around aware of crisp sheets and the smell of antiseptic potions. He blinked his eyes open, and shut them again quickly as the light assaulted his eyeballs.

“Neville!”

“Hey, love!”

Two voices, familiar and dear, seeped into his chest and warmed the coldness he felt. He could feel each of his hands squeezed. He cracked his eyes open again, and saw Draco’s face hovering above him.

“I’d think I was in heaven if it wasn’t for the smell,” he muttered.

“I’m your dream of a heavenly being, am I?” Draco teased, voice only gently mocking.

“I’ll get those ethereal looks,” Neville nodded. “God, my head hurts,” he groaned.

“I’ll get Madam Pomfrey,” another, deeper male voice said. Neville moved his eyes to see Kingsley disappearing out the door.

“Smells like the infirmary,” Neville said, puzzled.

“It is,” Hermione confirmed. “You’re safe, don’t worry.”

“Just got an Auror guard is all,” Draco said, “so they’ve put you in a private room.”

“Guard?”

“More like interrogators,” Hermione said severely.

Neville suddenly remembered what he had done.

“Sick,” he whispered, and bent over the side of the bed quickly, feeling even more ill from the pain in his head.

Hermione had a pan underneath him quicker than a blink and a cool hand, small and gentle, at his back.

“Did I kill them?” he whispered.

“We both did my guy,” Draco said. “Thought I could trust you to take out the other one.”
“Couldn’t let him kill you or the girl,” Neville whispered.

Madam Pomfrey bustled in, fussing in her calm way, and gave him a potion to relieve the pain in his head, gave strong words to Kingsley that he could only question him for ten minutes tops, once the potion had kicked in in five minutes, and that she would be checking to make sure her patient wasn’t bullied.

Kingsley pulled a chair up to the bed. Hermione and Draco sat down on the side of it.

“Am I going to Azkaban?” Neville asked, face white.

“I think I’d have trouble with the populace if we tried to do that,” Shacklebolt said easily.

Neville turned his head slightly, the pain lessening.

“There were plenty of witnesses who heard Ephraim give the order to kill Mr Malfoy and Miss Selwyn. Two hostages are free, two kidnappers – ex-Death Eaters at that - dead. Everyone is happy. On top of which, no-one heard you cast a spell or even point your wand, so no one knows, I’m afraid, that it was you who saved the day. They’re assuming my Aurors did something. And that you passed out from shock.”

“So why are you here?” Neville asked.

“Because I’ve questioned all my Aurors and checked their wands. No one cast a single spell. Not till after, to contain the bodies. The autopsies show death by Avada Kedavra. Smith – the man holding Mr Malfoy - was hit twice. None of my Aurors heard such a spell cast. However, I saw you apparating straight from the research establishment to Diagon Alley, somehow knowing Mr Malfoy was in trouble. I’m told you had a wand in your hand but didn’t point it. But you collapsed after the two men were hit. Collapse is quite common after casting strong spells, so I’m told. It would require huge amounts of magic to cast and target one of the most powerful spells known to the wizarding world wandlessly and wordlessly. I’m just trying to tie up ends here.”

“What actions might you take with that knowledge, Mr Shacklebolt?” Hermione asked primly. “Are you cautioning Neville that anything he says may be used in evidence against him? Because to ask a sick man to speak, and then -”

Shacklebolt held up his hand. “How can I make this plainer? Mr Longbottom will not be prosecuted for anything he may or may not have done in regard to this incident.”

“And if I was the culprit?” Draco said quietly.

Kingsley looked at him.

“In the circumstances, you would most likely be awarded an honour for not only defending yourself from attack – we have witnesses who saw the whole thing, from the moment you were thrown into the wall – “

Neville’s eyes shot to the graze, now scabbed, on Draco’s cheek. He restrained himself from reaching out to touch it.

“- and in particular for saving the life of a child despite being held yourself. Several witnesses have recounted how you pleaded with the captors to release Miss Selwyn. The reports in the papers have done a great deal to restore the honour of your name, even though it is assumed that the Aurors killed the kidnappers. So, in short, tell me if my assessment of the situation is correct. I believe Mr Longbottom has some telepathic connection to Mr Malfoy and came when he was in trouble. He
assessed the situation and did not act until the lives were threatened, unfortunately by the arrival of
the Auror team.”

“The girl struggled as well,” Neville said quietly. “The Petrificus that had been cast on her was
wearing off.”

“He hadn’t long cast it – only after she bit him,” Draco said disparagingly.

“Thank you for that information,” Shacklebolt said. “I assume when they ordered both killed you
decided to – take them out.”

“I killed my one,” Draco admitted. “I assumed Neville would save the girl.”

“I had to make sure both of you were alright,” Neville said doggedly.

“Are you able to tell me what you did?” Shacklebolt asked. “I’ve never seen or heard of anything
like it.”

Neville lay back against the pillows. “I knew at once I couldn’t use my wand – I could only save
one if I did, and if the attacker moved the spell could have hit someone else – the girl, or Draco. So
I just – thought – what I wanted the magic to do – really focussed on the image of the two men.”

Shacklebolt shook his head in awe. “And it just did what you wanted? How would you even think
to do that?”

“Harry made us think about how to use magic outside of the usual parameters,” he said humbly.

“So he was truly a Mage?”

“Is,” Neville said sharply. “Did you doubt it?”

“He’s so small,” Shacklebolt said inconsequentially.

Hermione laughed, and Kingsley grinned sheepishly, realising how stupid that sounded.

“You can see why it’s so important to get his magic back,” Hermione said. “Even in so short a time
he’s taught us such a lot about magic. Think what he’ll be teaching in a hundred years.”

“At seventeen he’s taught his fellows to kill without spell or words? And you think I ought to be
happy about it?”

There was a silence, because although the words were said in jest, they could all feel that there was
a serious worry about what that amount of power meant.

“Not that I can ever imagine him wanting to be Minister of Magic, but I’d much rather have Harry
in charge any day than the alternative,” Draco said.

“The alternative?” Shacklebolt queried.

“My father in power. He’s obviously not given up. Do you have any leads?”

And the conversation moved on.

Later, Shacklebolt took his leave. Hermione accompanied him out of the hospital wing.

“You’re good friends with them,” he said.
“Yes,” Hermione agreed placidly.

“They’re together?”

“We all are,” she said.

Shacklebolt looked at her sharply.

“Oh. Alright then.”

“You were going to ask me something?” she pushed. “I can be dispassionate, you know.”

“I – well, it’s none of my business. I’m just surprised, I guess. Now even more.”

“About our relationship?”

“Well, I was thinking Longbottom and Malfoy at the time. Chalk and cheese. Malfoys are all known for being nasty pieces of work and Longbottom – well –”

“Well what?” Hermione said, keeping the annoyance out of her voice.

“Well, I thought he was a bit limp. Didn’t get involved in the battle, here, did he? Great help afterwards, of course. Then to take out two men with a thought? Well! Has Malfoy rubbed off on him or have I missed something?”

Hermione turned and looked at Shacklebolt, and at that moment Albus Dumbledore appeared.

“Kingsley! Done with our young men? Good, good!”

“Headmaster,” Hermione smiled. “Mr Shacklebolt was just commenting on Neville’s lack of action in the battle here.” Her eyes were twinkling at the old man.

“Lack of action?” Dumbledore said, astonishment on his face. “Ah, but then you fighters no doubt think I did nothing too, it’s –”

“Not at all, Sir!” Kingsley said in horror. “Holding the castle, keeping the children safe –”

“Why yes!” Dumbledore exclaimed. “And didn’t Neville do a good job of it! He was so cross Harry wouldn’t let him fight, but not only did he hold the wards with me, he was out there on the grounds stopping attacks from the Forbidden Forest with a touch of his green fingers and –”

“Holding the wards?” Shacklebolt exclaimed.

“Yes indeed. He’s been holding nearly three-quarters of them ever since. I’d forgotten how tiring it was. Held on to them even through the attack on Draco – even unconscious he’s had a light hold, just in case I couldn’t manage. Remarkable man. No wonder the castle wants him.” Dumbledore was looking at Hermione as he said all this.

“The castle wants him to be Headmaster? He’s only a lad!” Shacklebolt said, shocked. “And you, Sir –”

“Getting on! Getting on! Time to hand over the reins. Neville’s offered me the chance to go and have a bit of a whirl before I pass on, you know. Such a thoughtful young man. Modest too. Won’t take over as Headmaster – says it’s not right. Not for the teachers or his loved ones,” he looked at Hermione. “Takes a strong man to turn down that honour too! Very wise fellow. He’ll be a great Headmaster one day – maybe share the role,” the old man suggested, looking again at Hermione.
Well, her chance to enlighten Shacklebolt had been turned on her.

She’d had no idea that Neville was still holding the wards, or had had all this to worry about.

Kingsley shook Albus’ hand, and hers. “Looks like you’ll have your hands full, with those two, Miss Granger,” he smiled.

“Indeed,” she nodded.

“Your intelligence and Muggle knowledge will be invaluable,” he added with a grin.

“Quite so,” Dumbledore agreed.

As the man strode down the path to the gates, Hermione turned to Dumbledore. “You are a very manipulative old man,” she said severely, reminding Albus delightfully of Minerva.

“It has been said,” he agreed with a smile.

They walked towards the Great Hall.

“Thank you,” Hermione said, touching his arm.

He patted it affectionately.

It was several nights later, that Draco and Hermione were comforting a quietly snuffling Neville.

After much encouragement, he was finally able to admit what had had him so upset.

“It was the girl,” he said, curled tight around himself, so unlike his normal pose spread out for the others to lie on.

“What about her?”

“Before – before I thought about the wandless spell – “

“Go on.”

“You can tell us anything, Neville,” Hermione said gently. “None of us are perfect. I’m battling jealousy here, but that doesn’t mean I should run away from this.”

“Jealousy?” Neville was glad of the heat being taken off for a moment, as well as curious to know.

“You knew Draco was in trouble. I didn’t feel anything. And...”

“Spill it all out,” Draco said. “Let’s not get into the habit of bottling things up that concern the three of us, or we’ll split ourselves up through lack of understanding. This thing is going to take working on, but for me at least, it’s worth it.”

Hermione looked at him, gave him a small kiss on the cheek, and nodded. “I thought you’d be all buttoned up,” she said.

“Had enough of that already in my life,” he said simply.
Neville, face wet but tears suspended, gently stroked the thigh that was curled near his face as Draco sat on the bed beside him.

“Okay,” Hermione said. “So, I’m jealous that you’ve got this thing going on. And – well, why didn’t you take me with you, Neville?” she asked hotly.

“It was dangerous,” Neville answered at once.

“And Harry hasn’t got me into dangerous situations for years?”

“I’m not Harry.”

Hermione sighed. “I know. Thank god for that, too. And I didn’t mean to blame Harry, I just meant I’d been in hairy situations before.” She looked at the young man, and slid her hand up his chest. He was trying to care for her, take care of her, and she appreciated it. But... “Take me next time, hmm?”

“Okay,” Neville nodded. He looked at Draco. “I don’t think I’ve got any communication thing going on with Draco. That was the first and only time. It’s not like we’ve got some mental dialogue going on. Not hearing my thoughts, are you, Draco?” he asked curiously.

“I could make lots of rude jokes there, but I won’t,” Draco said with mock piety. “If I knew what you were thinking I wouldn’t be letting you get so upset,” he said instead.

“Maybe it’s just an emergency thing,” Neville suggested. “Another magical skill, or gift, that I happen to have. That I can feel when the people I love are in danger. Oh.” he said, realising just what he had said.

Draco looked down on him and blushed. Neville put a careful hand back on that thigh, and looked at Hermione as well. “It just is,” he said quietly. “I love you both. Don’t expect you to feel the same, so don’t feel embarrassed. Maybe it’s because I’ve had precious few people close in my life –” he said self-deprecatingly.

Hermione’s hand covered his on Draco’s leg. “Or maybe it’s because we’ve fallen, or are falling, in love,” she said simply. “I feel the same way. More happy than I can believe possible. Despite worrying myself silly about you and being jealous,” she smiled.

Draco, bright red, turned his face away. “I don’t know if I know what love is,” he said honestly. “But I want to be with you. Is that enough? For now?”

Hermione leant forward and kissed him. Neville leant forward and slipped his fingers into the slit in Draco’s pyjama bottoms, slipping out his prick and then sliding his mouth around it.

Draco had his answer. They would wait. And accept anything he had to offer. And love him just the same.

Later, sated and comfortable, Neville said into the darkness, “Until I thought of the spell – I was going to save you, not the girl. That was really selfish of me.”

The anguish this had been causing him was evident in his voice.

Draco and Hermione were once more in their usual positions.

Hermione turned herself round, so that she could stroke her hands over Neville’s chest and belly.
“You were put in an impossible situation,” she said gently. “To save someone you loved or someone you didn’t know.”

“She was only a kid,” Neville said hollowly.

“Age is emotive, but they’re both people,” Hermione commented. “And I suspect you knew if you saved Draco you’d be pilloried, so it was hardly selfish. It was selfless. You just wanted to save the life of the man you loved, regardless of the cost.”

Neville’s head turned to her. “I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“Too busy feeling guilty,” Draco said into his armpit. “I was trying to think how I could save both of us too. If I’d killed myself they would have let her go. No point in keeping her.”

”Draco! Did – did you think of doing that?” Neville whispered, hugging the smaller man into his side.

Draco’s silence was all the answer they needed.

After a few moments, Hermione said, “At the end of the day, you made the right thing happen, Neville. You saved them both.”

“Draco saved himself, he didn’t need me.”

“You came,” Draco said. “You came and saved me from having to – do that. I - I would have. And – I trusted you to take care of the girl, so that I didn’t have to k – kill myself.”

They lay there in silence for a while, comfortable, comforted, and then Hermione said, “Draco said something important earlier –“

“Don’t make it sound as if it’s so unusual,” Draco grouched.

“Hermione swatted his head over Neville’s stomach. “Pillock.”

“Enlighten me, and I’ll judge,” Neville teased.

“It was about not bottling things up and keeping things from each other.”

“What now?” Draco asked.

Hermione propped herself up on one elbow, and looked at Neville.

“Dumbledore said you’re holding most of the wards. All the time. Even during the attack on Draco. Didn’t drop them even doing AK.”

“Holy shit!” Draco sat up. “You are fucking strong! Really?!”

“Well, yeah,” Neville said, confused. “It’s not hard, you know. Not for day to day stuff. It’s just like – an awareness, of what’s going on. I don’t have to do anything. Not unless there’s a problem.”

They stared at him.

“Look, it’s like – I can’t believe I’m using this analogy – a cauldron bubbling. You need to be aware of what’s happening in it, but when you’ve put all the ingredients in and it doesn’t need stirring it should be alright. You just keep aware just in case.”
“The security of the castle is in the hands of a man who compares it to the subject he is most famed for having devastating accidents in?” Draco smirked.

“Hey! The castle chose me, not the other way round,” Neville protested with a smile.

“So does that mean Dumbledore’s about to pop his clogs? And you’ll be Headmaster?” Draco wanted to know.

“Professor Dumbledore says he’s coming to the end of his life,” Neville agreed quietly, “and I offered to hold the wards until the next Headmaster comes, specially if he wants to go off and have some time to do something, enjoy himself a bit. I won’t be Headmaster, that would be ridiculous. Can you see me having to tell Snape how to run his classroom? Or Professor McGonagall? I haven’t got a death wish, thanks very much.”

“Professor Dumbledore thought you might make an excellent Headmaster in the future,” Hermione said. “But I think that’s a very sensible decision not to take it on now. It wouldn’t be fair on you at all. What do you want to do, Nev? I mean, after school? I’ve always assumed you’d set up your own Herbology business.”

Neville looked at both of them. Hermione could almost feel him gearing up to answer.

“I’ve made that commitment to Albus,” he said solidly, “so that’s the immediate future – unless a new Head comes pretty soon. Even if Albus stays, he needs help with the wards now. But – well, are we talking dreams here?”

“Say anything you like,” Hermione stroked down his side gently. “Dreams are always a good start. There are three of us to help them come true,” she said calmly, looking across at Draco.

Neville looked from one to the other. “There’s my dream in itself,” he said, his face reddening. “This. What we have. To be together. If – if you both want it.”

“I do,” Hermione said. “You know that.”

“We might have to split – I’m committed here, and Draco, you’ll need to go to wherever the best Healer is, and Hermione, I know you have a provisional place at Cambridge....I’d thought – well, hoped – if you still wanted me - well, apparating isn’t an issue for me so I can get anywhere, if maybe you two are close....”

Draco moved to lie on his back. “I’ll be staying here whilst my father wants to kill me,” he said emotionlessly.

“Draco! You don’t know he wants to kill you!” Hermione said quickly. “That man couldn’t have known you’d be there, it was opportunistic. To curry favour —“

“Yeah, my Dad’s trying to set himself up in Voldemort’s place,” he said sourly. “Like he’s not going to want to make an example of me.”

“Maybe he wants to convert you. To have you at his side,” Neville suggested.

Draco turned on his hip towards them, arm under his head. “Well, he’s going to be disappointed, then.”

“Good,” Hermione smiled at him. “What will you do here? And will you train under that Healer who was here at Christmas – when you’re free to go where you want? Or would you prefer someone else?”
“No, I really got on with Bert,” Draco said, “and he’s offered me an apprenticeship. He said part of that would be working with other Healers anyway – he’d send me to stay with others for a month at a time, see how they approach things and so on. They seem to have a network - the Healers. They all seem surprisingly non-competitive. Friendly with each other. I suppose there’s so few there’s work for everyone.”

“Do they all specialize in different things?” Hermione asked.

“I think they all do general stuff, but you’re right, they tend to have areas of interest – that’s partly why Bert said it’s important in the apprenticeship to study with others – not only to learn different styles but to see if their enthusiasm for a particular problem rubs off, takes me into a specific field.”

“Is Entwhistle based in London?” Neville asked.

“Yes. So it’s not Cambridge, but it’s not Vladivostok either.”

“We’ll manage,” Hermione said, turning so that her head was resting on Neville’s arm.

“Will you work with Madam Pomfrey whilst you’re here, or is that not the same sort of thing?” Neville asked Draco.

“If she’ll have me it’ll be good for me to have a good idea of the things she does,” Draco said, “but we need to sort out whatever groups are setting up in opposition, sooner rather than later.”

To that end, the Order of the Phoenix had met once again. It seemed clear that Lucius Malfoy, location unknown, was rallying support – and there were still wizards who supported his view.

Aurors had spent a lot of time attempting to break the wards on Malfoy Manor, with no success; Draco had even visited, not long after the battle, accompanied by Neville, Hermione and a team of Aurors, to no avail: his father had, amazingly, been able to block access to the Malfoy heir. The Aurors, had, in the end, thrown their own wards on the place to notify them if Lucius attempted to return.

Draco had said early on that his father would most likely have left the country, and indeed, there had been no sightings in England. There had been no sightings of him anywhere, even by the Auror teams of other countries who had been put on alert, particularly in France and Italy where the Malfoys held property: there had been no evidence that Lucius had visited either.

Draco was not surprised.

Several Auror contacts, whose cover had not been broken by the attack on Hogwarts, reported that they had been covertly approached about the start up of a new organisation.

Severus was highly amused to be able to report to Harry, after the meeting, that Alex Johnson was forwarded as a person under suspicion as he appeared to have done a runner. The informer’s name was Sebastian Flight.

“Dammit, Severus! I risked walking into the lion’s den – not to mention investing a shit-load of money – to make contact with someone already informing for us? You have to laugh, don’t you?” he grinned.

“I told you you were taking unnecessary risks,” Severus smirked at him.
Harry snuggled into his side. Severus had enlarged his hospital bed, and the guard had quickly agreed to wait outside. Severus had been visiting much more frequently, making love to Harry and reporting on the current events, both with the Order and the efforts to disentangle Harry’s magic. They were making visits every other night to the research establishment. They were reluctant to use too strong a force, but the centrifuge was certainly effective in loosening the curses and they were removing four or five times as many in a session as previously.

Harry, in the meantime, was working on honing his physical skills, and taking advantage of the benefits of as much tuition as he could handle. The whole business was surprisingly tiring – he had slept for 24 hours solid after that first time Severus had shagged him, and had taken quite a bit of teasing for it. He actually slept a great deal every day, and when he raised this with his doctors they agreed to run some blood tests, but said it was to be expected when his body was working hard at healing still, and following such a stressful period in his life.

Harry was aware once again, as he was whenever he had returned from working with Derek, that the magical world put little emphasis on nurturing physical well-being – it was so easy to cure maladies, and so many things could be done with magic rather than brute strength – that physical fitness was only seen as something necessary for sportsmen such as quidditch players – and that was more endurance and flexibility – and workers such as Charlie Weasley. He was surprised that wizards should live so long and on the whole look so healthy, and assumed that magic gave them some extra ability in this respect. Nevertheless, he would really like the fitness training he had introduced at Hogwarts to become part of the curriculum – for a start, he found it helped him focus and to de-stress.

He’d speak to Dumbledore about it.

When he was able to return to Hogwarts.

Matters changed entirely three weeks after Draco’s attempted kidnap.

Harry was in the quad of the barracks, running with a cohort of soldiers – eight of them in a pack, all in full kit whilst Harry ran in his pressure suit with track suit bottoms slung on top. An Auror member was puffing alongside.

Suddenly, all hell broke loose.

There was a series of cracks!, and they were surrounded by Death Eaters in full garb.

In a moment of clarity, the soldiers ground to a halt; several instantly surrounded Harry, shouting orders and arming weapons. There was a second of stillness.

Harry saw the Death Eaters in a fresh light through the eyes of the men around him: they looked ridiculous, yet undeniably scary; they had appeared from nowhere and he could smell the fear and adrenaline in the men around him. One of the Death Eaters fired off a curse, felling one of the troops, and the pandemonium started. Soldiers automatically fired back, but to their disbelief their bullets dropped to the ground in front of their targets. A visible shield was thrown up to surround them, preventing access to the soldiers that were now running from the buildings to join in.

Harry’s heart was racing. The soldiers had closed ranks around him, and he was grateful that they hadn’t abandoned him. The next moment he heard Petriﬁcus Totalus being repeatedly cast, and the soldiers around him stiffening.
There was a shout as the Auror disabled two of the Death Eaters, then his scream as the Death Eaters retaliated.

The distraction this had given the Death Eaters was enough for Harry to realise one thing.

He was able to move.

The *Petrificus* had not worked in him.

Magic did not appear to work on him. He could not use it, but unlike even these Muggles, he did not have even the tiniest hint in his system to make spells affect him.

“Get Potter,” snarled one of the Death Eaters.

Harry carefully pushed his way between the soldiers.

He would not allow this scum to cause any more injuries.

“How dare you?” he growled, stepping forward, causing the men before him to pause.

“How dare you attack me!” he held his head high. “Take off your masks, you cowards, and let me see who dares attack a Mage!”

He could feel the wave of fear and uncertainty passing through the wizards.

Heads turned towards one particular wizard.

Harry focussed on him. “You! You are leading this rabble?” He began to walk towards man.

“Surround him!” the man barked. The wizards did so, although Harry could feel their hesitation.

Harry stood still. The Death Eaters now stretched in a circle from him to the leader, with the petrified soldiers behind him and the Auror off to one side.

The man drew off his mask, and the others shakily followed suit.

“Avery,” Harry said, causing the man’s eyes to widen. So, he hadn’t expected Harry to know who he was. Harry recognised him from the days when Voldemort had been kind enough to share his experiences with Harry. “I thought you were in Azkaban. So, you are Malfoy’s servant now, are you?” he sneered, and was pleased to see that this had hit home. “His errand boy, sent to collect me.”


“We do,” Alfriston growled. “Look how easily we’ve overcome these Muggle goons,” he jeered.

Others laughed in agreement, though it was rather tentative.

“Indeed. And yet you attack *me,*” Harry continued, quietly, “to whom you should be giving your allegiance. Accepting my guidance. That is the tradition ingrained in our culture, is it not? I am very disappointed,” he said.
His words, his tone, caused a ruffle of uncertainty through the Death Eaters.

Good.

“You can argue all that with Malfoy,” Avery spat out.

“I shall indeed make my displeasure known to Lucius,” Harry said. “You lot have no brains of your own? I freed you from Voldemort’s insanity so that you could follow yet another person espousing the supremacy of wizards? And yet, here you refuse to acknowledge my power – the power of a Mage? Has Malfoy got you under Imperius? Consider your positions, gentlemen. This is your last warning.”

“Seize him!” Avery screamed.

There was a moment’s hesitation.

“Now!” Avery bellowed.

The two closest to Harry reluctantly stepped up and took hold of his arms.

“I advise you – on pain of death – to unhand me,” Harry said quietly.

“He doesn’t even have a wand,” Avery bellowed. “Apparate with him now!”

“My shoelace,” Harry said calmly, dropping to a crouch. Amazingly, the men loosened their hold.

“For fuck’s sake! Apparate!”

“Don’t,” Harry said.

“Sorry,” one said, looked at the other, and nodded. They both attempted to apparate with Harry between them.

At the same instant, Harry drew the knives held in each leg holster, and stabbed upwards as he did so, driving into the thigh of one and the crotch of the other. Letting go of the knives immediately, he grasped the darts in the second garter around his ankle, then flung them, one after the other, into the astonished targets of the Death Eaters on each side. Severus’ poison acted almost instantaneously, toppling four of the five men to the ground.

One miss, then. Poor shooting.

He retrieved a knife from the splinched leg lying on the ground. He’d hoped being knifed in the middle of apparating might have an adverse affect, and it had obviously proved to be the case. He wondered where the other body parts of the two men were, even as he strode across the quad to Avery. Avery and the other three Death Eaters were firing spells at him, but Harry felt an immense sense of power as the spells had no effect whatsoever. The fear in Avery’s eye’s was a joy, yet the man kept trying spells even as Harry strode up and grabbed him by the neck, moving behind him to hold the blade at his throat, wresting the man’s wand from his fingers.

The remaining three Death Eaters stood frozen in horror.

“How dare you!” Harry growled again. “How many chances have I given you? How many warnings! I am a Mage! You three! Come here!”

The three Death Eaters came scurrying forwards, falling onto their knees in front of the Avery/Harry combination.
“Hold out your wand,” he told the first.

With trembling hands, the man did.

“Snap it.”

The man stared at Harry.

Harry stared him down.

Taking a shuddering breath, the man did so. A sound suspiciously like a sob escaped.

“You too,” Harry said to the next man.

The third held out his wand even as the second snapped.

“Did I tell you to move, Marlin?” Harry snarled.

The man shook.

Avery gasped as the knife bit into his throat whilst Harry looked over his shoulder.

“Do you want to keep your wand?” Harry asked.

All three men were staring at Harry.

“Yes, Master,” the man begged, his head dropping to the ground.

“Release the Auror and come back to me,” Harry snapped.

The man leapt up and did so, almost running back to Harry and dropping to his knees again. The Auror might have been unable to move, but was aware of everything that had happened, and followed quietly behind, wand at the ready, waiting on Harry.

Harry pinched the blade closer to Avery’s throat.

“Well, Avery, what shall I do with you?”

Avery stayed silent.

Harry threw Avery’s wand to the Auror. “Snap it,” he said calmly.

He felt Avery’s body lurch, knew how fearful the loss of a wand could be.

“Wait!” he said, even as the Auror had the wand between his two hands. “I have a better idea.”

He held out his hand for the wand.

“Avery, you’re going to take a message for me. Tell Lucius that he can’t hurt me. That he can’t beat me. That he is wrong about Magic. Tell him that Harry Potter, who is not a Pureblood, is a Mage, and knows more about magic than he ever has or ever will. And when he asks where the dozen men are who were sent to bring me to him, you can tell him none of them are coming back, apart from you. And when he asks what spells I cast to destroy his attack team, I wonder what you’ll tell him? I don’t need my wand, Avery, or my staff. I’ve defeated ten of you without even bothering to use my magic. Did you even realise that? Think what I can do if I choose.” He let go of Avery’s neck, and stood back, knowing the Auror had his eye on the man. He took Avery’s
wand between his fingers, and drew his hand along the wood, then looked up at Avery.

“I’ll allow you this,” he smiled, “so you can apparate back. But I’ll just warn you. I’ve put two spells on it. It won’t happen the first time you use it, maybe not the second, or the tenth or the twentieth. But I’m just warning you. Sometime when you use it, you’ll trigger the spells. One of the spells will kill the person you love most. Is there anyone you love, Avery? Are you capable? I don’t know how that spell will direct itself. Your wife? Lover? Child? Lucius, maybe. The other will kill you. You do realise that a wand is linked to your core magic?” he asked conversationally. “Don’t think you can just buy another. The result will transfer, I promise you.” He handed the wand to the man, satisfied with the look of horror in his eyes.

“I hope the apparition works,” Harry smiled. “But then, maybe you’d prefer to be dead rather than telling Lucius you failed. It doesn’t matter to me. Either way, he’ll know.”

Avery’s hands were shaking as he stared at the instrument in his hand.

Suddenly, a fearsome look in his eye, he pointed it directly at Harry.

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry folded his arms over his chest.

“I’m very disappointed in you, Avery,” he said quietly, reaching out and taking the wand from the man.

“Auror Hamblyn, he’s all yours.”

The Auror had him bound in moments. “Thanks. Goes against the grain to let the bastard get away.”

“Yes. Probably a bad choice,” Harry agreed.

He pulled up Marlin, still clutching his wand.

“Have you been listening carefully, Marlin?”

“Yes, Mage, my allegiance –“

“Stand.”

The man leapt to his feet.

“You go to Lucius Malfoy,” Harry said.

“But – but – he’ll.....”

“Yes?”

“He’ll be angry,” the man said in a rush.

“I’m sure he will,” Harry said. “He may kill you; that may be preferable to Azkaban, from all I’ve heard. However, if you do this, survive, and are truly contrite, I will consider your position. You will return afterwards to the Ministry, give yourself up and ask for an audience with me, as promised. Do you understand?”

“They’ll never –“
“Auror Hamblyn,” Harry cut across the man.

“Mage,” the Auror bowed.

“You are my witness. Please log my promise to this man at the Ministry.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good. Go, Marlin.”

The man bowed his head, and with a look at the carnage around him, apparated.

Auror Hamblyn stared at Harry in amazement.

“God, you’ve got balls,” he nodded.

“You ok?” Harry asked, now that everything was under control.

“Nothing a few drinks won’t put right,” the Auror grinned. “Which I’ll undoubtedly be having tonight.” He gave Harry a comradely pat on his arm, then turned and cast a spell to release the protective dome, allowing the other Aurors who had apparated in to enter the zone, taking charge of the wizards and soldiers alike.

Shacklebolt strode in, but could get nowhere near Harry.

The soldiers were going bananas. Harry was clapped on the back, cheered, and within moments was on their shoulders, being paraded up and down the quad, whilst a few soldiers helped the Aurors shackle the Death Eaters. They did not know what had happened, exactly, but one thing was absolutely clear: Alex had taken out 10 attackers on his own. Now they knew why the small lad was regarded as a hero.

“Alex,” Shacklebolt shouted up to him.

“Put me down,” Harry batted at the hands holding him with a grin.

“Well done, lad. What poison?” Shacklebolt asked, pointing to the immobile Death Eaters.

“A Paralysing Draught,” Harry said. “Severus made it, he’ll know the antidote.”

“No hurry, then,” grinned the Auror. “You let one go.”

Harry nodded. “Back to Malfoy. To tell him where to stick his sodding prejudices and hatred.”

“Good thinking. Now we just need to find out how they knew you were here and where to put you for safety. Not to mention what to do with all these men.” He looked around. The quad had been invaded as word had spread. “How the hell are we going to keep this a secret?” he groaned.

Harry was whisked away by the delighted soldiers once again.

That, at least, wasn’t his problem.

*He* hadn’t used any magic, after all.
Hermione To The Rescue

“Mr Benton! How many times do I have to tell you that you cannot mix asphodel with dragon’s bile?” Snape snapped, standing over the cowering fourth year and his heaving cauldron. “If, however, you are able to tell me how you are going to retrieve this potion, I will deduct only five points from Hufflepuff, and not ten. Well?”

The door opened, and Snape glanced round.

Draco Malfoy stood in the doorway. “Sir, I’m sorry to disturb you. Could I have a word?”

“Mr Benton? You have five seconds. Five. Four. Three. No?”

Snape sprinkled some rosemary spines into the mix, watching carefully and adding a couple more.

“Watch for the reaction,” he said, adding a single one more. “Now, it is recovered. Ten points lost, Mr Benton. Continue, and do try to follow directions. This is a simple potion,” he sneered.

He strode over to Draco now that the cauldron was no longer likely to explode.

“Mr Malfoy?”

“I’ll take over the class, Sir, if you’d like to go outside. Miss Granger will explain. Elfwick’s No Hole Fabric Solution?” he asked, reading the blackboard.

“Yes.” Severus’ eyes looked over Draco quickly, and he nodded. Draco would have no problem handling the class.

There was a tightening in his stomach as fear made itself known. He swept out.

Outside the door, both Hermione and Neville were waiting.

“The good news is that Harry is ok,” Hermione said quickly.

Relief flooded into Severus, and he was grateful to the young woman for her perspicacity.

“The bad is that a dozen or so Death Eaters attacked the camp.”

“The camp?” Severus’ brows drew together. “How could they know -?”

“We need to find that out. I expect the Aurors are working on that now.”

“The Aurors saved him?”

“We’ve had the briefest news via floo, but the word is that Harry took out about ten of them himself.”

“He has his magic back?” Severus’ voice was startled.

“Without magic.”

“I thought you might like to go straight there,” Neville spoke at last.

“I can apparate –“
“Now. You’ll lose fifteen minutes getting out the castle,” Neville said. “Up to you. Professor Dumbledore has approved Hermione going too, she wants to find out what’s happening from the Muggle perspective, and Shacklebolt thinks she might be helpful. Had hundreds of witnesses, apparently.”

With a flick of his wand, Severus transfigured his robe into Muggle wear – a black open neck shirt, jacket and trousers. Neville and Hermione were already Muggle style, Hermione in a dark skirt, stockings and blouse. She looked very feminine, he noted absently.

He placed his hand on Neville’s arm, in preparation for apparition.

“Thank you.”

To his surprise, they apparated straight into Harry’s room at the base.

At Snape’s raised eyebrows, Neville merely said, “They’ve been over-run with wizards all day. Too late to worry now.”

A guard shot in at the noise.

“Professor! Miss, Sir. Where the hell did you come from?”

“Where is Alex?” Snape demanded, not answering.

“In the Mess, Sir,” the soldier grinned. “Bit of a celebration going on.”

“And Mr Shacklebolt?” Hermione asked.

“With the Colonel, I believe, Miss.”

“Radio through to let them know we’ve arrived,” Hermione smiled the order. “Now. Directions to the Mess?”

They walked into the Mess, which was a riot of noise and high spirits. Harry was sitting at one of the tables, a bottle of beer in his hand, surrounded by soldiers joking and laughing.

One of the ones sitting on the edge of a table behind Harry spotted them and shouted across, “Hey, Alex! Your mates have turned up!”

“Didn’t need no help!” one of the others piped up. “Took out a whole clutch all on his Jack Jones!”

“Bloody amazing kid,” one of the others said.

“Wouldn’t have managed it without the Professor’s secret recipe on the darts,” Harry demurred, as he turned round in his chair and grinned straight at Severus. He got to his feet and walked over, hovering right in front of his lover, wanting to reach out but holding himself back.

“Your Paralysing Potion was brilliant,” he beamed up at the older man.

“Give him a kiss!” one of the soldiers yelled, to much laughter and sniggers. It seemed surprisingly lacking unpleasant undertones.

“We’ve all heard ya, mate,” another called out, again to much catcalling and laughter. The empty bottles on the tables were testament to some rapid drinking having taken place.

“Let’s get out of here,” Harry smiled up at Severus.

“Don’t want to stay with your fans?” Severus said. He could have kicked himself the minute the words were out, seeing Harry’s face tighten.

“I didn’t mean – merely that you looked to be enjoying yourself.“

Harry looked up and saw the openness in Severus’ face, and threw off the reminders of his past.

“Rather be with you,” he said simply, tugged the door open and pulled Severus out.

“I’ll go find Shacklebolt,” Neville said to Hermione.

“I want to talk to these soldiers,” Hermione responded.

“On your own?”

“I’ll be fine,” Hermione said.

Neville watched as she sashayed over to the table and slipped into Harry’s seat. He could see the soldiers, deflated at the loss of their centre of attention, perk up again as this attractive woman sat down amongst them. They all knew Hermione was, in their terms, a soldier too, but she looked so petite and feminine... Neville found it rather erotic to know that Hermione’s prim knee-length skirt covered stocking-clad thighs and beautiful underwear, and that he was the only man in the room to know that. The day Draco had been captured in Diagon Alley, he had gone there to buy Hermione some more of the sort of delicious underwear she had worn after returning from her home. All three of them loved her in sensuous fabrics and silks and lace, jewel bright colours or lustrous black. Hermione crossed one knee over the other, a movement that drew the attention of several of the men.

Hermione lifted Harry’s beer bottle and took a swig.

Did she know how sexy it was to see her lips slipped around the neck of the bottle? He could see several of the men shift, their eyes roving down her throat as she swallowed, continuing over the swell of her breast.

Neville cast a wordless protection spell; Hermione felt it, and turned and gave him a pleased smile, before she turned back to the men and said, “Well, who’s going to tell me about all the excitement? I think Alex is rather busy.”

Neville exited the room. Severus and Harry had disappeared, he was rather relieved to discover. He’d seen enough of them entwined around each other to last a lifetime, even if they did look good together.

He made his way to the entrance of the block, asking directions to the Colonel’s office.

Shacklebolt looked surprised to see him as he was announced, but then seemed to accept Neville.

“The Professor is with Harry, and Miss Granger with the soldiers, getting a picture from a Muggle point of view of what they think happened,” Neville explained, sitting down. “I’m here to do anything you feel might be helpful,” he said humbly.
“That’s a very good idea for Miss Granger to talk to the men,” Shacklebolt said. “Frankly, the Colonel and I are at a loss to know what to do. He’s taken a count of all those who witnessed at least a part of the incident, and it runs to a couple of hundred. That’s rather too many to deal with,” Shacklebolt looked at Neville.

“We’re waiting to hear your Minister’s views on how to proceed,” the Colonel added. “Mr Shacklebolt has mentioned memory modification, and I can tell you now, I’m not at all happy about the idea. The long term consequences – I’m not prepared to risk my troops’ minds, you must appreciate that.”

Neville settled back in his chair. “Hermione is extremely clever and also practical. I have a great deal of confidence in anything she may suggest,” he said calmly.

“She’s just a young thing –“

“Don’t underestimate her, Sir,” Neville cut in, his voice cold and firm.

The Colonel looked rather taken aback.

A knock sounded on the door, and to Neville’s surprise, Snape and Harry were led in.

“Harry has told me of the events here today,” Severus said calmly. “What actions are being taken with regard to all the witnesses?”

“We were just discussing that,” the Colonel said. “We await word from your Minister, and this gentleman tells me to trust in Miss Granger,” he said shortly.

“She’s getting a Muggle perspective of events from the troops in the Mess,” Neville explained.

“You may have full confidence in Miss Granger,” Severus affirmed, surprising everyone.

The Colonel at least, looked somewhat mollified that the Professor trusted the young woman.

The cold grate suddenly flared. Shacklebolt and Snape went over, talking briefly to the Minister.

Neville twitched. “I think Hermione wants us,” he said uncertainly.

Snape looked at him and nodded.

No one queried how he knew – Neville didn’t know himself – just that he had a feeling a little like the one he had had when Draco’s attempted kidnap was happening, but without the fear or sense of urgency.

They made their way to the Mess. All the men rose to their feet as the Colonel walked in, but he waved them seated again. The noise level dropped. Hermione stood up and came over.

“What’s the official position on this? You can’t possibly obliviate all these men. I think I can help, but I need a bit of leeway.”

“We’re in total confusion on the matter, Miss Granger. Do what you can,” Shacklebolt said.

“Seriously?”

He nodded.

Hermione sauntered back, propping herself on the edge of the table. Neville knew he wasn’t the
only one appreciating the way she walked.

Then, to eyes bugging everywhere, Hermione slid her hand up her thigh and withdrew her wand from her stocking top.

“Well boys,” she smiled demurely, “you wanted answers, and I’ve just been told I can give you some.”

“I’ll give you some, chick!” someone yelled, to a lot of laughing.

“I can give you something longer and thicker to hold, it’s ready and waiting for you,” someone else shouted to applause and whistles.

The four wizards tensed, the Colonel went to step forward, but Hermione held up a hand.

“Okay, okay, you’ve had your laugh. Now, the Colonel is going to step in and reprimand your conduct if you don’t shut it. So do you want an explanation or not?”

A murmur of noise.

“Sorry Miss,” a voice called.

“Yeah, beg your pardon. No insult intended.”

“Or taken,” Hermione nodded, settling herself. “Right, you all know we – “ she gestured vaguely at the wizards behind her – “work for a specialist unit. You’ve seen we have some equipment you’ve never come across before, or had the benefit of using. Today, the enemy showed you a weapon that you’ll be pleased to hear we have too. This is it,” she held up her wand. “‘And before you say anything, we have a technical expert with a sense of humour who thinks he’s Q in James Bond,’” she said, raising her eyebrows. There was a lot of laughter; Shacklebolt seemed the only puzzled person – Harry had taken Severus to see a Bond movie some months previously, so he was amused at the reference.

“This – let’s call a spade a spade, shall we? – it’s a wand,” Hermione grinned, eliciting amusement in response, “has several effects. As you’ve seen, it can freeze people in position, throw them away from you, and inflict pain rather like an electric shock, among other things. It has transmitters inside linked to the brainwaves of a specified user, so I’m sorry to tell you you can’t have a go playing with it. You’ll have to keep playing with your own,” she said, her voice sultry.

Harry was gobsmacked at this sexual, playful Hermione. She had these men in the palm of her hand. Were they going to buy it?

“You’ll be pleased to hear we’ve advanced on the principal, and are way ahead of the opposition. The Professor, for example, has an implanted channelling device. As you can imagine, it’s convenient not to have to worry about losing this,” she asked, twirling the wand.

“Implanted where?” someone said.

“In his brain,” Hermione answered easily. “You’ll also be pleased to hear that it’s a volunteers-only procedure.”

“Can he demonstrate? Can you? With that twig?” someone called out.

Hermione lifted the wand and pointed it at the speaker. With a whispered Wingardium Leviosa, she lifted the wriggling man up into the air and set him down on the other side of the room.
Silence burst into whispers. “Holy fuck!”

“It is like magic.”

“It is,” Hermione agreed, “if you don’t understand the physics principles behind it. Which, let’s face it, most of us don’t,” she added, to amused snickers. “That’s why our Q used a wand as a transmitter – although the length is important, the centre is hollowed and carries the conductor,” she said calmly.

It was sort of true. It did have a core all through it after all.

“What can the Professor do?” someone yelled.

Severus, with a glance to Shacklebolt, who shrugged, stepped forward.

“Anyone care to attack me?” he invited.

There was a huge roar of delight, and the next moment tables and chairs were being pushed back to make room.

Severus took off his jacket and threw it at Harry, who caught it, enjoying the feeling of its warmth.

A largish soldier stepped forward, grinning, to much cheering.

He began to circle, Severus moving too and never taking his eyes off the would-be attacker.

The man eventually launched himself at Severus, who set up a shield. The man crashed into it, and peeled down it like a gull hitting a windowpane. There were catcalls and yells. The man picked himself up and launched into a flying kick. With the shield still in place, his ankle hit and the man crumpled to the floor, clutching said ankle and bellowing that he had broken it.

Another man came forward. Again, he circled, then, suddenly, pulled a knife. There were shouts of protest that Severus was unarmed, but Severus just held up a hand to stop them. As the man lunged, he cast Expelliarmus! The man flew backwards so hard that he knocked over the front row of men behind him. The knife flew into the air, and with a swift Accio Snape had it in his hand.

There was a lot of applause and cheering. The man stood up, calling on the toppled soldiers to join him. Again, there was some booing, but Snape allowed it.

Harry felt himself tense. Whilst he had every confidence in Severus, taking on half a dozen men wandless was strenuous, if not downright foolhardy.

He needn’t have worried. Severus set them all bouncing into each other as he blasted them from him. He stood there, barely breathless, and gave a slight bow, before returning to Harry.

Harry gazed up at him, pride and love in his eyes, though he didn’t embarrass Snape by touching him.

Not that Snape hadn’t embarrassed him often enough.

“What?” Snape said, though his tone was satisfied. “It would be shocking if I couldn’t take care of half a dozen Muggles.”

Shacklebolt grinned.

“Good show, Snape. Where’s Miss Granger going to go with this next?”
Hermione was wondering that herself. The atmosphere was good – she knew she’d almost crushed the fear element that had been pervading the euphoria of success earlier, but knew too that they weren’t out of the woods yet.

“So what’s with all the magic crap?” one of the soldiers called at last.

Hermione sat down again on the table, crossing her legs with a sigh of silk.

Draco did have seriously impeccable taste, Neville thought. Hermione looked absolutely enthralling to him, animated, in control, sexy and luscious. He was startled to find that he wished Draco were there with him, to see her like this and share his appreciation.

“You’re a very lucky man, Neville,” Snape said.

Neville looked around at him in surprise.

“She’s splendid, isn’t she?” Harry agreed with pride, standing close to Snape.

“And the stockings! Wow!”

Snape turned to look at Harry. “You like the stockings?”

“Something sexy about them, somehow. Must be that gap of naked flesh, or something.”

Even the thought made Neville’s mouth water.

“You may wear them if you wish, Alex,” Severus murmured, “just don’t expect me to.”

Both Neville and Shacklebolt choked, Neville snorting an undignified laugh, as Harry turned teasing eyes to Snape. “Really? You wouldn’t mind if I wore stockings under my robes?”

“As long as you shaved your legs,” Snape said, straight-faced. “I don’t think matted dark hair would look the part. And you can wear a short skirt with it if you wish. It’s your publicity.”

“You’re such a bastard,” Harry said affectionately.

“I try,” Snape conceded smugly.

Hermione had been bantering with the men, but another question about magic and mages caused her to hold up her hands for silence.

“Ok, now we’re at the part that’s up to you. I’ve told you almost as much as I can, and you’ll have to decide what to believe. You saw how the guys were dressed, so I don’t doubt you’ve realised that they’re a bit kooky,” she gave a small smile. “They’re a cult, of sorts, but more powerful than you can believe, and there’s a hell of a lot of them. Alex has taken out the leader, and we’ve taken a large number into custody. One of the higher ranking officers is trying to take power to continue their fight, and that’s why they were trying to capture Alex today. They have some weird ideas, but I can tell you,” she said, her face serious, “that their reign of terror has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians – here in Britain - and the torture of many.” Her face turned briefly to Neville in acknowledgement.

“Now, you have to decide whether Alex was choosing to play them on their own terms, or whether magic actually does exist. Can everything you saw be explained by what I’ve told you? Did Alex need “magic” – she quoted the words with her fingertips – “to sort them out? There’s a lot of technology out there that’s being developed, we all know that. But personally,” she stood up and walked over to stand in front of Neville, “I like a little magic in my life.” And she leaned up and brushed her lips over Neville’s.
Neville’s arms were round her in an instant, cradling her as he deepened the kiss. The men around were cheering and booing in equal measure as the gorgeous girl was claimed.

After a few moments, she pulled gently back from Neville, stroking her hand down his cheek. The she turned in his arms.

“I’m quite often called a witch,” she said, resting sensuously back against Neville, one leg raised so that her foot brushed his calf. “Personally, I take that as a compliment,” she said, tongue firmly in cheek.

There were more catcalls and cheers, and men telling Neville he was a lucky bastard.

The Colonel stepped forward and shook Hermione’s hand, opening the door for the party to exit, whilst he remained with the soldiers.

“Hermione, you are a witch!” Harry chuckled. “You had them eating out of the palm of your hand.”

“Will it do?” she said. “I hated the thought of attempting to obliviate them all. It’s just not on – both for the individuals and in terms of success with so many. What do you think, Mr Shacklebolt?”

“Please call me Kingsley,” the Auror smiled down at her as they walked. “I rather liked the end, there, inviting them to choose which they found most believable. An excellent touch. Have you considered a career in the Ministry?”

Hermione laughed.

They arrived at Harry’s room and sat down. Harry now had a kettle and fridge in the corner, and Severus put the machine on to boil, preparing cups, looking quite at home with the Muggle paraphernalia.

“The question now,” Shacklebolt said as Severus worked, “is how we can keep Harry safe, now the security here is blown.”

“You’ll let us know as soon as you have leads on how he was found?” Severus said, not bothering to look round.

“Of course. How much medical care do you need, Harry? The Muggle Ministry have plenty of safe-houses, but are you ready – physically – to be away from the hospital?”

Harry, who had sat himself on the bed alongside Hermione, leaning back against the wall, said, “Well, they still look at it every day; I’m using Severus’ and Neville’s ointments still, and wearing the pressure stuff,” he indicated his face and body. "I have physio and training; frankly, I’m sure they do a lot because I’m here; I could do the physio alone, and could have a doctor check me over weekly or something. I – I need help applying the salve and getting the pressure suit on and off,” he blushed.

Severus handed round tea. He knew people helped Harry, yet somehow, now that Harry was up and fit and they were regularly having sex, he hated the thought that someone else was touching him, smoothing cream into him, helping him undress and seeing him naked. He was surprised at the ferocity of his possessiveness, could acknowledge how silly it was when these things had been happening all along, he just hadn’t had to face them.

Passing Harry a cup, he sat down on the bed on the other side of him, despite there being a spare
chair. The smile his lover beamed at him helped sooth his ruffled feathers.

“You need to come home,” he said, brushing a hand over Harry’s unruly hair.

Harry almost purred. Severus quite liked shocking people, but was not one to show casual affection in this way in front of others.

“Wish I could,” Harry sipped his tea, leaning against Severus’ shoulder.

Exhaustion suddenly hit him like a bludger. His mind found it hard to follow the conversation, and Severus took the cup from his hand as a small amount of tea slopped onto his leg as he drifted off.

“Adrenalin all worn off?” he murmured down at Harry, lips caressing the top of his head.

“Mmmm,” Harry snuggled closer.

Severus’ arm slipped round his back.

In moments, Harry was fast asleep. Severus felt full of warmth, protective of this wonderful creature who was entrusting himself into his arms.

He looked up moments later as Hermione said, “Surely he could stay here a little longer? I’ve one or two ideas I want to explore –“

Severus snorted, but Hermione just turned and to everyone’s amusement stuck her tongue out at him with a grin.

“Well, I have, and I may need to ask you one or two embarrassing questions, so you can take that condescending look off your face. I’m assuming you’ll be willing to do anything to bring Harry back into Hogwarts?”

“Anything” is not the type of thing I commit myself to, Miss Granger,” Snape said, even as his interest was piqued and he thought he probably would.

Hermione looked at Shacklebolt. “If Harry keeps inside – and the poor lamb looks knackered, he’s probably going to sleep for twenty four hours like when –“ she glanced up and met Severus’ gaze – “yes, well,” she said with a blush, “anyway, Lucius Malfoy will undoubtedly think we’ll move him. If he stays here, we increase the Auror guard – we can buy ourselves a couple of days to make the right decision.”

“You have a plan?”

“I have an idea; I need to consult with the right people,” Hermione said firmly.

Shacklebolt stood up. “I’ll have a team of Aurors here round the clock, with alarms to get further help that will trigger if they’re attacked or petrified. It won’t help if a shield is erected as the attackers did today, but at least we get them here. And Harry seems quite capable of taking care of himself.”

Severus smiled down at the sleeping man who had slipped down so that his head was now buried in Severus’ lap. He was so proud of him, so pleased that he was unhurt, that he regretted neither the embarrassment of having witnesses nor the fact that there was nothing sexual involved in the position at all.

Shacklebolt strode to the door. “If you can stay with him briefly, I’ll make sure I have the Aurors
stationed here,” and without waiting for their acquiescence, slipped through the door. A soldier came in to take his place.

“Sorry, Ma’am, Sirs,” he blushed.

“No problem,” Hermione said, slipping off the bed. She took a blanket and covered Harry up. “I don’t know how he does it. He is so amazing.”

She turned round and headed over to Neville, sitting on his lap. “Am I too heavy?”

“As if I’m going to object to an armful of you,” Neville grinned.

The guard stood stoically.

It was only a few minutes before a knock on the door heralded the arrival of the Auror guard.

Severus reluctantly slid Harry off his lap and got off the bed, adding a further blanket; Harry was out for the count. Severus pressed his buzzer, calling a nurse.

“Would you keep a close eye on him, please? He’s very tired, though I suspect he’s had a few beers. He’s still wearing his suit and mask - ”

“I’ll take care of him,” the nurse said firmly, coming over and checking Harry’s pulse as he spoke.

“Thank you,” Severus nodded, and moments later the three of them had departed.

Once again, Neville took all three straight back into Hogwarts, arriving in his room. Draco was sprawled on the bed, freshly showered and wearing only a towel.

Which was rather loose, and his hand was down the front of it.

“Shit!” he choked, seeing Snape materialize as well as his lovers.

His attempt to leap up and find decency was hampered by his knee catching on the fabric, which slithered off, leaving his erection waving in the air.

Severus turned his back, biting the smile from his lips, as he walked to the door.

Hermione and Neville were snorting back laughter as Draco fell over trying to pull on some trousers. The mirror beside the door gave Severus an ample view of Draco’s arse before he fell back on the bed. It was no good. The laugh bubbled out of him and he turned around.

Draco was swearing and cursing, absolutely bright red.

“Serves you right for not waiting for us,” Hermione laughed.

“How was I to know your room had become a public apparition hub,” Draco growled, as he at last got his second leg into his trousers.

“Draco, I’d shake your hand to thank you for the best laugh I’ve had in ages, if it wasn’t for the fact that I knew where your hand had been,” Severus intoned, making Hermione and Neville burst into even further gales.

“At least it’s clean,” Draco muttered, causing more amusement.

He grabbed a shirt, pulling it on.
“I’d better go,” Snape said. “I apologize, Draco, for invading your privacy.”

“It’s my fault,” Neville said –

Too right it is,” grumbled Draco. “Mr ‘I-can-apparate-any-fucking-where’.”

“The thing is, I brought Severus up here for a reason,” he began.

Draco’s eyes widened.

“Not that reason,” Neville snorted. “Harry’d kill me.”

“No offence, Mr Longbottom, I might do that myself,” Severus smirked.

Neville stood his ground, and Severus was once again conscious of him as a man who had grown into a powerful wizard.

He held up his hands in apology and sat down on Neville’s desk chair.

The room itself, lush with plants and aromatic herbs, was a revelation, despite knowing of Neville’s passion for herbology. It was orderly, yet welcoming, the scents pleasurable; a room with surprising character.

Mind you, it looked as if it was occupied by all three.

Hermione sat herself on the bed and rested her head against Draco’s hip. Draco stood stiffly. But eventually huffed and sat down. Neville stayed standing.

“Hermione has some ideas about Harry. You need to be here too.”

“There’s some private – intrusive - stuff I need to ask,” Hermione said apologetically.

“Good,” Draco said, moving to the back of the bed and pulling Hermione with him. “At least I’m not going to be the only one embarrassed.”

“You have nothing to be embarrassed about,” Hermione turned and gave him a brief touch of her lips to his, “more like to be proud of from the view I had.”

Draco blushed and Snape said, “Do try and restrain yourselves a moment or two longer. Neville, do you have anything to drink?”

At the surprised shake of Neville’s head, Severus summoned a house elf, who popped back a moment later with a tray bearing both whisky and white wine.

Hermione and Draco took wine, Severus and Neville the whisky.

“Delicious,” Hermione said, sipping with pleasure. “Thank you.”

“Fire away then, Miss Granger,” Severus sighed, savouring the full depth of the flavour in his mouth.

“Actually, if we can talk about the ideas first that would be really useful,” she said. She shifted forward so that she sat cross legged; Severus ignored the flash of long lean leg, and the moment’s wondering about how he would actually feel if Harry used a depilatory spell and then wore stockings. The sight of Hermione’s feet through the fine silk, though, was rather attractive, and he’d never considered himself to have a foot fetish before.
“Well, these are both probably stupid ideas,” she went on, “but I’m just trying to think around the problem of getting Harry back here. We’ve really speeded up the magic cleansing, but I reckon we’re still talking three weeks, maybe a month?”

Snape nodded. “That seems about right, at the present rate.”

“He could go to a safe house but –“

“Come on, Mione, spill,” Neville cut through her bluster.

“Well, the first idea was whether you could ask the castle to admit him,” she said, looking at Neville. Into the silence, she continued, ”The castle lets Muggle parents come in sometimes, so it can change what it normally allows to happen, right?”

“But even Muggles have a tiny hint of magic to make it possible,“ Draco argued.

“You’ve found that when you’ve had a look in them?” Hermione asked.

“Yeah, Bert showed me. He had a couple of Muggle friends of his come over at Christmas and let me have a look.”

“And the castle let them in?”

“Dumbledore arranged it, I think,” Draco shrugged.

“Harry has no magic,” Neville said.

“Yes, I know, but the thing I was wondering is, well, the castle recognised him specially before, didn’t it? Let him adjust the wards and come in and out just like you do, Nev. So I wondered whether it might just recognise him anyway. If it’s sort of sentient. We could bring Harry here, get Neville to ask the castle and then get Harry to make contact with it –“

“How?” Asked Draco. “He can’t even see it.”

“Ah, but that’s not strictly true, is it? Even Muggles see a pile of ruins. So if he touched the old stones he can see....”

They all took pulls on their drinks whilst they thought about it.

“It’ll seem odd to the Muggles if they have to bring him all this way, he touches a stone and then they have to take him back again – if it doesn’t work,” Neville said.

“Well, I think we’re in the position that there isn’t any question that they will bring him if we request it, and we can make up some sort of meeting or something.”

It’s worth a try, I should think,” Draco shrugged.

“Harry might be disappointed,” Neville said. “He was really upset last time.”

“Yes, but this time he’ll know we’ll soon be able to get him in, when we’ve sorted his magic. It’s just a more comfortable protection from attacks if we can get him back into Hogwarts sooner rather than later.”

“He might be attacked here,” Draco said. “He won’t be able to defend himself.”

“I don’t think you need to worry about that,” Neville replied. “He took out 10 armed Death Eaters
“Not your father, you know that, right?” Hermione said, swinging back anxiously to look at Draco, her hand on his leg.

“I’d assumed I would have been told if he’d been taken,” Draco said coolly. “I suspect I wouldn’t have been sitting here having a merry wank, but on the other hand... Was anyone killed?” he asked, voice revealing little.

“Two tried to apparate holding him,” Snape answered. “He told them several times not to try.”

“And?”

“He knifed them both as they did. He didn’t budge, of course. They splinched.”

“Nasty. And surprisingly clever.” Draco’s voice was a little more animated. “So they’re dead?”

“One – Llewelyn is – “

“David Llewelyn? He was a stupid tosser anyway,” Draco interrupted. “He was always getting drunk at our parties. An idiot.” He sounded rather relieved.

The others in the room were guiltily aware that they hadn’t thought of the attack from Draco’s point of view at all, and were trying to make up for it with an excess of tact.

“The other?”

“Wilkinson. He’s not been found yet, though as he left half his leg behind at the scene it doesn’t look too hopeful for him either.”

“No. So what did Potter do with the others?”

“Used my poison-tipped darts on four, took a knife to Avery’s throat, got two of them to break their own wands and sent the last back to your father with a message to not mess with him.”

“Well, am I glad I chose the right side,” Draco sighed, putting a hand over his heart.

The others were all looking at him.

“What? Everything Potter does shows how wrong my father’s lot are to believe what they do. Even as a Muggle he can take them out. They haven’t a leg to stand on, even from the point of valid argument, let alone once you get into all the violence they perpetrate. So.” He sat up. “Did you have another idea too, Hermione?”

Hermione nodded, and then blushed. “Yeah. It may be silly...”

“Let us consider all possibilities, Miss Granger,” Snape said. “I take it you are going to ask embarrassing questions about our sex life. Pray elaborate on how this may be relevant.”

Hermione nodded. “I wish you’d call me Hermione,” she said, then turned to Draco. “First, I need to know – I mean, Harry’s magic is out of him in a big swirl – but when it’s in someone – what’s it like? Is it in every cell? Where does it reside?”

They all looked rather taken aback at this apparent diversion of thought.
“Um, well, I can feel it everywhere,” Draco said. “I’m not quite sure if I can feel it in every cell, though. It just – is.”

“And in Muggles?” she pressed.

“Same thing, really. I can sense the hint of it. I couldn’t name a location. There’s no magic organ, repository, or anything.”

“Mmmm.”

“Do go on – Hermione,” Snape said.

“Well, I was wondering about maybe transfusing a little bit of blood into Harry –“

“Gut feeling – no,” Draco said quickly.

“Why not?”

“Not sure. The blood is the conduit of everything in the body – I – it has a lot of importance for wizards,” he said feebly. “That’s the Pureblood talking, probably more than the Healer. I don’t know if I know enough to say for sure. I could talk to Bert.”

“Yes, can you?” Hermione asked. “That’s one route to explore.”

“You’ve other thoughts,” Neville prompted.

“Yes.” Hermione looked at Snape. “Ok, the embarrassing bit. I wondered if Harry bottomed. Or – or – let’s be blunt – sucked and swallowed.”

Neville choked.

Draco stilled, then slapped his thigh and cracked a laugh.

“Okay, that puts my embarrassment into context. Do answer our lovely sweet lass, Severus,” he grinned.

“Your purpose in knowing this is?” Snape asked, brows together.

“I was wondering – instead of a blood transfusion – I had a feeling that might be an issue – whether your semen – in Harry – might give his body enough magic to enable him to see Hogwarts. If magic is in semen. If the transfer would work. I know it’s a long shot –“

“Terrible choice of words, there, love,” Draco grinned, his hands slipping round Hermione’s waist and pulling her back once more. He was now thoroughly enjoying himself.

“Well, it’s an idea. And given that I don’t suppose either would object to renewing the donation regularly....”

“You’re amazing,” Draco nuzzled her neck.

“It’s an intriguing idea,” Severus said, taking it seriously. He rather appreciated Miss – Hermione’s - mind. She brought a fresh view alongside her formidable intellect, and she wasn’t going to let her personal embarrassment deter her. When that power was directed at helping Harry, who was he to argue?

“I would imagine our best chance might be for me to ensure Harry was – primed - shall we say,” –
he ignored the snorted laughter, though was in truth amused himself – “and Neville also asked the castle to recognise Harry and he did the hand contact suggestion. If it doesn’t work with both methods in place, then we should have a safe house set up and Harry could move straight on there, and then we concentrate our efforts on freeing his own magic. Also, the number of your father’s supporters must be dwindling, Draco. We can hope that the capture and interrogation of the Death Eaters today will help in apprehending him, and finishing off this opposition to peace. If that can be achieved, Harry, and the rest of us, can be safe.”

The sniggering had stopped as Snape’s words took a serious turn.

Severus stood up, weary, but surprisingly hopeful.

“My thanks to you all today,” he said quietly. “Draco, for taking my class. I trust there were no problems?”

“Nothing too bad,” Draco said, thinking of the narrow escape he’d had with one cauldron. “I’ll contact Bert Entwhistle to talk about a blood transfusion too. Oh, and I marked some homework – I hope that was alright?”

“I’m very grateful. Thank you. Neville, thank you for taking me, and Miss Granger, thank you not only for your ideas, but the Ministry owes you a debt – not that they will acknowledge it – for your skilful handling of the troops today. I’ll leave you in peace, and go and relate matters to the Headmaster.”

“Thank you, Severus,” Neville said quietly, as he saw him to the door.

“What for?”

“I could start with twenty years of spying,” Neville smiled, “but maybe I’ll just skip to the fact that you give Harry a reason to want to live. Goodnight, Sir.”

In the quiet of the room after he had gone, Draco stretched out on the bed and looked at Hermione and Neville.

“You really think he’s going to tell Dumbledore that it’s his duty to fuck Potter every day so that Harry can stay in the castle?”

“Good thing Harry is gay, and has Snape, is all I can say,” Neville threw himself down on the bed, sliding his hand up Hermione’s thigh. “Can you imagine if he wasn’t? What then?”

“I’d rather think about what now,” Hermione said, stretching out too so that her head leant back against Draco’s chest, one of her hands moving to his thigh and the other looping behind his neck as she pressed back against him. The position thrust her breasts forward, and Neville’s eyes dropped to roam over the swell, noticing the tightening of her nipples against her blouse, through the filmy lace of her bra.

“She has been such a tease today, Draco, you wouldn’t believe,” he said, voice deepening.

“Really?” Draco slid a hand round, finding a peaked nipple. Hermione moaned as his fingers rubbed over it. “Tell me.”
It was three days before Draco could arrange a visit with Cuthbert Entwhistle, because the Healer was engaged elsewhere.

When Harry had woken up, aching and feeling rather fluey, late the following day, he was surprised to see a nurse with him, and a doctor coming even before he asked to see one.

It was the pleasant lady doctor who had treated him all along, but one look at her face told him he wasn’t going to like what she was going to say.

At the end of the lengthy discussion, held with his Auror guards out of the room at Harry’s request, Harry lay in his bed for a good forty minutes, brain on overdrive.

He then asked an Auror to fetch him Kingsley Shacklebolt.

Shacklebolt was in the middle of interrogating prisoners, but imagining that Harry had something of importance to tell him, he came as soon as he could.

He found the young man dressed and sitting at his desk, reading.

“Mr Potter, you have some information for me?”

Harry looked at the Auror guards and asked them to wait outside.

Shacklebolt looked at him with surprise.

“I’m sorry to pull you away,” Harry said. “I haven’t any further information. I – I needed to ask you to arrange something for me. And I need a guarantee of confidentiality.”

Shacklebolt sat down.

He was glad he had, after Harry had spoken to him. Harry had asked to see Cuthbert Entwhistle – the only Healer, apart from Draco, he had heard of.

And Harry had explained what the doctors had told him, and that the knowledge of it was not to be repeated to anyone. At all.
Harry Returns To Hogwarts!

As Harry strode into the Great Hall, his overwhelming relief and joy was broken by suddenly becoming aware that the waves of cheering and clapping were giving way to shocked gasps.

It was amusing, he thought, that after everything that had happened, he had actually forgotten about his facial scarring, and the impact his mask would have on the students. His step faltered for a moment, but then the thought that he really, truly didn’t give a damn, rose up in his chest, and he held his head higher, moved down the aisle and took his place at the Gryffindor table, Neville and Ron slipping in on either side.

The cheering and noise settled down as Albus Dumbledore stood up.

“Well, well, everyone, it seems as if you’ve all rather enjoyed our surprise! We welcome back Harry Potter into our midst.”

The cheering broke out once again. Harry was busy shaking hands held out to him at the Gryffindor table – Dean, Seamus, Lavender, a sea of familiar faces.

“Now, one or two warnings.”

The hall simmered down.

“Do not be foolish enough to go up to Mr Potter and try to hug him,” he smiled, and was rewarded with a few chuckles, “or see if you can manage to get a spell in on our resident Mage, either,” he added, to much laughter.

“Mr Potter has been taking lessons at a secret location, and it may interest you to know that the reports that almost a dozen Death Eaters were apprehended last week is entirely true.”

There was a flight of murmur zipping round the hall.

“What was not published was that Mr Potter took out nine or ten of them, I believe, unaided, and, I understand, he decided to try out some new skills he’s been learning from our Muggle colleagues – just for the fun of it, I imagine,” – he said to more awed laughter, “and did so using only his newly learned Muggle techniques. I think we can assume he’s a quick learner,” Dumbledore raised his eyebrows at the crowd, working them successfully. “Now, it will come as no surprise to most of you that Mage Potter,” he stressed the title, “will not be continuing normal classes, which I rather suspect he has been using as cover for some time.” This raised some laughter. “Am I correct, Harry?” he called out.

“Aren’t you always, Sir?” Harry responded, raising his voice, provoking more chuckling.

“I try,” Dumbledore agreed, keeping up the banter. He turned a more serious face on the pupils.

“Only some of you are aware that we had the honour of the Mage teaching some of the members of this establishment – both staff and pupils – prior to the battle. Mr Potter is transferring now to staff chambers, and will be doing some research. If you see him in the corridors, I know you will all treat him with the respect he is due,” the Headmaster said severely, causing Harry to bow his head. “I know some of you will wish to pledge your allegiance, but I must ask you to respect the wisdom of our Mage: he has explicitly stated that at this point he will not accept any such pledges, and I expect he will make a statement of explanation when he feels it is fit to do so. In this, as in other areas of magical knowledge, we must bow to his greater authority. I hope you all understand?” he said firmly.
There were murmurs of surprise and acquiescence.

“Mage Potter has been kind enough, however, to offer everyone a unique opportunity. If you have questions about the nature of magic, the Mage is willing to consider each and every one, no matter how ridiculous it may seem to you, if your question is honestly meant. You may leave such questions by parchment for the Mage; he will either answer your questions individually, or, if he feels your question merits the attention of our wider community, he will be holding a discussion session covering what he considers to be the most important topics at a later date. During the course of history, such sessions have only been given by Mages at the Wizengamot or the International Council of Wizards, so I know you will appreciate the honour and think carefully about your questions. Now, the Mage must be starving! Let us eat!”

To Harry’s amazement, the first question he was asked was from Dean.

“Harry, mate,” he said casually, as he helped himself to some potatoes, “how come you’re sitting here and not up there?”

“I wanted to say hello,” Harry grinned. “I think I’m supposed to sit at High Table, but –“

“You missed us?” Seamus laughed.

“How I can bring myself to admit this I don’t know, but the truth is – I did,” Harry nodded. “What’ve I missed? What’s been going on?”

And to his relief and pleasure, especially after Dumbledore’s speech, they fell into ordinary chat and updating and no-one mentioned Harry’s face or anything else unpleasant.

In truth, Harry still couldn’t get over the fact that the castle had allowed him access.

He had laughed for the first time since the day of the attack when Severus had explained Hermione’s schemes, but the prospect of returning to Hogwarts as soon as possible had felt more precious than ever. He had made fierce love to Severus barely three hours ago, pouring his feelings into every touch, driving Severus higher and higher until Severus had slid, hot and hard and panting, into his waiting body and claimed him. His arse ached even now, reminding him with every shift on the hard bench of his lover’s driving thrusts and passionate possession.

On arrival at Dumbledore’s office, he had been greeted with warmth and welcome, but he had laid down clearly what he wanted – Albus was rather taken aback, he knew – but he had no time now for prevarications.

He had said straight up that he would be sharing Severus’ quarters, and when Albus had suggested that as a student it was better if they maintained the discretion of their prior arrangement, he had said that he would no longer be continuing his studies, but hoped Hogwarts was still willing to give him sanctuary anyway. And that, excellent as the old arrangement had been, now that he could no longer floo or apparate between his room and Severus’, his wandering of the corridors between his rooms and the dungeons was likely to cause a great deal more talk than a simple move, and expose him to the risks of jostling students.

Harry had turned quickly to Severus. “If you don’t mind me in your quarters? If it’s inconvenient, the castle could find me some rooms nearby?”

“If you are no longer a student, I see no reason to hide our relationship,” Severus said calmly, “not that it is in my nature to flaunt my personal life. But I am entitled to one,” he said, looking at the
Headmaster.

Albus nodded, again surprised.

Frankly, Severus himself had been gobsmacked. Harry had seemed full of decisions. However, secure in the knowledge of Harry’s affection for him, he was not one to throw a damper in the works. Maybe Harry needed him.

He thought, at Harry’s reception in the Great Hall, and the shock that Harry’s injuries had provoked, that he understood why. He himself had become so familiar with them, that he had forgotten the impact of seeing the damaged flesh, and was proud of the sudden tilt of Harry’s head, and the determination he read on his face to ignore adverse reactions. It was a relief to see Harry’s apparently pleasurable and normal meal with his fellow Gryffindors.

His eyes wandered to his own House table. He could see the whispering going on, though Draco was involved in some of it, and any Slytherins who were foolish enough to be plotting against Harry in the Great Hall weren’t worthy of the name.

He felt an excitement in his veins that he barely recalled feeling before. To know that Harry was here, would be living with him, in his bed every night and to wake up to every morning – and that he had no reason to hide the relationship – was absolutely liberating. He felt - well, he supposed it was happiness, this unfamiliar thing coursing it’s way through his body.

The next three weeks were a period of adjustment. Severus had never lived with anyone before – not all the time. And actually, it was good. He hoped that wasn’t because he was hardly there – he was still teaching, working on Harry’s magic, attending Order meetings and so on. But it was strange having Harry’s things in the wardrobe, his toothbrush permanently in the bathroom, a second towel always hanging on the rail. Harry there at meals – sometimes he sat at the High Table, and other times Harry went and sat at the House tables, just plonking down next to anyone and talking to whoever was there. Even if Harry wasn’t next to him, Severus found himself watching him.

Harry seemed intent on fiercely enjoying every moment together – and he felt like a man in a hurry.

Harry had asked Albus to call a meeting of the Order, and after the welcomes and salutations, he had got straight down to asking how many Malfoy sympathisers there were likely to be, and what the plans were for taking him out.

He had become surprisingly impatient, even, at the second meeting, being quite aggressive with Ron Weasley, much to the redhead’s annoyance.

There was something wrong.

Snape just couldn’t put his finger on it.

Harry too was adjusting. His doctors – two of them – were coming to visit him every week – they had already signed the Official Secrets Act – and it was made clear that this was covered by it. Harry had actually loved their disbelief, followed by wonder, as they finally realised that magic actually did exist. The sessions had gone much as he expected, and he had told them he saw little point in their continued visits – but after the first they were so keen to come again that he had
laughed and agreed, taking them on a brief tour of the castle and the classes happening within it.

Harry was cross with himself for blowing up at Ron, and went up to Gryffindor Tower to visit his friend. He felt like he’d forgotten how far up the castle Gryffindor Tower was, as he finally reached the portrait hole.

His experience of the castle was weird. The castle itself had allowed him entry, the food appeared on the table, but to Harry all the portraits were still. It made the castle feel surprisingly eerie.

He hadn’t thought how he’d gain entry to the Gryffindor common room, but fortunately a couple of Ginny Weasley’s friends turned up just as he got there.

“Why are you waiting here, Harry?” Fenella Smith asked, as she spoke to the portrait.

“Forgot to get the password before I came up,” Harry lied, following them in.

He looked around for Ron, and spotted him playing chess with Dean.

He came and took a chair by the side of them, feeling the stiffness in Ron. He waited patiently. He had got too used to sitting around whilst his injuries had prevented action, and he found himself dozing off.

Ron shook his shoulder.

He had been cross with Harry, but seeing his friend there, asleep, he was struck with how pale and fragile Harry looked – so different from the fierce Mage who had lost his temper with him the night before. He was suddenly cross with himself. Harry had been through so much, and lying there with his face mask and bodysuit on, just visible under the lightweight robe Harry had draped over the top, he realised that his friend was a long way from recovered. And he had come all this way from the dungeons to see him. His game finished, he flipped through a magazine for a while, and let Harry sleep, shushing people around who made too much noise, and staring down the spectators. In some ways, it was easier to let them have a good look at Harry in the mask, asleep, rather than awake. People couldn’t help their curiosity, after all.

Eventually, a loud noise made Harry stir, and Ron leaned in.

“You after me?” he said, as if Harry had just arrived.

“God, did I doze off?” Harry muttered, sitting up, rubbing a hand through his mane.

“Well, chess was never really your thing, let’s face it,” Ron smirked.

Harry smiled gratefully at Ron for his easy tone.

“Can we go to your room?”

“Didn’t think you cared, mate,” Ron grinned.

“You’d be shitting yourself if I did,” Harry retorted. “The kitchens, anywhere with a bit of privacy.”

“Come on up. I’ve got some chocolate frogs.”

Harry soon found himself stretched out on Ron’s bed. His legs ached, and he was glad to have them
up. The chocolate frogs were scrumptious.

“Come to apologise. I was a prick last night,” he said, licking the last of the chocolate off his teeth.

“Don’t worry about it,” Ron said. “It’s not like we don’t all agree that we need to sort Malfoy, it’s the how to do it.”

“I wondered if you’d had any ideas that you might not have mentioned?”

“If I’d had any good ones I’d have said them,” Ron answered, puzzled.

“What about the bad ones?” Harry asked.

“What?”

“You know, like when we used to do brainstorming. Sometimes throwing in the crap ideas can be really useful too. Something sparks off it.”

Ron sat forward. “Have you had a crap idea you want to share?”

Harry blushed. “I wondered if you had anything else. But I have got half an idea, just don’t know how to set it up. Hoped you could help.”

“Go on, then.”

“Well, it was the fact that when I was attacked, the wizards all used magic on me. And it had no affect.”

Ron leant back. “Yeah, but they’re not going to fall for that a second time, are they?”

“Depends. What I want to set up is a situation where I face Lucius Malfoy – “

“Whoa! You mean that?”

“Yes, of course I do,” Harry said, frowning. “I’ve got to take him out, Ron. And as many idiots who’re following him as well, so that none of them try to carry on this ridiculous nonsense. If we can get on top of this now, then people will have the opportunity to see what it’s like to have peace with Muggles. Once it works, then there’ll hardly be any support for any future Voldemorts. I mean, all we’ve done is pointless if people are still terrified.”

Ron leant forward again. “Harry, you do realise – it doesn’t have to be you any more? You’ve fulfilled the prophecy. Let someone else deal with it.”

Harry shook his head. “I mean it. I – my life is worthless if I can’t protect – if there isn’t peace,” he said, swallowing.

Ron knew just how stubborn Harry could be. “Alright, so does your idea go any further?”

“Well, hopefully they’ll be able to give me back my magic soon – in the next couple of weeks. So my idea is, we set this thing up where I meet Malfoy. He’s bound to be casting a shit-load of spells at me. If I have no magic, they won’t work.”

“But he’s not going to hang around for you to knife him, Harry,” Ron stretched out his hands.

“I know. But I want to be able to get right up to him. Then, if it’s possible, I want them to let me have my magic. Then I’ll take out the whole lot of them.”
“Wow,” Ron gulped. “Kill them?”

“I suppose that’s over the top?” Harry said. “I’d like to give them a last chance. Though, frankly, they’ve had plenty,” he said wearily.

“What’s the hurry?” Ron said. “Surely, when you’ve got your magic back, and you know it’s under control —“

Harry shook his head. “No. It gives me lots of power to not have magic – yeah, I know that sounds crazy – but the change will unbalance him, I hope, and then I can use it to finish this all… it can’t go on, Ron. It’s time. Past time.”

Ron sighed. “Let’s jot down what we need, then. Some reason to make Lucius come – and all the others – they need to be there, yes? And have you a spell to wipe them out? All at once? Surely you can’t AK a load all in one go? We need some information on how many there are likely to be….a location….”

Ron was off.

Two weeks later, Harry’s magic still wasn’t quite ready. Harry called for an Order meeting to focus on his plan. Ron laid it out, giving the information that he had.

“I’m sorry,” Severus said sharply, “why is this Harry’s responsibility?”

All eyes turned to the two of them.

“It was my job to defeat Voldemort –“

“You did that!” Snape snapped.

“Yes, but it’s not finished, not with his legacy still going on.”

“There’s a room full of grown men here – and witches – it’s not your personal battle, you know. I haven’t been working on sorting your magic for the last several months so that you can go and face Lucius bloody Malfoy without any!” he snarled.

Harry wiped a hand over his face. He was sweating and hot, and really couldn’t face Severus’ anger.

Though, he knew it would come. He’d just been putting it off. He’d forgotten how painful it could be to be on the other end of that glare and cutting tongue.

“Severus is right,” Bill began.

“No,” Harry said sharply, surprising Bill.

Severus stood up. “If my opinion is of so little value, I have marking to do,” he said coldly, and swept out of the room.

There was an embarrassed silence.

“Harry,” Dumbledore began.

Harry turned to look at him fiercely. “Albus,” he said sharply. “Once upon a time you swore
allegiance to me. I asked you to accept that sometimes I would know more about magic and I asked you to listen to me. Do I take it that without my magic you feel that no longer stands?”

His voice, cold and hard, echoed in the room.

No one dared speak.

“It still stands,” Albus said quietly, “but I also remember you asking for my advice too.”

Harry sank back in the chair, breathing deeply. “And that is?” he said distantly.

Albus sat back, and looked at the young man properly. Harry was flushed and sweaty, but there was something about him: he looked nearly as exhausted as he felt himself. Maybe being here, with magic all around but unable to be a part of it, was tiring the young man out.

“We have already asked too much of you,” he said gently.

“It’s irrelevant. You’re not asking,” Harry looked around. “I’m saying. It needs doing.”

“If that is the case,” Dumbledore said quietly, “then allow us to help in every way we can.”

Harry sat back in the chair, and nodded. “Thank you, I’d be glad of all possible help.”

When Harry arrived back in the dungeon, Severus was already in bed, his face firmly turned to the wall. Harry washed and slipped into the sheets, uncertain how to approach his prickly lover. In truth, he could understand Severus’ point of view, but he couldn’t give him all the facts.

Not yet.

Severus would understand then, he would see that Harry was acting logically.

He lay under the covers, back to Snape, feeling cold and alone. He knew he should talk to Severus, but he was deathly weary. The meeting had rambled on for a further two hours, and he knew he wouldn’t have the patience or energy to have the conversation he needed to have.

It would have to wait till the morning.

Severus lay there, still angry that Harry hadn’t even mentioned this scheme to him beforehand. Getting Harry’s magic clear had taken longer than they had hoped, the last spells resistant to the centrifuge and so global that they seemed to be embedded thinly throughout the whole of Harry’s magic.

Harry hadn’t cared what he thought, either, and that irked. So the boy was a Mage. Well fuck that, it didn’t mean he’d accept anything Harry said regardless. This was a relationship, not a takeover.

He would not be dominated by a stronger wizard again.

He had only just gone to bed before Harry arrived, and waited to see if Harry would make any approach to him – half of him too angry to want it, and the other half desperate to feel Harry’s small hand on his hip.

The touch never came.
They both slept badly.

Harry awoke late to find that Severus had already left.

There was a note on the table asking him to clean his rubbish up a bit.

So Severus was still cross with him.

Harry moved about the room aching and sweaty; he couldn’t ask the house-elves to help, as it was more a matter of sorting the piles of books he had been reading. Half way through Harry conceded defeat and returned to bed to have another half hour.

Severus arrived after his last class with a blinding headache. Voller had blown up a cauldron and he was furious with himself for not stopping it in time. He had a mountain of marking, Harry’s magic to work on, and all he wanted to do was sit down, have a tisane and fall asleep in his armchair. Unfortunately, there was a stack of books in his chair and that usurping of territory was about the only evidence that Harry had made any attempt to tidy up at all.

He went into the bedroom, anger building, to find Harry slung across the bed, the room smelling of sweat and unwashed boy, and suddenly his temper got the better of him. He crashed the wardrobe door open, exacerbating his headache, and waking Harry.

“Sev’rus? You back for lunch?” a rumpled voice mumbled.

“No, I have completed my day’s work.” Severus snapped, pulling a clean robe from the wardrobe to replace the stained one he was wearing. “That is, the first part of my day’s work. Seven hours of teaching useless, waste-of-my-time students. I have yet to spend eight or so hours marking, taking detention, attending to house problems, and working on your magic.” He pulled a clean shirt and trousers out too, deciding a shower might be a good idea. Harry could sodding wait for his, even if he did need it more.

“What have you done today?” he asked pointedly.

Harry rolled over, a hand thrown across his face. “Started tidying...”

Snape waited.

“That’s all?” he said. “Thirty seconds to move some books into my chair?”

“Was tired,” Harry muttered.

That was it.

“You’re tired!” Severus exploded. “What the fuck do you think I am? I am absolutely bloody fucking exhausted! I have a headache from hell and appear to have given my last dose of potion to some snotty kid who was probably pretending to get out of homework. I haven’t had time to brew for months because I am too fucking busy. And what have you done to make you tired? Bugger all! Do you know what?” he ground out, undoing his shirt.

Harry looked at the older man from under his raised arm. “You’ve done fuck-all since you got back. I know you don’t have your magic, but I thought at least you’d be taking your old lot running
and doing stuff in the gym with the kids. Albus said you were keen on an exercise class for the pupils. But somehow you were fine running round at the base with the hunky commandos, but you’re too far up your own arse to pull your finger out and do it with the kids here. You’re always nagging at everyone else to get on, but do you know what? You’re a fucking lazy bastard, Harry Potter. You don’t pull your weight and you’re all take and no give.”

He undid the buttons on his trousers, stepping out of them.

Harry’s silence irritated him even more. “It might be a good idea if you got yourself a room of your own,” he said at last. “I realise you need me to fuck you, but I’d appreciate having my study space to myself. And a bed that doesn’t stink of teenager that has probably been there wanking whilst I’ve been running around like a blue-arsed fly.”

Now naked, Severus strode over to the bathroom, walked in, and slammed the door behind him.

Harry lay there for a moment, his mind blank. The shower started up and he rolled slowly from the bed, wincing as he stood up. He felt like he had been hit with a bludger, mentally, physically, and emotionally.

Severus was right, of course.

It was surprising that he’d given him as much leeway as he had.

Harry pulled on the trousers he’d dropped on the floor before crawling back into bed, and the rumpled shirt. He shoved his feet into his shoes, and shuffled into the sitting room, stuffing his feet into them properly as he walked.

Severus’ note was still on the table.

*I’m sorry*, Harry scrawled on the bottom quickly. His eyes roamed the room. He wanted to get out before Severus came out of the shower, but he wanted to do everything to stop Severus being so cross. He fumbled a couple of paracetemol out of his pocket and put them on the table by the note. Severus knew what they were, and if his headache was really bad he might take them.

Dobby suddenly appeared.

“Dobby! Oh good!”

“Master Harry? Is you alright?” The house elf said, looking at the young man.

“Just tired. Could I ask you a favour?” He went straight on, not wanting Severus to appear, “I’m going for a walk. Could you change the bed so it’s fresh? And pack my things quickly and find me another room? Thank you so much.”

And before Dobby could answer, he was out of the door, relieved and wanting to cry at the same time.

Dobby startled him, popping up outside the door in front of him. He held Harry’s cloak.

“In case you is cold, Master Harry.”
Harry bent down and hugged the elf, taking the little creature by surprise. Dobby’s ears flapped against his head, and he awkwardly tried to pat Harry’s back.

“Thank you for everything.” Harry said. “It’s been wonderful to know you.”

The elf looked up at Harry, eyes huge. “Dobby will finds you when you come back in – you just calls for me, Harry Potter. Dobby will find you a nice room, yes?”

“Thank you,” Harry said again, standing up.

He hadn’t known where he was going, just that he needed to leave. With the cloak, he now had a direction, and walked along the dungeon corridors and up out of the castle. The lake gleamed in the late afternoon sunshine, and the air was fresh. Harry breathed deeply. He might not run, but he usually walked most days, and he headed off towards the lake.

Severus yanked open the door of the bathroom cabinet, and fumbled through the various vials, taking hold of a multi-purpose pain reliever that he usually used if Voldemort decided that kicking each other in was part of the evening’s entertainment. It would do.

Downing it in a gulp, he turned on the shower and then spent a long time under it, the water very hot, until at last he felt ready to wash himself, and let the last of the classroom wash down the plughole.

He’d ask Crabbe to supervise detention, he decided. He couldn’t face going back into a classroom again tonight. He stepped out of the shower and snapped his fingers for a house-elf, asking it to take the message to Mr Crabbe.

He began to dry himself, but in a moment of cowardice couldn’t face going out and seeing Harry’s hurt face. Or more likely angry. He turned and started running the bath, sitting down to cut his fingernails whilst it ran. He was angry with himself for taking his bad day out on Harry.

Well.

He was taking last night out on him too.

But he was also at a loss to know where the man he used to know was. Did magic make such a difference? Was Harry’s lethargy due to his lack of magic? It was understandable, he supposed. Worth a paper on, really, once Harry had it back. He wondered which journal would be the best to carry such an item. His thoughts wandered to the previous night. Why hadn’t Harry talked to him about his plans? He’d obviously talked to Ron Weasley. But then, in fairness, not only was Weasley one of Harry’s oldest friends, he was also one of their main strategists.

But Harry knew he’d not agree.

Which is why he hadn’t told him.

He’d act pretty much the same himself, he knew.

And Harry might be lazier than he expected, but he was getting through a hell of a lot of books.

He just wasn’t used to sharing his space.

His life.
It was all adjusting.

They’d get the hang of it over the next century or so.

He got out of the bath later to find the bed freshly made and the sitting room tidy, and smiled. So there was give and take, after all. His eyes took in the apology on the bottom of the note and the Muggle painkillers, and his heart felt warmed that even after he’d shouted at him, Harry had still thought to make him feel better.

He wondered which friend Harry had gone to see – he noted that his cloak was missing. Hagrid then. Hard rock cakes. He grinned, and headed off to spend a session on Harry’s magic.

They’d talk about his plan more sensibly later.

Draco had finished a flare-lit quidditch practice – they usually did several a year, just in case a game extended into a mammoth event - and was easing the kinks in his neck by taking a leisurely flight around the lake. The showers at the quidditch pitch were locked at this time of night, and the team were all heading up to the castle to clean up. He preferred to let them go on ahead; he would head up to Neville’s room in a moment, and shower there. There was a light drizzle – actually quite enjoyable when flying slowly – at fast speeds it bit into his face, making vision difficult and his cheeks smart.

A movement under one of the trees caught his eye, and he slowed, wondering what sort of animal it was.

It took only a moment to realise it was a cloaked figure, and he landed near, drawing his wand.

He cast a shield on himself, and then a *Lumos*, pointing it at the figure so that it would dazzle them and protect him.

“Draco, you’re blinding me,” Harry said quietly.

Wand down, Draco loped over.

“What on earth are you doing?” he asked, looking at Harry sitting wrapped in his cloak at the base of the tree.

“Fell asleep,” Harry said nonchalantly.

Draco’s eyebrows drew together. “Well, you’re soaked, you idiot! Why didn’t you go back to the castle?”

“Can’t.”

“Can’t? Why the fuck not?” Draco crouched down beside Harry. His instincts were screaming at him that something was wrong.

“Precisely.”

Draco reached out a hand and touched Harry’s head, feeling the heat there. “You’re delirious,” he said. “Come on, let’s get you back in.”

At Draco’s look, he explained, “You said, ‘why the fuck not?’ and I said, ‘precisely’.”

“Surprisingly, I remember that, Harry,” Draco retorted. “Come on, up you get. I’ll help you back in.”

“Kind offer, but I think you might want to go back on it,” Harry said, sitting still. “Need to be fucked to get back in. Can’t see it.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Guess I found out which bit meant I could get into the castle. We didn’t ‘fuck or suck’ last night, as Hermione would put it. Now it’s gone. Doesn’t really matter.”

Draco sat down beside Harry. He was obviously rambling, and maybe he needed someone to listen.

“Why doesn’t it matter?”

“Severus threw me out. No more fucking. No more Hogwarts. Don’t fancy anyone else fucking me. Or sucking anyone else, either. Like Severus’ cock –“

“Harry! Too much information!” Draco screeched.


He turned to Draco and grabbed his arm. “Tell him, Draco. Please?”

“Tell him yourself, you daft prick. We all have arguments. Come on. If we get up to the castle maybe even just a kiss from him’ll do the trick – bit of saliva – “

Draco was hoping like hell that they weren’t going to have to have it off on the front lawn. Severus and Harry, that was. No way was he –

“Don’t think I can do that,” Harry said.

“Kiss Severus?”

“Could manage that,” Harry grinned. “Can’t walk back. My legs have given up.”

“Did something happen?” Draco’s brows drew together.

Harry gave a half sob, half snort. “You could say that.”

Draco didn’t ask. He should have. Harry was conscious, if rambling. But without thinking, he slipped his hand under Harry’s cloak onto his belly and –

“No!” Harry shouted.

Draco was in just for a fraction. Harry had no magic to connect with. But –

“Fucking Merlin!” Draco yelled, falling backwards onto the grass.

Harry had sat forward, eyes fearful.
“Don’t tell anyone!” he said quickly. “You’re a Healer! Patient confidentiality!”

Draco, shaking, crawled onto his knees.

“Harry? You – you know?”

Harry slumped back against the tree and snorted a laugh. It wasn’t a pleasant sound.

“My body aches all over, my joints feel like I’m a hundred years older than Albus, my head aches all the time, nose bleeds, I’m dizzy, knackered – yes, Draco, I know.”

“I’ll get Bert Entwhistle –“

“I’ve seen him.”

“What? When?”

“Few weeks back. Before I came here. When I first found out.”

“He’s treating you?”

“You know he can’t. I’ve got no magic.”

“God! Why didn’t you say anything? Make us hurry up? We need to get it back into you at once.”

“I think it’s too late, don’t you?” Harry said quietly.

“I – Harry –“ Draco’s voice was horrified. From his brief view, he was surprised Harry was still alive and talking.

“It’s a bummer,” Harry agreed.

“Does Snape –“

“Know? No.”

“Dear god.” Draco found he was shaking.

Harry reached out and patted his hand. “Sorry for shocking you.”

Draco, to the surprise of them both, turned his hand over and grasped Harry’s. “I’m so sorry,” the words fell from his lips.

“Me too. Love Severus. So happy. But you know, it’s all drifting away already. Sort of. Haven’t the energy for feeling. Not - that’s not it, but... hard to explain. ‘Scruel and maybe not at the same time. Just – need to sort your father out. Then I can die knowing Severus is safe. You and Mione and everyone too, of course, “ he added. “Too tired to think or to talk. Can you help me, Draco?”

Unable to believe everything he had seen or heard, and even more Harry Potter asking him for help, Draco swallowed the lump in his throat and nodded.

“Sure.”

“Be nice to die here,” Harry said again. “Feel so peaceful. Don’t want to move. Just one more job to do,” he said, rolling over onto his hands and knees and forcing himself to his feet. He stood there and swayed, holding onto the tree for support.
Draco stepped forward.

“I’m putting you on my broomstick, Harry. I’ll hold you. Now, you won’t like this, but we’re doing it, alright?”

He slipped the broomstick between Harry’s legs and climbed on behind, holding him firmly. Harry was soaking, and his head lolled back onto Draco’s shoulder.

Gripping Harry’s middle with one hand, Draco got himself a mouthful of saliva, hawked it onto his own fingers, and trailed it over Harry’s lips.

“Open up,” he said quietly, and shoved the saliva into Harry’s mouth.

“Swallow.”

Harry did.

“Your saliva?”

“Yeah. Don’t fancy kissing you, Potter, you look like shit,” he said brusquely, to hide the embarrassment.

Harry laughed, opening again without comment as Draco repeated the gesture.

“Okay, let’s see if it works,” Draco said. “I’m going to take you to the infirmary.”

Harry’s head made a slight nod.

“Can I get Bert to have another look at you?” he asked, as he skimmed slowly low over the ground. The broomstick seemed reluctant to take Harry.

“Yeah. Get my Muggle doctors too. They might be able to help me hold on a week or two. Finish the job.”

Draco found that he was crying.

Severus practically bounced back into their chambers much later that night.

At last! At last they had finished clearing Harry’s magic! If it hadn’t been so late he would have suggested they transfer it back straight away.

He smiled as he noted, through the soft glow of the firelight, that the sitting room was still tidy, and made his way to the bedroom.

His brows drew together at the pristine bed, having expected to find Harry in it.

His heart began to thump as he entered the bathroom.

It was spotless, cleaned and tidied after his prolonged ablutions. A fresh towel hung neatly on the –

Eyes darting everywhere, Severus took in the single towel. Single toothbrush.

With a wandless Lumos, the lights blazed throughout the apartment.

No books on Harry’s side of the bed...he threw open the wardrobe.
His robes hung neatly, lifelessly unjostled by Harry’s hastily thrown-in robes.

No clothes in the drawer.

The sitting room was very neat, yes. 

*Everything* of Harry’s had gone.

He clapped his hands, and a moment later an elf appeared.

“Master Snape, Sir? What can Serry be getting you?”

“Where are Master Potter’s things?” he snapped.

“In Master Potter’s new chambers, Sir,” the elf said, huge eyes staring up at the Potions Master.

“And why is that?” Snape demanded.

“Serry is not knowing, Sir, Dobby is moving Harry Potter’s things for him.”

“Fetch him.”

Snape walked to the shelves, and with shaking hands poured himself a stiff whisky.

It was an unusually long delay before he felt the elf’s arrival.

Long enough to feel how lifeless his chambers felt, even though he had spent years alone in them.

Long enough to recall everything he has said to Harry in his anger.

“Master Snape, Sir?”

“Tell Mr Potter to come back at once. Or take me to his rooms,” he said briskly, slugging back the rest of his glass. He would tell Harry that they had finished cleaning his magic at last, and then make love to the stupid twit. Stroke that wild and lovely hair –

“Master Potter is sleeping,” Dobby said severely.

Snape looked at the implacable elf. “Well, bring his stuff back. There was a misunderstanding,” Snape ordered.

Dobby’s head rose. “I is only answering to Harry Potter,” he said firmly, and disappeared.

Snape stood there, empty glass in hand, bested by a house elf.

Slowly, he took himself to bed. The cold sheets were unwelcoming, crisp and smelling only of laundry soap. Severus twisted and turned. The brush of the sheets against his cock as he twisted reminded him that – he had not made love to Harry! Suddenly cold, he sat up, realising that last night too...so Harry didn’t *need* him – his physical contribution – to stay in the castle.

He knew he ought to be glad, but he only felt lonelier.

Draco stumbled into bed about four in the morning, sliding in next to Neville, who turned round, hooking his arm around him.
"You alright?" Neville asked, sleepily caressing his flank.

Draco had sent an elf, earlier, to say not to wait up for him, he had some work on.

Draco snuggled into the big body, taking comfort from the arms tight around him.

"That Arithmancy essay?" Neville mumbled. "Mione didn’t come to bed till two."

They had soon found they had different sleep patterns: Draco and Hermione often worked late into the night, whereas Neville tended to be ready for bed – and ready to get up – much earlier. After several nights when they had slept apart because of worrying about disturbing the others, they found they all preferred to end up together, whatever time it was.

Silence followed for a minute or two. Hermione was obviously dead to the world.

"Sorted Harry’s magic at last," Neville said dozily.

Draco jerked his head up.

"Really? All done?"

"Mmmm. Can put it back tomorrow. Have our evenings to ourselves at last."

Draco lay back, the moment of excitement washing away to leave more stupid tears threatening. He had spent the last few hours with Harry, Bert, and Harry’s Muggle doctor – he’d apparated to get him himself, so desperate had he been.

The tears were partly exhaustion, he knew.

He wanted to spill everything to Neville, seek the comfort he desperately wanted, but knew this was the start of really understanding about being a Healer. Just as Bert had never mentioned to him that he had seen or knew what was happening to Harry.

He sniffed.

"You alright?" Neville asked again, his large hand warm on his naked back.

"Tired," Draco said. "Was doing some stuff with Bert," he explained, when Neville started to unfurl from his sleepiness.

"Ah." Neville held him close. Healing was not going to be an easy road, he knew. The Healers who sporadically came and saw his parents usually looked worn and frazzled afterwards.

He held his lover close as they drifted off to sleep.

The next morning Harry was woken by a gentle shake on his arm. He turned, groaning. His body felt battered, and he recognised where he was by the smell alone – the infirmary had been a regular habitat over the years.

He cracked his eyes open to see Draco.

Gathering his thoughts, he sat up, taking the drink Draco handed him thankfully.

"You should be sleeping," he said to Draco, mouth and throat now lubricated.

Draco quirked his head at him.
“You were up till all hours,” Harry explained. “I’m grateful, Draco. Thank you. I’m sorry too, hadn’t meant to get you involved.”

“Forget that,” Draco brushed off the thanks. He pulled his seat closer. “Neville says that your magic is clear. Ready to go back in. They’re wanting to put it back in today.”

He watched the hope flare in Harry’s eyes, and then dim and extinguish.

“You know it’s too late,” he said quietly.

“We can’t know that,” Draco said urgently.

Harry lay back on the pillows and looked at him.

Draco ran shaking hands through his hair.

“Harry...”

“My brain hasn’t gone yet,” Harry interrupted. “It’s not that many hours since the conversation with Healer Entwhistle.”

“We don’t know – you know he said there’s never been a situation like this. Wait at least, till you’ve got the Muggle tests back. Decide then.”

“I’ve no loss in doing that,” Harry nodded. “I need to see Ron. I really need a good strategy, fast.”

“You’ll tell him?”

Harry was silent. “Yes,” he said at last.

“And Severus?”

Harry looked down. “I told you, he doesn’t want – it’s over.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Draco said. “And he’ll have to know why you’re delaying returning your magic.”

“I need to speak to Ron first. I need to know how to get your father – sorry, Draco – in front of me, with as many of his merry band as possible. I’ve got to finish it. What’s the point, otherwise?”

Draco was surprised that he really understood Harry’s motivation. He sighed. “How are you feeling?”

“Achy. Could be worse. I’ll be dressed in a minute – is it still breakfast? I’ll walk down with you.”

“You will not!” Captain Nathan Jones, Harry’s Muggle doctor said, coming in.

“You will not!” Captain Nathan Jones, Harry’s Muggle doctor said, coming in.

“Why not?” Harry asked.

Nathan took his blood pressure and temperature, looking him over all the while. “Do you really feel up to it?” he asked quietly. Poppy had appeared and was bustling around the room.

“I don’t know,” Harry answered honestly. “Thought I’d give it a try. I’ve got a lot to do.”

“I’m sure anything can wait –” Nathan began.

“It can’t,” Harry cut across him. “You know that. I’m sorry, I don’t mean to be rude,” he said
gently, "but in your terms, I haven’t completed my mission. If I can, then I will. I know you must have a lot of other patients and need to get back - ”

“Well, you’re wrong there,” Nathan said firmly. “I’ve just used the mobile Poppy lent me and I am your personal physician now until further notice. And Dr Hammond will be coming up this afternoon with the test results, and wanting to take some more specialist samples too, I suspect.”

Harry took in all that was said and unsaid. “I’ll be back up here this afternoon, then. I’d like to go to the Great Hall and I need to see Ron. Want to come and eat with us, then?”

“If you can stand several hundred bellowing youngsters at this time of the morning,” Poppy sniffed.

Nathan grinned. “I’ll come. I love it here. Still can’t believe my eyes.”

“Let’s get you dressed then, Harry,” Poppy said, his body suit over her arm.

Harry looked at it. “There really isn’t much point me struggling into that, is there?” he said.

There was a painful silence.

Harry picked up his robe and nipped into the bathroom.

They headed down to the Hall, Harry feeling deliciously free without the pressure of the suit. He had got Poppy to put featherweight and softening charms on his robes, so that they didn’t rub against his mangled flesh underneath. He hadn’t had any other clothes with him apart from the body suit, so he was going traditional. He had even dispensed with the mask. He felt lighter and better and much more himself.

He was feeling much better altogether and made the journey without problem, Draco and Nathan either side of him chatting amicably.

Heads turned as they entered the Great Hall, the young doctor being an attractive young man in uniform, who had been a topic of much interest around the castle following his recent visits. He had usually only been seen in the corridors, though, so his arrival prompted lots of excited whispering.

“Do you want to sit at a pupil table or with the teachers?” Draco asked.

“Wherever you’re going,” Nathan said easily.

Dumbledore and Severus both watched the progress of the men towards the Gryffindor table. Albus had been informed by Poppy that she had Harry in the infirmary and that Draco was fetching his Muggle doctor. He had had a brief memorandum that morning from her to say that Draco had also consulted with Cuthbert about Harry. He wondered what had occurred: nothing too serious, from the look of things.

Severus’ brows were drawn together. Why was Harry’s doctor here? He noted that Harry hadn’t got his mask on, and as he reached across to pick up a cup of tea, he realised that Harry’s arm was
bare. No special suit? Had it been agreed that today was removal day? He couldn’t remember Harry mentioning it.

He’d had a word with Albus to say that Harry’s magic was now hex and curse-free and ready to go back, and Albus had suggested they do the deed after classes that day. Things seemed to be tying in well, then; he wondered how much improvement Poppy would be able to wreak on Harry’s ravaged flesh.

He wondered too if Draco had already told Harry the good news - he bet he had; he must’ve known from Neville. He was irritated at the thought. It was childish, but he had wanted to be the one to tell Harry. Even more so today, when he had bridges to build and apologies to make.

Harry had sat next to Ron, with Nathan moving into place next to him.

He didn’t feel very hungry, but drank some tea and ate a bit of toast and marmalade. The conversation around them was busy, but Ron, as ever, was concentrating on his food.

“Ron?” Harry said quietly. “I need to talk to you.”

“Fire away, then,” Ron said cheerfully, picking up another couple of bacon rashers and dumping them into the egg yolk on his plate.

“Privately,” Harry said.

Ron turned his head. “Okay. I’m free after Care of –“

“Would you mind doing it before? It’s kind of important.”

Ron stared at him, and finished chewing his mouthful. “Okay,” he said slowly, “you ready now?”

He looked at Harry’s plate. “You haven’t eaten much.”

“Not really hungry. I’m done.” He stood up. “You alright here, Nathan?” he asked.

“Want me to come? I can be discreet.”

“You stay and eat. If I need you, Ron’ll come and get you.”

“Okay. This bacon is ace, by the way.”

Harry laughed.

Ron, puzzled at Harry’s words, followed his friend out.

“Room of Requirement?”

Much as the idea appealed, Harry didn’t know if he could attempt the climb. He’d been getting wheezy on the stairs.

“Na, let’s just nip into this class. It’s never used. Can you ward it, Ron?”

Moments later it was done.

Harry suddenly didn’t know how he was going to tell this dear friend. He’d been so busy focussing on what he needed to do...maybe he’d start there.
He sat on a chair and leant an elbow on the desk. “I need you to come up with an idea for getting Malfoy and his gang to meet me as soon as possible.”

“Well, you know I’ve been thinking about that, Mate; what’s the sudden hurry? Hagrid’s started getting really stroppy if you’re late -”

“I need to do it in the next week, ten days,” Harry said calmly.

“Whoa! Come on, Harry, let’s be sensible. That’s not going to happen. Besides, your magic isn’t ready – oh, blimey, have they done it?”

“Yes, all set and ready to go.”

“Right, well, I see your point. Want to get your magic back in as soon as possible, of course.” Suddenly he went bright red. “Ooh. You – you still having to - you know – with Snape - to stay in the castle?”

Harry turned his head away. The conversation wasn’t exactly going where he’d planned. “He threw me out yesterday, actually.”

“What?!”

“I’m too messy and lazy. I can see his point. Anyway -”

“Oh, Harry, I’m sorry. Can’t believe I’m saying that. But – you know. You liked him.”

“Yes.”

“So. Oh. Not the sex, then? Keeping you in the castle? Was it Neville talking – ?“

“It was the sex thing.”

“But –“

“Draco helped me out last night. I was outside and –“

“Draco? You let Draco fuck you? Bloody hell, first Hermione and Neville and now – is this a Slytherin takeover or something? Harry, surely somebody else –“

Harry couldn’t help his amusement at Ron’s horror, or taking the opportunity to tease.

“Ron, I never thought to ask you. I meant no offence – I really didn’t think you’d be willing –“

Ron was turning green and then white, his mouth opening and shutting like a fish.

“I – I – Harry – that is – “

Harry put his hand on Ron’s arm. “Stop panicking. I’d never ask you. It was only saliva, anyway.”

“You kissed him?” Ron was still horrified.

“No, he shoved a handful of spit in my mouth.”

“Oh! Eeww! Harry –“

“Well I’ll have to have someone else’s today, so stop going off the deep end, Ron.”
“Well, that’s – you poor sod.” Ron patted his shoulder sympathetically.

Here was his opening.

“Well, I wish it was the worst of my problems, Ron, but unfortunately it isn’t.”

Ron looked at Harry, and then said, his voice upbeat, “You know Harry, it was a shock at first, of course, but I don’t even notice your face now.”

Harry had to laugh. “That’s really comforting, Ron,” he grinned.

“Yeah, but you know what I mean,” Ron, aware of the size 12s in his mouth, was turning beetroot again.

“I do,” Harry smiled. “Thanks for that, though.”

“Shit. I’m useless at this comfort thing,” Ron rubbed his hand around the back of his neck.

“Don’t worry about it,” Harry said, deciding to try another tack. “I didn’t ask you in here for comfort. It’s because I can rely on you for strategy, and I really need to finish this off now.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know. There are Aurors, and others. It’s not your responsibility now, whatever pressure anyone puts on you.”

“I know that theoretically,” Harry agreed, “but I do feel responsible. And I’ll be able to go satisfied if I know everyone I care for is safe.”

“Go where?” Ron exclaimed, then sank back a bit. “I suppose you’ve got offers from all over the world. Sensible to take them up. Miss you, though.”

Harry gulped. He hadn’t known it would be so hard – hadn’t really let himself think about it.

“Sit down, Ron. I mean it.”


Harry plaited his fingers together in his lap. “We don’t know if it was Voldemort, or one of the others, but – well, something got by. After the battle.”

“What?” Ron’s brows drew together. “But they took your magic out. You still have a curse?”

Harry shook his head. “It could be that a curse set off a reaction even in the short time it was there, or that it was something that was going to happen anyway, or – well, no-one knows. The thing is,” he looked up at Ron’s intent face, and swallowed.

“Just say it. We can sort it out.”

“No, we can’t.” Harry responded. He looked up, took hold of Ron’s hand. He thought maybe it was he himself that needed the comfort of the contact. “I have leukaemia. It’s a cancer of the blood. It’s – well – it’s not very easily treatable in adults at the best of times, and – it’s advanced.”

Ron held on to the hand, turning it over. Looking at it. “What are you telling me?” he whispered.

“You know what I’m telling you. And that’s why I need your help. Please let me finish this properly, Ron. Lucius Bloody Malfoy. Please.”
The silence seemed to stretch.

“How long?” Ron got out, a choked out sound.

“A month? Two weeks? Five weeks? Not long enough,” Harry said quietly. “The doctors hope to have a better idea this afternoon. I – I won’t be active – for all of that. That’s why -”

Ron nodded.

They sat there, awkwardly, and yet it was strangely comforting too, after all.

“Who knows?” Ron asked at last.

“Draco. He found me last night. Poppy since then. Cuthbert Entwhistle, Muggle docs.”

“Not Severus?” Ron said, shocked.

Harry shook his head.

“You have to tell him.”

“I suppose it’s time to tell everyone – get this plan on the road. Maybe really brainstorm it with all the Order. No point pretending anymore.”

“How do you feel?” Ron asked, voice small.

“Tired. I’ve been better. Then again, I’ve been worse. There’s drugs they can give me - at the end. But I can’t do this drugged up.”

Ron nodded again, and stood up. “I’ll call an Order meeting for this evening – is that alright? You haven’t told Mione or Neville yet?”

Harry was suddenly tired and weary. “Will you? Or tell Draco he can? If you wouldn’t mind? I – could you get Nathan for me from the Hall? He’ll see me back up to the infirmary.”

Ron was just crossing the corridor to the Hall when Snape suddenly cut across his path. Ron knew at once he had been waiting for him.

“Mr Weasley? Surely you’re late for classes?”

Ron tried to pull his face together, but the muscles wouldn’t seem to move right.

“Ron? Are you alright?” Snape asked, voice suddenly concerned.

“Do you love Harry?” he blurted. “He said you chucked him out?” he added.

“There was a misunderstanding,” Snape said, drawing himself up.

“Yeah, Harry has no sense of worth after the Dursley’s,” Ron rambled. “He’d always think you didn’t want him if you made the slightest hint. Do you love him?” he asked again.

Severus’ brows snapped. “You are overwrought. Whatever makes you think I would answer –“

“Do you fucking love him?” Ron bellowed. “Because, if you do, get in there now, alright? I’m just getting his doctor. Do you have a class?”
Bemused by the behaviour and erratic questions, Snape decided to answer. “Yes, Mr Weasley, to the first, no to the second. Are you satisfied?”

“No. Go see him now. I’ll be back in a minute.”

Harry looked up as Severus walked in the door.

“You bumped into Ron,” he deduced.

“Yes. He was acting very oddly. Why is your doctor here?”

Harry looked at Severus. It was only half past eight but the day had been too long already.

“I’m dying,” he said baldly. Nathan and Ron had stepped in behind Severus. Harry looked at Nathan and said, “He’s with me till I pop my clogs, aren’t you, Nathan? I think he’s disappointed that it’s not going to be a long secondment.”
Severus’ brain went into the acute mode that it employed when in the presence of the Dark Lord – everything sharpened, lines became clearer, colours more intense, words more precise. Maybe it was the pressure of the likelihood of pain at any moment that did it.

Severus was aware of the breathing of the men behind him, Ron Weasley’s agitation, even though he was standing stock still, the other man’s reek of patience. And Harry.

Harry’s words were humorous, but his tone – and there had been the slightest hint of tremor in his voice. His face was pale, the dark hair unusually flat this morning.

Harry’s arms moved onto the desk, elbows on the wood, to create a prop for his chin. The naked forearms looked thin and vulnerable.

And suddenly, suddenly, Severus knew.

“You left your suit off because you’ve given up?” he said, unable to mask the shock in his voice.

He felt the doctor prompt him into the room.

“Alex – sorry, Harry – felt there was little point in enduring the discomfort of struggling into the thing. It was a logical decision,” he said quietly.

Severus found he was sitting down near Harry.

Ron was hovering by the door, and Nathan was kneeling next to his patient. “You up for this?”

Instead of responding, Harry looked at Severus.

“Severus? You can just hear this with the Order. No need to pretend –”

“Don’t be such a fucking idiot! I was pissy and had a headache. Thought we had a hundred years or so to get used to each other.”

Harry’s eyes stung with tears, the emotion surprising him. He had felt so flat.

“‘Fraid not. Sorry for making a mess,” he gulped.

“You should be apologising for not sharing this with me, but let’s get past that. Bottom line, as Weasley just asked me – of course I love you, you nit. Now, tell me what the fuck is going on. Are you comfortable?” he asked, sharply.

“Tired. Sorry.”

Severus looked hard at him, stood up and transfigured the chair he had been sitting on into a wide and comfy armchair, then held his arms out to Harry. Harry hauled himself to his feet and moments later was sitting across Severus’ lap, snuggled against his chest.

The feel of Harry against him was enough to make up for the embarrassment of being in this position in front of others.

Severus stroked Harry’s head, and then looked up challengingly at their audience.
“Ron. Transfigure something comfortable for our guest.”

“Ok! Sure! Sorry,” Ron quickly made another couple of armchairs.

“I can’t believe that that’s possible, and yet I can’t believe how quickly I’ve become accustomed to seeing it happen. Magic, that is,” Nathan smiled, settling himself rather tentatively into the chair, as if uncertain as to whether it might revert at any moment.

“Severus?” Harry said quietly.

“Mmm?”

“I know I should have told you – just us, and everything, but – now we’re here – I - would you mind if Albus and Hermione and Neville joined us? Draco knows, but him too. I haven’t the energy for lots of going over this. Nathan and Draco can explain. If you don’t mind, Nathan?”

“Sure. That seems a good idea.”

“Ron, fetch them,” Severus said.

“Tell Albus to get someone to cover my classes today.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Harry settled himself against Severus, enjoying his body heat. He shivered slightly, and Severus transfigured a rug, throwing it over them both. Nathan went and stood looking out of the window, watching first years with Madam Hooch.

“I’ll get up when they knock,” Harry said.

“You stay there,” Severus replied, his lips against Harry’s hair.

“You sure?”

“I’ve crawled in the dirt in front of Voldemort, laughed at by scum. I’m not ashamed to hold the man I love in front of friends,” Severus said, and found that he meant it.

“Oh good. ‘S’nice. Wonder how many years it would have taken us to get here if I wasn’t dying?”

“Too long,” Severus said, after a long pause. “We waste far too much time in life.”

“This is one of the best bits. Not wasted at all,” Harry said, his tongue just tasting the salt where Severus’ neck rose from his robes. “You taste good. Had to have Malfoy’s saliva last night. Couldn’t get back into the castle.”

Severus’ arms tightened. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, nuzzling Harry’s ear. “I never meant you to leave our rooms – not gone.”


“Yes,” Severus groaned, getting hard under Harry despite the shock and fear.

The door knocked and Harry muttered, wiggling his arse down against Severus.

“Bloody bad timing. Need you,” he buried his head in Severus’ neck, ignoring the knock.

Severus soothed a hand down his back. “You’ll have me. I’m letting them in now, okay?” and he
released the warding.

Albus came in, followed only a moment later, as his eyebrows were twitching in surprise at the sight in front of him, by Hermione and Draco.

“I’ve sent an elf for Neville,” Ron said, coming back in and busying himself transfiguring more chairs.

As an afterthought he summoned another elf, and a moment later, a tray with a steaming teapot appeared, cups rattling and clinking.

His mum always recommended tea for shock.

He needed some himself.

Harry sat snuggled, whilst Nathan, and occasionally Draco, explained about his condition. The shock and disbelief of his friends was comforting, really. He was only worried about Severus, though. Hermione had Draco and Neville, and Ron had his family for support. They would get over him. The sharp grief and guilt he had felt over Sirius’ death had faded, over time. It was natural.

But at the time, when it was fresh and raw and agonising...he’d had his friends, even though he was a bastard to them.

Who would support Severus? Albus was dying too. He didn’t doubt that Severus would find another lover, but it was too much change all at once. The end of Voldemort, the end of his mentor, the end of his lover. Maybe he’d leave Hogwarts. He could, if he was free. Harry needed to make sure he could do anything he wanted.

Rid the world of the bastard. Make his will.

He felt the tension in Severus mounting as the explanation went on. Harry had only half an ear to it.

Severus suddenly sat up straighter, propping Harry up straight.

“Let me get this right. Harry has some illness that you’ve known about for weeks, and you’ve done bugger all about it?” he demanded of the doctor.

Nathan looked at Harry. “There are several things to try, but Harry refused.”

Severus snapped him round. “Why?”

“Because they involve destroying the cells that make my blood,” Harry said quietly. “I talked to Cuthbert Entwhistle as soon as I knew. The chances of being able to have my magic back were minimal if we did that. It’s linked.”

But you would have lived?"

Harry shrugged. “The chances weren’t exactly great anyway. It was already rampant.”

Severus turned and pinned the doctor with his gaze. “So how is it that it should be so advanced? He’s been in your fucking hospital for months.”

It was awkward arguing from this position. Harry slipped off of Severus’ lap, taking the blanket with him, dragging it round his shoulders. Albus made him his own chair in an instant.
Snape continued to glare at Nathan.

“It’s not their fault,” Harry said in a small voice.

Everyone turned to look at him, the doctor included.

“They had the first dodgy results ages ago. The doctor said my bloods were developing something strange. The Auror who was there at the time thought it would be to do with my magic, them being linked, so he cast a spell to make the blood tests forgettable.”

“And you let him?” Severus growled.

Harry hunched down. “I though maybe my magic was reasserting itself. Growing of its own accord. It had to have come from somewhere. It has to grow – I wasn’t always as powerful as I – was, before... I hoped it was coming back, and you wouldn’t have to bother doing the untangling.”

Snape heard the small voice, and felt the days of longing and wondering and hope that Harry must have had, and never mentioned to a soul. The disappointment that must have been inevitable. He wanted to hex him and hold him and – blast and shit!

He looked at Draco. “So wizards don’t normally get this?”

“No, their magic must give them protection,” he said quietly.

“So we put Harry’s magic back this morning and it’ll sort it out. Why are we sitting here?”

“Severus – it – I don’t think –” Draco stumbled.

“What? Why isn’t Entwhistle here? This is obviously beyond you,” he sneered, his old armour falling back into place.

“Yes, it is! “ Draco snarled. “I got Bert last night, alright? I’m not stupid!”

“And? Get him again! He didn’t know Harry’s magic was purified now.”

“Severus, don’t shout at Draco, he’s been a real help,” Harry said. “We talked about the fact that my magic should be ready soon, last night, with Cuthbert. He has little hope that anything is possible, now.”

“Well, little is better than nothing! If it gives you an extra few years.....”

Harry swallowed.

“What?”

“My system is so weakened that it’s more than likely to finish me off,” Harry said.

“Did Entwhistle say that?” Dumbledore asked.

Harry nodded.

“How far advanced is this illness, Harry?” Albus said gently.

Harry looked at Nathan.

“We’ll know better when the results come back this afternoon –”
“Give an approximation, then,” Severus snapped.

Nathan steeled himself. “A month? Give or take a fortnight either way?”

“No. No, no, no,” Severus was up, prowling, shaking his head. “That can’t be right. Look at him! No!”

“Severus—”

“I don’t believe it,” Snape said. “That is nonsense!”

Hermione’s sob echoed in the silence that ensued.

“So what treatment have you been giving him?” Snape said at last. “If we can get him stronger, then we put the magic in a bit at a time, now it’s all cleaned through—”

“Severus, I spoke to Ron first because I need to take out Lucius—”

“Malfoy? What the fuck has he to do with anything?”

Harry looked at Ron. He was copping out, but it was too much. They all knew. He wanted to lick his wounds and sleep. “Ron. You explain.” He slid down so that his back was to them, lay sideways across the chair, pulled the rug around his ears, and shut his eyes.

Albus stretched the chair into a sofa so that he could straighten out. Nathan came and felt his forehead and took his pulse again. “I’d like to get him up to the infirmary again,” he said quietly. “Have you got some magic to help get him there?”

“Harry! You’re deliberately doing that!” Snape went over to him, leaning over to take his face in his hands, regardless of the furious protestations from the others in the room.

Big green eyes looked into his. “I am,” Harry nodded. “But Ron’ll tell you. I’ve had enough.” His hand slid out to grasp around Severus’ wrist. “See me this afternoon?”

Severus, despite his anger at Harry and the fury in his chest at fate, nodded, his hand briefly curling around Harry’s as he drew his fingers away and tucked the hand back under the covers.

Later, he was crosser still, and knew just why Harry had avoided telling him.

Albus sat with him in the infirmary.

Harry was fast asleep, curled around himself in the bed.

Dr Hammond had been and talked to Dr Jones, then shared the results with them, Nathan having explained that Severus was Harry’s partner and now in the know.

“Severus,” Albus said gently. “There’s little time and only two ways to play this.”

Severus stared at the old man. “Yes? What do you see my options as being?” he asked, voice harsh.

“You can fight Harry, or you can support him.”

“Is that it?” Severus said sarcastically, after waiting for more.
“That’s it.”

“Well, that’s just wonderful –”

Albus held up his hand. “Harry has rarely asked anything of me, but he has asked me to understand that he knows things. This is important to him, Severus. Would you deny him that?”

“And just let him die? There are others to deal with the crap, Albus, why do you still expect it of him? Hasn’t he bloody done enough?”

“He has, more than enough, of course. But now we’re talking of what he wants to do. I know how it feels to be approaching the end of your life, to be weighing up your achievements and looking to see what else you can manage. Everything becomes very clear. Harry’s very clear about this – he has been from the very minute he knew Malfoy was stirring up trouble. Can you not let him go knowing that he had done everything – that we had helped him to do everything that he possibly could?”

“There’s a chance he could live –”

Albus was silent.

Severus sunk his head into his hands. “I know I’m clutching at straws. But I – how can I give up hope, Albus? I can’t,” his voice cracked.

Dumbledore leant forward, patting his hand. “A month or so back, Neville Longbottom offered to take the wards from me, so that I could do what I wanted before I died,” he said conversationally. “I was astounded. It was one of the best offers I have ever had. To have the freedom – untroubled by feeling that I was letting anyone down – to do what I want. I can’t tell you how easier my heart has felt for having that offer.” He paused. “Can you not make that offer to Harry, Severus? To put his needs before yours?”

“He’s doing it for everyone else,” Snape hissed.

Harry stirred in the bed.

“Yes, but he needs to do it for himself too. He needs to know you’re all safe. He loves you, my dear boy. Can’t you see that?”

Harry woke late that afternoon. Albus was sitting by the bed, flicking through some travel brochures.

Harry swallowed. “Severus has gone?” He couldn’t keep his distress from his voice.

“He’s brewing potions,” Albus said gently. “It’s how he thinks. Where he finds comfort.”

Harry turned over, onto his back. He was hot, and sweaty.

“A drink?” Albus offered.

Harry gladly drank down the cool pumpkin juice.

“I need a shower,” he sniffed himself. “I don’t know where to go,” he said, his voice forlorn. “I don’t want to stay in the infirmary.”
“I would think in your chambers with Severus,” Albus suggested.

“He doesn’t want –”

“He asked Dobby to move your things back. Last night, I might add, not just because you’re ill.”

“He might have changed his mind.”

“Well, if you’re alright to wait a little, there are things it would be best if we discussed.”

“Oh. I’m not changing my mind.”

“I know. But you really ought to make a will, Harry. Have you given it any thought?”

Later, Harry stepped out of the shower in Snape’s chambers to find Severus standing with arms spread, a towel draped between them, waiting for him to walk into it.

“Was – was it alright for me to be here?” Harry asked nervously.

Severus stepped forward and began to dry him.

“If I haven’t got you for long then I’m not missing any of it,” he said firmly.

Harry flopped against him, more relieved that he could believe.

“I love you,” he whispered, holding on tight.

He felt the big intake of breath into the chest under his nose. “And I you. Nevertheless, you are getting me all wet,” Severus said severely.

Harry stood back grinning, allowing Severus to dry him. “Perhaps you ought to take off those wet clothes,” he suggested hopefully.

“That’s your best suggestion today,” Snape growled.

Some time later they stirred from their position in Severus’ bed. Their bed. Harry didn’t want to move. Severus had made love to him with tenderness and passion, and it had been heartbreakingly wonderful, every touch, every nuzzle, as if Severus was trying to coax every ounce of pleasure he could out of Harry’s body, and at the same time imprint the memory onto his own brain.

Harry’s hand stroked lazily over Severus’ chest, ghosting over the curling hairs and down, feeling the muscles of his stomach. His fingertips trailed down, rounding across to slide over the hip, down the curve of thigh and back up the inside. Severus’ legs fell open, allowing Harry’s fingertips to trace the rippled skin of his scrotum, like an enlarged fingerprint, Harry thought whimsically, before they headed up, running along each side of Severus’ beautiful cock, tracing around the head.

Harry slid down, his head level, just looking at the organ that had given him so much pleasure, before leaning forward to suckle it into his mouth. The cleaning spell Severus had used after he had pulled out of Harry had left it bland, yet the sweet scent still seemed to fill his nostrils. Harry tongued the responding organ.

“We haven’t time,” Severus groaned. “Not unless we skip the Order meeting. Sounds a good idea,” he thrust his hips a little.
Harry ran his tongue one last time around the head, and reluctantly pulled off. “We’re going,” he said, “just couldn’t resist having the feel of you in my mouth. I dreamt about it earlier,” he blushed.

“Did you indeed?” Severus smirked, brushing his lips over Harry’s, then darting his tongue inside to taste once again.

At last they were up and dressed. Out in the sitting room, Severus handed Harry a potion bottle.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“I took the liberty of talking to Entwhistle and the other two doctors. This should help your blood a little: you should feel a bit less breathless, less tired. It can’t harm you.”

“Thank you,” Harry smiled, and downed the vial.

“Eeuk! Doesn’t a dying man warrant a decent flavour?”

“I’ll give you a decent flavour later, if that gives you the energy,” Severus smirked.

“Now that’s the best reason to drink one of your potions I’ve ever heard,” Harry grinned. “Not that I think you ought to offer it as a general enticement,” he added.

Snape chuckled, and in a surprisingly comfortable frame of togetherness, they made their way through the castle.

In Albus’ study, they fought their way across the crowd of extra chairs that had appeared. Harry wondered why they didn’t just use a bigger room, but he could see that the jiggly shambles got people talking and comfortable.

There were two armchairs left, and parting company, they took one each.

“Well, dear friends,” Albus said, “thank you all once again for coming at short notice. We’ve reached a situation where we need to move urgently, and your ideas are sought. Ron, could you outline the plan?”

Ron explained what Harry wanted to do, apologising for the fact that he had not yet devised a method for bringing it about.

“So Harry’s magic is cleared up?” Molly asked. “That’s wonderful news, dear! Of course you want to get it back as soon as possible. But why this plan? Surely, as a Mage, you can sort out Mr Malfoy and his cronies anytime? Of course, it’ll be wonderful not to have to worry anymore, but –”

Several knowing eyes – Ron, Hermione, Draco and Albus - had turned to Harry, and he sat up in his seat.

“What?” Mrs Weasley asked. “I don’t think I said anything silly, did I, Arthur?”

“You didn’t at all, Mrs Weasley,” Harry smiled at her. “The thing is, I’ve had some rather bad news.”

Severus choked back a snort at the understatement, but Harry avoided glaring at him.

“I asked for this meeting, and I’m very sorry to inconvenience you all, and bring you out when I’m sure you had lots of other things to be doing. I must ask another favour and ask you to keep the next week or so free, because I’d really like to get this over and done with by then.”
“But Harry –”

“I’ve got a suggestion,” Draco said quietly.

All eyes turned to him. He was sitting on the floor beside Hermione’s chair, and it was pretty obvious that she didn’t know what he was going to say.

“Arrange a quidditch match here. School best versus some big names. Pull some strings. Harry Potter to award the trophy – he’s not been seen in public since before the battle. I’ll play seeker for Hogwarts. Father’ll have an open opportunity to a) get into Hogwarts, b) to take a pop at Harry, and c) to do me in.”

There was a stunned silence.

“How can we protect you up there?” Hermione said quietly.

“Would your father risk coming?” Bill asked. “He’d know there’d be loads of security. Not to mention a Mage to deal with.”

Draco looked straight at Harry. “It might help to give him a hint that you’re vulnerable at the moment, but suggest you won’t always be. A window of opportunity, to entice him.”

“What, like pretend he wasn’t really recovered yet?” George Weasley queried. “We’ve got one or two products that could help with that.” He turned to his brother, a grin on his face. “Fred, you know the –”

“What bad news?” Remus asked, cutting across the twins and reverting to Harry’s earlier comment.

Harry took a deep breath. His eyes skittered round the room, hit Molly Weasley, and shot to Severus.

Snape bit off a laugh, and got up and stood behind Harry, a hand on his shoulder. “You killed Voldemort. You can’t be scared of Molly, surely?”

There was a sudden silence in the room, then Fred said, “Good instincts, there, mate, with you all the way on that one.”

“Excuse me!” Molly bristled. “Since when was I scary?”

Every Weasley in the room avoided looking at her.

“Humph!” Molly breathed. “Really! You say anything you like to me, Harry dear.” She looked at the proprietal Potions Master. “If you’re having an affair with Severus, I’m delighted. What’s all the fuss about?”

There were some shocked gasps, and Harry grinned, relaxing a bit. “I certainly don’t regard my affair with Severus as bad news,” he chuckled. “It’s the best thing that’s ever happened to me.” His hand went up his shoulder, grasping Severus’. “Unfortunately, the bad news rather spoils that, and, it’s why I’m in a bit of a hurry.” He looked around the room. “I’m awfully sorry everyone’s gone to such a lot of trouble and effort to protect me over the last few months. I know it’s taken up lots of your time. Unfortunately, you could say another enemy got to me anyway.” He breathed in, hard, and gripped Severus’ hand tighter.

Mouths that had opened to question shut again at the glare from Severus from behind Harry’s
“Please don’t fuss. I’ve seen two excellent Healers and Muggle doctors. Unfortunately I have very advanced cancer, so I’m not going to be around much longer. I don’t want to discuss it,” he said quickly above the roar of protest surging in the room. “I just want to finish this, and I need your help. Please.”

With words cut from them, a horrible, fraught silence filled the room.

“I think Draco’s idea sounds excellent,” Bill said at last. “I can get Thomas Finn – the beater from Falmouth Falcons, I’m sure. George, Fred, you can talk to Ollie Wood, can’t you?”

Everyone moved eagerly into planning the match.

“When are we arranging this for?” Fred asked.

“Next weekend?” Ron looked at Harry, who nodded. “I suggest we arrange it as a school event.”

“But that won’t –” Tonks began.

“Then leak it to the press,” Ron continued. “Make it look like we’re setting up a special school thing. Parents welcome. That’s all. No obvious high security needed. Of course, you’ll have the place stuffed with Aurors, Mr Shacklebolt, yes?”

“Certainly,” the Auror’s deep voice agreed. “We’ll have two or three obvious ones – always do, with celebrities around – the rest mingling with the crowd.”

Details were thrashed out.

“What if he doesn’t bite?” Neville asked.

“Then we all enjoy a good quidditch match, and deal with these problems in the fullness of time,” Dumbledore said calmly.

Arrangements were made for various sub-meetings setting up the event, taking care of protection spells, and so on. The meeting began to wind to a close, but people were reluctant to leave.

Harry cleared his throat, and as if hyper-alert to his every move, conversation stopped and all eyes turned to him.

“Before you go,” he said, “I’d like to ask one more favour. Albus was kind enough to talk to me this afternoon about my will.”

There was a shocked murmur.

“Please, these things have to be done, no good pretending. Actually, I was very grateful – I had no idea about wizarding customs in this respect, but Albus tells me that traditionally, wizarding wills are made in front of six or more witnesses. Can I ask you all to witness mine?”

Arthur Weasley sat down again. “I’d be honoured, Harry,” he said quietly.

Everyone followed his lead, and Harry picked up his bag from beside his chair and withdrew some envelopes.

“Griphook, from Gringotts, came to see me – you can see I’ve had a busy day,” he gave a little smile. “He made some interesting suggestions, which I’m following through on. For example,
some of the things I want to pass on, I’m doing now. It feels a bit like Christmas,” he grinned, “right down to that horrid feeling of embarrassment about the people you’re not giving gifts to. I hope I’ve remembered everything – everyone - but if I’ve missed you out – tough!”

His words made everyone laugh.

He handed an envelope to Hermione. “So these are gifts. If there’s a miracle and I live, I still want you to have them, ok?” He suddenly changed his voice, so it was more formal. “I, Harry Potter, do make these gifts of my own free will, in the presence of witnesses, with effect from this date.”

A quill and parchment had appeared in the corner, writing the words as Harry said them.

“To Hermione Granger, a key to a vault in Gringotts in your name. It contains the number of galleons marked on the document enclosed, invested at present on your behalf, to spend as you wish, but sufficient to purchase a flat near a university.”

“Harry,” Hermione said, then for once, found herself not finding any words.

Harry just smiled at her.

He handed an envelope to Ron. “To Ronald Weasley, I give the land at Godric’s Hollow.”

There was a rush of murmuring at that.

“Ron,” Harry said, less formally, “even if I was to live, I never want to live there. Do what you like with it – sell it, to buy your own place, build yourself a house there if it’s a nice place – oh, there’s a key to a vault with a bit of money for building – “ he handed that over – “has that quill recorded that? Does it need to?

“Oh, good, that’s ok. I’m not very good at this,” he brushed the hair from his face.

“You’re doing fine,” Albus said. “This is very exciting.”

“You don’t know the details?” Shacklebolt asked him, leaning in next to the old wizard.

“No, no, he thrashed it out with Griphook. Isn’t it lovely?”

Harry picked up another envelope. “To Neville Longbottom, my house in Hogsmeade.”

“Harry! I can’t take that!”

“Why not? You did all the work on the garden. I know you’ll be around Hogwarts a lot, but sometimes it’s nice to be just that bit away. You can sell it, if you want, it’s yours.”

He picked up another envelope, and wafted it in his hands a little. “To Draco Malfoy –”

Draco swung round, staring at Harry. “What? You’re giving me something?”

“Number 12 Grimmauld Place.”

“What!”

There were several screeches around the room, and some muttering from older members.

“I may do with my property as I will, you are witnesses, not advisors,” Harry said sharply. “Sirius Black left me the property, as you know. Draco, however, was related to him, which I was not, so it’s only appropriate that the property should go to him. Why this should surprise anyone I don’t
know. I’m delighted to be able to do this: Draco is a man of impeccable character; he had given up
everything – his family, his inheritance – to do what he believes to be correct. Even today, his
courage – well, I don’t know if I could have given myself up as a target for my own father. He is
also a caring Healer and I know is going to make a major contribution to the wizarding world. And
I suspect the house may have several occupants, who hopefully, will make it a much less miserable
place and bring, in time, some family warmth to the wretched thing!”

Draco was crouching on his knees, unbelieving. First Neville had killed to protect him, and now
Harry was standing up for him - he felt his face tighten. He couldn’t want to cry, could he?

Harry just smiled at him, and moved on, diverting people’s attention.

“Now we get to the bits that I’m not passing up until I turn up my toes – sorry folks!”

The laughter was there, but rather strained.

“To Mr Arthur Weasley – some shares in Muggle companies. I thought you might like the chance
to get involved, Sir.”

“Oh, Harry, splendid! That’s – oh, very exciting! Thank you!”

“To Molly Weasley – Mrs Weasley, I didn’t know what to get you, I’m so sorry – it’s a key to a
vault, just a little bit of money I want you to spend on yourself. I’m sorry that’s boring.”

“Harry, dear –that’s very thoughtful of you. Thank you, and I hope I never come to receive it. I’m
sure miracles can happen, you know.”

“Thank you, Mrs Weasley, but you won’t be thanking me in a second. To Molly Weasley,” he
intoned, “a task, I’m afraid. To administer a fund, to ensure the safety of pupils and future pupils as
discussed with the Headmaster and Professors Snape and McGonagall at the beginning of the year.
Professors, can you discuss this with Mrs Weasley? You know what my concerns were. Mrs
Weasley, there’s a salary for the administrator. I hope you won’t mind setting this up; do feel free
to delegate it to someone else if you want.”

“Well, yes, I’ll look into it and – what a good idea. “

“Can I change what I’ve said?” Harry asked. “This should go ahead from this moment, whether I
live or die.”

“Duly noted,” the voices of the older members stated, followed at once by the younger
participants.

“Oh, good,” Harry smiled. Then he grinned at Severus.

“What is that wicked look, Mr Potter? Are you about to embarrass me?”

“Would I do such a thing, Severus? Merely – to Severus Snape – my shares in Weasley’s Wizard
Wheezez.”

“Harry! What?! You bastard!” George leapt up.

“No, no, George, that’s brilliant,” Fred grabbed his brother. “A Master Potions Maker on board?
Think of the potential product range.”

“Good point,” George sat down, beaming.
“Did you think I needed further reasons to try and keep you alive?” Severus asked, glaring at Harry.

“Thought you needed the prospect of a bit of fun,” Harry grinned, not brow-beaten at all.

The mood had lightened quite considerably.

“Right,” Harry said awkwardly. “Almost there. This next seems a bit odd to me. Albus said that a wizard’s wand is considered – special. Sort of revered. That it holds some of the wizard’s power, or style, and is a valuable gift?”

“That’s true, Harry,” Remus nodded.

“Oh. Well, I hope it doesn’t seem odd then, if I leave my first wand – my holly and phoenix feather wand – to Hogwarts? I don’t really know what you’ll do with it, stick it on the shelf with the Sorting Hat or something...And I know it’s silly, but I wanted to leave you my broom.”

That’s very generous, Harry,” Albus said. “On behalf of Hogwarts, my gratitude.”

“Oh, right, that’s ok,” Harry said sheepishly. “Well, just the last stuff, then. To Severus Snape, I leave the rest of my possessions, the keys and contents of my vaults, and all and everything remaining.”

There was a stunned hush, and then, out of the blue, Moody’s voice.

“Slimy bastard. Knew he was fucking the boy for something.”

In the shocked silence, no one moved.

“Mr Moody, would you care to elaborate?” Harry said icily.

“ Forget it, Harry,” Severus said.

“I will not. State your view, Moody.”

“He knew you were a Mage. And an impressionable boy. Of course he took advantage of it.”

“I see. So even before I was as scarred as you are, you feel that he could not have found me an interesting prospect.”

“Oh, I’m sure the thought of a juicy young arse was an added bonus –”

“Alastor!” Albus rebuked fiercely.

“But you think his primary motivation was allying himself to a Mage.”

“Of course. He likes creeping to powerful wizards.”

There were shocked gasps. Severus’ long fingers smoothed over the arm of his chair, a fingernail tracing the pattern in the chintz.

“Professor Snape had no idea I was a Mage when we started our relationship.”

“Really? Then he was happy to fuck a school boy? A pupil in his charge? Oh, he’s an outstanding moral figure,” Moody sneered.
“He neither knew I was a school boy, nor that I was Harry Potter,” Harry said quietly. “In fact, he almost killed me when he found out, to find that he had compromised his moral views on teacher-pupil relationships. If you wish, you may accuse me: Severus Snape was a pupil of mine—”

“Excuse me?” Moody interrupted.

“As a Mage, I undertook to teach a number of wizards in this school in September. Professor Snape was one of the pupils I selected. There are several others in this room that were pupils, or can attest to the classes. They were chosen, by me, on the basis that they were not fulfilling their potential power.”

Harry looked around. “Just for the record, at that first meeting, I told the pupils of their power levels. When Albus dies, and I suspect it will only be a year or three after me,” he smiled warmly at the older wizard, who nodded happily, ”Severus Snape will be the most powerful wizard in the country. He knew how high he ranked. I assure you, he has no need to ‘creep to powerful wizards’. That he did so, to save the skins of so many of us, shows unimaginable courage.” Letting that sink in, Harry turned to Neville. “Nev, I wish I did have my Mage powers at the moment – I’d love to review you – I think yours have been growing! But then, growing things is your forte, right?” He looked back across at Moody. “Your apology after the meeting will be most welcome.”

There were snorts of amusement all round, with little attempt to muffle them.

“Right, can I finish off?” Harry said. “To recap, all my remaining possessions, left to Severus Snape,” he said, voice as clear as cut glass, ”and in particular, with love and in honour of his profound integrity,” he stared at Moody and then swept his gaze around the room, “my Mage wand and Mage staff, to use as he wills.”

The silence was deafening.

Every wizard in the room appreciated the depth of honour and trust Harry was bestowing, even Hermione, who had read everything about Mages she could lay her hands on, following the discovery that Harry was one.

Remus coughed. “Uh, Harry, no offence, but do you underst-”

“Yes.” He looked around. “That concludes the will of Harry Potter. Thank you for your time. I’ll see you at the match, if not before. Albus, is there a chance of a cup of tea?”

Three days later, the evening meal, set earlier than usual, was coming to a conclusion, and the hall was buzzing with excitement. The ’Audience with the Mage’ was about to happen, and the pupils were excited to see whether the questions they had submitted would be read out.

Professor Dumbledore waved his hand and the tables were cleared. A chair was set at the front of the platform where the Head Table stood.

Harry looked at the tall, formal chair.

“Good heavens, that looks stuffy! Enough to give a wizard a back-ache for days! And are you lot going to be behind me? I don’t think so! A circle of chairs – nice comfy ones, so anyone can drop off if they fancy – oh yes, lovely! Thank you,” and he plumped down in the middle, to the amusement of the audience.

Harry looked out over the sea of pupils. “Mmmm, here I am all comfortable and you’re on those
hard benches. Do you think we ought to change that?"

“Yes!” roared the youngsters, in high gig.

“Well, I’m not doing all the work! Headmaster, would you banish the tables? Oh, quickly, stand up everyone – I forgot that bit!”

Laughing, the pupils all stood.

“Right, now everyone transform themselves a chair,” Harry said, once the tables and benches had been moved to the sides of the room. “Whatever you fancy. You don’t expect me to do it, do you? This is about using magic! Need’s a wonderful spur, as my Magic class pupils will tell you! It’s amazing what being manacled to the wall can do. Have a go! If your mates aren’t as good as you, give them a hand – make yourself a sofa, if you want to cuddle up with someone – oops, you don’t mind, do you, Headmaster? First years, don’t worry if it’s tricky – my pupils will sort you out – thanks, guys. Do it wandless and show off, will you? Yes, that’s right. Students performing wandless magic! It’s impressive, isn’t it? So it’s not just Mages and masters like Professor Dumbledore – and, I can tell you, others of the staff here – that can do it. Some of you will be capable too. So here’s the first lesson – have a try at anything. Well, preferably not Dark Magic,” he said, to much amused laughter.

There was a hubbub of activity. Harry turned to Severus, patting the chair next to him. “Severus, can you do a wandless something like a Sonorous on me? So I don’t have to shout all evening? I know you can’t spell me, but something that gets the air and sound the minute it’s left my lips? Maybe Professor Flitwick has an idea?” He turned to the tiny Professor.

“Oh, very interesting thought! Now, what might work – a reverberation charm? Severus?”

Between the two they worked it out.

Is this alright? “ Harry asked Severus before the charm was applied, waving his hands at the students laughing and working away, the room half full of chairs of all varieties.

“Your unique style, Harry,” he shook his head.

Harry’s face dropped.

Severus leant over. “It worked for us, didn’t it? Your class? Have confidence in yourself. That’s the art of teaching.”

Harry nodded, and smiled. “Have you got –“

“Here.”

Harry smiled again at Severus, then turned to look at the students, and laughed. A sofa to one side was walking away, two legs working and the others dragging behind.

Severus applied the spell wordlessly and wandlessly.

“Well, there’s some interesting work out there,” Harry laughed, drawing attention, “and some impressive achievements too. Very well done! Good lord, did you do that? Yes, you with the glasses. What year are you?”

“Second year, Sir – er, Mage,” stammered the boy, going red.
“That’s brilliant! I certainly couldn’t have done that at your age. And that leads me into my first question,” he said, selecting a card from the heap on his lap. “Is everyone settled? Yes? Almost? Good. Thanks, there, Ernie – love that. Nice theatre seats! Oh, look, that lad’s got a recliner! Good for you! Now! Can I say thank you to you all for these – some very interesting questions indeed, that have really got me thinking. Some bizarre,” he said, to a laugh; “why anyone would imagine that I’d want to transform myself into a plate of dragon-food, get eaten, and then see if I could reconstitute myself afterwards, I’m not quite sure,” he expanded, to howls of laughter, and a cluster of pointing and laughing children in the middle of the hall. Harry looked at the group. One boy in particular was being pointed at.

“Was that your idea, then?”

“Yes, Sir, Mage Potter, sir.”

“Want a prediction for your future?”

There was a hush of excitement.

“Yes please, Sir.”

“How very brave of you. Do you really want to know?”

“Yes, please, sir.”

“Why?”

“P-pardon. Sir – Mage,” the boy stood there, perplexed.

“Well, I was just wondering why you’d want a prediction for your future. The minute you hear it, it’ll change everything. It’ll always be in your mind. After that, you’ll start to do things differently. You’ll do things that’ll make it likely. In a sense, a prediction takes away your free will. I don’t think that’s a very good idea.”

Into the silence, a hand shot up.

“Yes?” Harry said encouragingly.

“You don’t believe in Divination, Mr Mage?”

“Please, just call me Harry, everyone. It’s much easier, and it’s my name.”

There was a bit of laughter.

“In answer to your question – it’s not really a matter of belief, is it? I know there are accurate predictions. One was made about me. Professor Trelawney made it,” he said, waving towards the woman without looking at her, “and it was perfectly correct.” He gave a nod of acknowledgement to the woman, who glowed under the praise. Severus stared at him as if he had gone mad. Harry continued, “But if no-one had known that prediction, would people have acted differently? I can’t imagine most reasonable people would have expected a kid to face the Dark Lord.”

There was a heavy silence, especially surrounding him.

“But – well, you’re a Mage, Harry. So it had to be you,” someone piped up.

“Really? Albus Dumbledore brought down Grindelwald, but he wasn’t a Mage. After I go, there may not be another Mage for a hundred years. Will the world stop? I don’t think so! You’ll all be
out there doing amazing things, I hope. Before I go upsetting anyone, what I’m trying to say is that—well, carve your own future. Do more than anyone believes you can. I think there’s always more than one way to achieve an outcome. And— you have magic!! Enjoy every second of it— even if it’s only a spell to do your hair. Not that I had much luck with those,” he grinned, brushing a hand over his hair to much amusement.

“Right, let’s look at the questions— by the way, ask anything you fancy as we go along— we’re all learning here, and often there are no right answers, just as there’s more than one way of doing things. Okay, this is an easy one. When did I know I was a Mage?” He looked up. “Just over a year ago, when I made my wand with Mr Ollivander. I didn’t know it meant anything, but Mr Ollivander told me once I’d done it. Oh look, this question follows on— can anybody make their own wand? Well, have a go and see! Obviously, Mr Ollivander isn’t a Mage but he does make wands. I understand the apprenticeship takes seventy years or so, so you’ve got to really fancy it, haven’t you?” he raised his eyebrows.

Several hands shot up.

“Yes? Eversely, isn’t it?”

“Yes, Harry. Can we see your wand? Your Mage wand? And they said you had a staff at the battle.”

Harry drew his wand out of his robes. Severus passed him his staff, and he held both up. “They’re not much to look at, are they? Often the best things aren’t.”

“I do hope you are not referring to me,” Severus said, sotto voce. “I would, of course, be very offended.”

“We—” Harry realised his voice was still raised, and cut off quickly, looking reproachfully at Severus, who smirked.

Another hand shot up.

“Yes?” Harry invited.

“What’s the difference between using your wand and your staff?”

Severus sniggered next to him, but so did Dumbledore, to Harry’s horror, which stopped him reacting.

“A very good question!”

The girl beamed, nudged by her friends in support.

“Most of the time, I prefer not to use either— but they look a bit more showy, don’t they? The staff’s not exactly handy to carry round, really— not unless you’re two hundred and fifty and need a bit of help.”

There was a lot of chuckling.

“Essentially, there’s not a huge difference between the two— more difference, really, between wandless and wand— or staff - aided magic. Wandless is entirely based on one’s personal magic; wand or staff use draw on earth magic.”

“What makes a Mage different from a normal wizard?” a young girl asked, to shushes from her
friends.

“No shushing there!” Harry said sharply. “I said any questions, and this question is one of the best. The simple answer is nothing.”

A huge wave of muttering went round the hall. Hands started to go up.

“You,” Harry pointed.

“Well, then, why are you up there and we’re down here?”

“I’m happy to swap,” Harry offered, to laughter. “Want to sit in the hot seat?”

The boy declined.

“Look at it this way. Most people can cook – it might be you can only make a cup of tea, it might be that you can create a sumptuous feast that makes the mouth go crazy with pleasure. But both things are on the same continuum. You might say you can learn to cook better – well, you can certainly learn to do magic better – to use it better. But some people are naturally better cooks – they’re instinctive, they somehow know what things will go together. I think being a Mage is like that.”

“So what can a Mage do? Can you show us?”

This was the question that Harry had been waiting for, that Ron had suggested holding the meeting for.

Albus leaned over quickly and spoke to Harry, and Healer Entwhistle, who was standing behind him, whispered briefly too.

“Not tonight, I’m afraid,” Harry said with a sad shrug. “Healer Entwhistle won’t allow me to at the moment. As soon as I’m fully recovered we’ll see about a demonstration. Now, oh, this looks a good question too. What would I do if -”

And the meeting went on.

As it drew to a close, Harry deliberately stood up quickly. He was not surprised to feel his vision dim, and his hand went out. Severus grabbed him carefully.

“Perfect, Harry,” he whispered. “Let’s hope the spies pass it on. We may even make the Prophet.”

Severus was right. The next morning, the Prophet reported that Mage Potter had held an Audience, that his magic was still recovering and he had been seen to stagger. The Prophet sent its best wishes for his speedy recovery, whilst also commenting on how closely Professor Snape had held the young man.

“It’s all good,” he commented to Harry, as they ate breakfast in his quarters. “If he clicks that we’re involved, he’ll have even more reason to come. Three targets for him.”

Severus had curtailed his teaching commitments: he was still working with his exam groups, but his timetable had been rearranged so that he started later and had a lengthy lunch break with Harry. Harry usually slept again in the morning and most of the afternoon, and for Severus these afternoons were filled with various planning sessions for the day of the quidditch match. He could
not just sit there watching Harry sleep, watching life slip from Harry with every breath, watching him slip through his fingers. But every moment together he treasured, committing to his memory the quiet contentment as well as the hazy pleasure, the peace that was so soon to be torn from him.

He and Hermione, Draco and Remus had researched potions, to no avail. He brewed only things that could help keep up Harry's strength as much as possible, but even over the week his breathing was becoming more laboured and his young lover slept more and more. He watched Harry try and hide how painful his body was, but when he had broached it Harry had refused pain medication until after he had dealt with Lucius.

At every opportunity, they made love – now slow and gentle, because Harry bruised at the slightest touch. Severus stayed awake long after Harry had fallen asleep, savouring the weight on his chest. Despite all the signs, he could not accept Harry was going to die.

Lucius Malfoy paced in his room above the shop. Things had not been going as well as he had planned.

After months of nothing, they had had a lucky break – a sighting of a known Auror having a pint near a military establishment. Telling his contact to keep watch had been one of a number of spying activities that he had in hand, and he hadn't expected much to come of it. It had quickly proved the jackpot – the Aurors were providing round the clock cover at the base, and then Potter’s cronies had been seen too. Observation of the camp had led to the confirmation that Potter was there, apparently training with the soldiers, judging from the running in the grounds. And he usually only had a single Auror with him. It had seemed such a simple task to bring the man to him.

The plan to take Potter had been a disaster of epic proportions. An embarrassment. He had lost two major players – not that he minded losing Karkaroff, the man was a threat to him, after all.

He was fair enough to grant the failure to Potter’s power, which he had underestimated, rather than entirely to the incompetence of the men on the job. Marlin, who had returned, terrified, to tell him, had been incoherent. That Potter seemed to have completed the decimation of the group without even using magic, which he had claimed, he found impossible to believe. How could a wizard bring himself to not use magic? But then Potter had proved to be an incredibly disciplined young man.

And now this new information.

He mistrusted leaked reports and easy chances. Nevertheless, he had had it from several sources that there was to be a quidditch friendly at Hogwarts, arranged at short notice to prevent trouble, for families and the pupils in thanks for the defence of the castle. Potter was to award the cup, and his son was playing.

He made himself a mental list of pros and cons.

The cons included the fact that it could be a trap; there were likely to be a lot of light-side wizards present and that he had not had much time to prepare. On the positive side, it could be that it wasn’t a trap, merely an opportunity. All the key players he needed to get at would be present: Potter, Draco, Severus – even Dumbledore. If he pulled it off, he would have done so in front of an audience who would understand his power, and it would make his rightful position in society known. And there seemed every indication that Potter was not at full strength. Although he found it unlikely, he had to accept that it was possible that he had not used magic against his attackers at
the camp because he couldn’t – even the Prophet said that he was still suffering from his injuries, and his spies told him that the man had been seen to stagger on more than one occasion. Furthermore, even the kindest of accounts referred to appalling scarring – that a wizard of his stature had not been able to heal his injuries, or respond well to treatment, suggested a serious depletion of magic. It was an opportunity that might not arise again.

He had had enough of waiting in the wings, all through Voldemort’s reign. His life was frittering away, and even more so now that he was living in this pit without social status or any of the comforts that his upbringing had led him to take for granted. He appreciated them a little more after his stint in Azkaban, and had no intention of doing without for any longer than was absolutely necessary.

The roar in the stadium as the teams soared into sight was nearly as good as the sound at the World Cup. In some ways, this event was better – the stadium was much smaller, and therefore the action was closer, more immediate. Plus the players were familiar – the Hogwarts team, versus British team players, most of them old pupils. Lee Jordan, come back to commentate, (rather a lot of old pupils had joined the parents in a new stand thrown up for the occasion) was saying, “...and there goes Jack Sloper, a promising young man who’s really been making the other Hogwarts’ teams work for their points, so I hear – and there’s Vincent Crabbe, the other Beater, one of the two Slytherins on the team, Draco Malfoy is playing Seeker – would he have got the place if Harry Potter wasn’t a Mage, that’s what we all would like to know, wouldn’t we, but Harry’s all for fair play and of course hasn’t played at all this season, ....” and Harry suddenly felt at peace, the tension of the preparations washing away. He could not have a better place to be, if this were his last hour or two on earth. He turned to Severus and smiled, lifting the Potion Masters’ hand and kissing it.

Lee Jordon, who had just turned his attention to Harry in the teachers’ stand, faltered, then rallied, saying, “Well, folks, it’s good to see that the Houses are uniting off the field as well as on, though keep it down, gentlemen, please, there are pupils present you know – and there goes Gwenog Jones, Captain of the Holyhead Harpies, and Captain today, a formidable player, she’ll have the Hogwarts’ team on their toes....”

Harry looked around. Children were cheering, the two visitors’ stands were full, and the match was about to start. There were invisible shields in front of both the teachers’ and pupils’ stands.

Neville had been stationed at the entrance to one of the visitors’ stands. He looked across to the teachers’ box, and gave a slight shake of his head.

He had been set to detect Lucius Malfoy’s presence. They assumed that the man would be in disguise; Neville was unsure whether he had clocked the man’s signature on the brief occasions that he had been near him, but it was worth a try; he was obviously very familiar indeed with Draco’s signature, and some hasty thought and testing showed that there was normally, though not always, some family traits in common.


On the pitch, Madam Hooch had zoomed out from the enclosures, to much cheering from the crowd. She had taken the two Captains to the centre of the pitch, no doubt asking for a clean game as was her wont. Harry suspected that it would be a lot cleaner than usual – the celebrities were unlikely to do any particularly nasty moves on the kids, for fear of the damage to their image, if nothing more, and the pupils were unlikely to attack their heroes. It would be nice to just watch and enjoy the match, but if things did not come to a head, he knew the chances of resolving the Lucius
situation in time were next to nothing.

The match proceeded for thirty minutes with little apart from the game happening. Harry found that his eyes kept being drawn back to the play, rather than scanning the stadium. The game seemed resolutely fair, as he suspected, with little refereeing required of Madam Hooch.

“Did Madam Hooch ever play professionally?” he asked Severus, leaning over, his eyes never leaving the witch.

“She did. Six seasons with the Harpies, I believe,” Severus answered.

“She was a real catch to get here,” Albus answered. “She was always such a joy to watch. Such a delicate control of her broom – though she seems to have - oh!”

“...What unbelievable luck! Draco Malfoy just avoided a direct bludger hit from the Cannons’ Joey Jenkins, there!” Lee was saying, “Well, I expect it’s no holds barred after that! The teams have been tip-toeing around each other, but Jenkins has taken the game up a notch now! But what outstanding flying from Malfoy! He certainly deserves those cheers...oh, Gwenog Jones has the quaffle – was this a tactic to divert the team’s attention? Oh, what a save by Ron Weasley! He really is the Hogwarts King! And he’s thrown it to....”

Harry and Severus looked at each other.

“Do you think...?”

“Impossible...?”

Five minutes later they had their answer.

“...and Malfoy is racing – galloping gooseberries, he’s seen the snitch! He’s surely going to be offered a place on one of our professional teams after this! He’s miles ahead of Galvin Gudgeon, Jenkins’ team-mate from the Cannons – good lord! - Now that is foul play! The ref must surely stop it – Madam Hooch, you can’t allow that, can – and now he’s closing in on the seeker head on – well, he’s got determination, you’ve got to give him – Merlin! He’s hanging off his broom – Malfoy that is – oh, this looks bad – its tail is cracking off – after that blow who’s surprised? - The ref –taking notice at last! – oh, too – he’s – and – oh my God! Crabbe has caught him! Mid air – that man must have arm muscles of steel, he’s holding onto him by – oh, the fabric’s ripping - ”

There was a thud. Draco Malfoy lay sprawled, motionless on the ground. Screams echoed round the stadium. To the shock of many, Hermione Granger ran out onto the pitch to the fallen Slytherin.

Madam Hooch was striding to the unmoving boy, but Madam Pomfrey got there first.

“Well, this is unexpected,” Lee was saying. “Oh, will you look at that! Vincent Crabbe is laying into the ref! Did we know the boy could speak? Oh, a joke, a joke! And the ref is now laying into Jenkins! He’s been sent off! Well, that’ll be an embarrassment for the club! Madam Hooch is calling for a five minute break for the teams to bring on their new players. Well, the celebrities have three players on the benches, but none of them are beaters! Who’re they going to field? They’re allowed in the rules to change their team positions, if they want. They must be calling themselves lucky that the ref has allowed them a replacement at all. And Ginny Weasley is replacing Draco Malfoy as Hogwarts seeker! It’s just like old times with a couple of Weasley’s on the team. And Draco Malfoy still appears to be unconscious...Madam Hooch is investigating – good heavens, Madam Hooch, surely you know better than that! Madam Pomfrey isn’t likely to
allow you to give a potion however good it is, she’s got her own horrible concoctions courtesy of Professor Snape to torture us all with! Beg pardon, Ma’am, course I didn’t mean any offence...”

“It’s not Madam Hooch,” Harry and Severus said almost at the same time.

“I knew her flying looked funny,” Harry added, “I just couldn’t put my finger on it. She’s always jumps on any bad behaviour she sees, too. And I’ve never seen her give a pupil anything. It’s Lucius? I can’t believe he would really kill his son in cold blood like that.”

“You are right about Hooch, I thought her style had changed,” Albus joined in the whispered conversation. “As for Lucius – he was always vindictive. And he has already disowned Draco. He would see this as finishing off business.”

“It all ties in,” Severus said quietly. “He’s just had a break –nicely engineered there – timed to coincide with killing his son. We’ll need the best part of another hour before the polyjuice wears off again. Albus, Shacklebolt needs to be looking for Hooch. She could be... in grave danger.”

“Dead, you mean,” Harry said quietly. “It’s my fault...”

“It is likely he will have killed her, “Severus agreed hollowly, “but it is not your fault. It’s a clever move, however, for Lucius. I suspect Imperius on Jenkins. At least we have Draco out of the picture.”

“He’s alright? How can you know?”

“Because whilst you were sleeping we had strategy meetings, did we not, for just this eventuality. It seemed more than likely Draco would be attacked on his broom. Getting Lucius here was the only point in him playing. He has a cushioning charm and Merlin knows what else that Miss Granger and Neville have used on him. She was to give a signal if he was seriously hurt. She has played her part as planned. There was no signal, so I am assuming Draco is play-acting, as agreed. Your Ron came up with a lot of good ideas.”

“Lucius is at an advantage on the broom,” Harry said. “We hadn’t considered him doing this. How can I get close to him?”

“We need the game to end just before the polyjuice wears off. You must go down on the pitch to present the trophy. Remember, he might not look like Malfoy even when it wears off – he’s most likely to have altered his appearance to have stayed undetected for so long. It’s possible, however, that he will attack you from his broom before then. The shield will hold. We need to know who his supporters are. There are plenty of Aurors everywhere, so I expect they have their eye on some already. He must be planning something, some big show. We just need to wait for him, and take advantage of it. His vanity may just act in our favour, too – I can’t see him trying to take over as the new Dark Lord whilst endowed with breasts and spiked hair.”

Harry laughed, a carefree sound, and in front of everyone, Severus leant in and kissed him. Harry returned it, warm and eager.

He pulled away to see Hagrid beaming at him, and Lee Jordan being nudged over in the commentators’ box.

“Well, what a day! I’m being told here I’ve just missed a snog in the teachers’ box – action everywhere here today, folks, and I’ll come back to you if there’s any more news on that one, we didn’t have any of that in my day, I can tell you! But here we go again, the teams are back, oh, Meghan McCormack, the Pride’s Keeper, is coming on as Beater, well we hope she’s a cleaner
player, though we all know how tough our women players are! Does she have the stamina for all the chasing round? We’ll find out! And a cheer too for our own Ginny Weasley, she has to be the smallest player on the pitch but that can give you a lot of speed...”

Lucius Malfoy was feeling frustrated. He didn’t know what state his son was in, and hadn’t got close enough to administer the potion. It wasn’t intended to kill him – it would silence and paralyse the boy, temporarily, whilst allowing the boy to see through his appearance so that he knew who had done this to him. He wanted him chastised and out of the way. Narcissa would string him up by the balls if she knew he had killed Draco, or use any of a number of nasty hexes which she was remarkably adept at. No, he’d wanted his boy to know that his father was angry with him. He was fair enough to admit that Draco had chosen the right side, Potter over Voldemort, so he couldn’t fault him for that, but now there was another option. And blood was blood.

However, having seen the Mudblood crying over his body, he had been disgusted. Surely his son had not sunk that low...

He now had just under fifty minutes to get his plan on track. Potter was well-protected in the stand; he could feel the magic of the shield protecting both the teachers’ and the pupils’ stands. Was that now standard practice, or were they expecting trouble? The visitors’ stands were not warded, but they had probably only just been put up. Merlin knew, it was a precaution several of the governors had asked for over the years, when he was on the Board.

When he had hastily thrown the plan together, he had expected the school to have at least used a professional referee. He had been taken aback to have to consider using the body of a woman, and he had no intention, now that he had discovered that he could not attack Potter unexpectedly from the air, of tackling him in this woman’s body. The experience was made worse by the fact that he had not spent this long on a broom in years. His back ached, as he constantly braced himself against the forward thrust of the bosom that from this angle seemed disproportionally large for the body, and his thighs ached from gripping the broom. It felt extremely odd between his legs too, despite the cushioning charm he had applied twenty minutes into the first hour.

No, he would give the signal to his followers, and make his play as Potter awarded the cup. All eyes would be on the boy, and the boy would be distracted. It was definitely the best time. And once he had killed him, he would eviscerate Severus, publicly, here on the grass. Not only a traitor to Voldemort, the slimy snake had already ingratiated himself with the Mage, judging from the display he had witnessed moments back. He could not believe that Dumbledore had turned a blind eye to it, but maybe the old manipulator was rewarding Snape for his lying and cheating on his behalf. The boy had little enough guidance, and was probably a ripe plum in Severus’ hands. The man certainly knew how to use those hands, he remembered, and had obviously kept himself in practice with that other lad, Alex. Had he dumped him like a hot coal, or was he running Potter and the nonentity?

He circled the pitch once again. The players were behaving themselves after the incident, leaving him little to do, and he was able to use his position to assess the stands and the grounds.

A half hour passed. Suddenly, in a flurry of activity, the Weasley girl was racing across the pitch. She was no match for Gudgeon, on his professional broom, and in moments, the match was over.

Harry stood slowly. There was twenty minutes to go.

“...and Harry Potter is getting up to make his way down to the pitch where he’s going to present a
special trophy – ah, I’m being told that the trophy has been presented by the National Quidditch Association...oh, will you listen to this, I’ve just heard that the Hogwarts’ players are all to be awarded with a season ticket for the team of their choice, not a bad runners’ up prize, eh, folks!.... “

In the darkness at the back of the stand, Harry slipped into Severus’ arms, held tight against that chest for several long moments. That this might be the last time was unspoken. It weighed heavily enough without.

Albus came and stood beside them. “I’ll watch from up here, and do what I can. To the next great adventure, my boy,” he said quietly, and gave Harry a hug.

“Fuck that,” Snape snarled, grabbed Harry back and kissed him hard. “It isn’t over,” he said fiercely.

Harry nodded, resting his head against Severus’ chest, listening to the beat, feeling the warmth.

A cough brought them back, and Harry made his way down the stairs, Severus in front of him. They stood outside the stand, eyes adjusting to the sunlight, before Harry strode out onto the pitch, Severus a step behind him. Harry had his Mage staff in one hand, and his Mage wand in the other. He was wearing his best robes, resplendent in deep green velvet.

“...and here’s Harry Potter at last...Mage Potter that is...and the teams are ...wait a moment, I’m told Madam Hooch is powdering her nose...probably not a euphemism, half the girls here are doing the same with our celebrities about... good to know there’s life in the old girl yet....”

The unintended cruelty of Lee’s words struck home, leaving Harry rigid, and sharply aware that he could not afford to pull his punches. There were ten minutes to go. Harry looked round, and spotted Neville to one side, standing beside what appeared to be a compost bin. He grinned at his friend, then turned to Severus, pointing to his throat. He felt the brush of the spell that Severus had used in the Great Hall, and smiled his thanks.

Lucius, watching from the wings, saw the request. He had not committed himself fully until that moment. Now he knew it was worth the glorious risk. He would never have another chance like this one.

He could hear the roar of the crowd as the winners were called to take their medals, then the losers theirs. He watched through the flaps of canvas as the winners took to the sky, a victory loop around the stadium. To great cheers, the celebrities encouraged the Hogwarts’ team to join them. Lucius felt the potion wear off, and pulled the coin from his pocket, summoning his followers. They would apparate to outside the wards, and fly straight in.

He gave them three minutes.

He shook his hair out, transfigured the quidditch outfit – now excruciatingly small -back into his own elegant black silk robes. He was himself, glamoured to his old appearance, blond hair down his back, wand in hand. Excitement was flooding his veins with adrenaline.

However it ended, this was his day.

He saw the first of his followers swoop in, even as a shout sounded and an Auror in hot pursuit zoomed after him, and strode out into the stadium.

The crowd were sluggish to realise what was happening – most of them were watching the
celebrities and thought the arriving broom-riders were gate-crashers being chased by the celebs’ Auror guards.

That would not do at all.

Malfoy wanted attention, and he would have it.

With a simple Accio, he summoned the nearest broomstick/rider to himself, yanking the rider off the bucking broom and holding his wand to her throat.

“Why, Miss Weasley, how convenient you always are to my plans,” he hissed into her ear.

The stadium fell silent.

“I suggest the Aurors stand down, if you wish this little witch to live,” he shouted.

Shacklebolt, now on the pitch, gestured to the Aurors, who landed, standing beside their brooms. The team players and remaining Hogwarts team members hovered, uncertain what to do, thirty black garbed witches and wizards circling in the air around them.

“Mr Malfoy. Still terrorizing children? I’m sure everyone is impressed,” Harry taunted, voice clear and loud on the air.

“From what I’ve seen, Mage,” Malfoy sneered, “you’re rather partial to older men that enjoy terrorizing babes.”

“Heavens, Malfoy, if you were interested in my...personal... attention why didn’t you just say? Do put Miss Weasley down.”

Malfoy’s face pinched. Potter was not supposed to be toying with him so easily. “I’m no queer, Potter, and the girl stays here.”

To his astonishment, Harry laughed. “Come now, Lucius, you were very fond of Alex Johnson. My alter ego, by the way.”

Malfoy’s eyes widened. The little shit! His eyes darted briefly to Severus, but instead of seeing mocking amusement there, he could see only a fierce determination. So Severus was scared. His courage bolstered, he stood straighter, his hand tightening and dragging the girls’ feet from the ground. She flailed her legs, kicking his shins.

“Stop that, bitch, or I’ll prove I’m no queer,” he whispered, his words drowned out from the others by the fury of the crowd when he had tightened his hold.

Harry couldn’t see what Malfoy had said, but the shocked stillness of Ginny told him it was bad.

“What do you want, Malfoy?”

“A wizard’s duel with you, Mage.”

There was hissed murmuring all around the stadium. Malfoy wanted to laugh, and to see their faces when he took down the scrubby little excuse for a wizard.

“You want to be humiliated in front of all these people?” Harry asked mildly.

“No, I’m going to kill you in front of all these people,” Malfoy responded. “What sort of Mage are you? A Mage is supposed to lead his people – what have you done to direct the Wizarding World?”
Killed Voldemort, and then nothing. No involvement in the Wizengamot – he hasn’t even accepted the allegiance ingrained in our traditions!” he called to the crowd. “You don’t believe in our traditions, in our culture, do you, Mr Potter? You want to saturate our world with Mudbloods and riff-raff. You hold no honour for the title that you say you are entitled to carry. I’m here to show the Wizarding World that a half-blood Mage is nothing compared to a Pureblood Wizard! That the rule of Purebloods is the best way for our world, and that I am here to offer it the leadership it deserves.”

“Offer, Lucius? “ Albus called down from his position in the stand. “It seems like you are trying to take to me. And most wizards and witches – I appreciate you won’t agree - would regard the defeat of Voldemort as a rather large contribution to our society.”

There were roars and feet stamping of approval.

“The Dark Lord was a half-blood himself,” Malfoy shouted, “easy for the boy to destroy. Let’s test him against a real challenge!”

“And yet you were happy to lick his boots, Malfoy,” Harry commented.

“As did your traitor lover!” Malfoy jeered.

Severus tensed.

“Indeed. And yet he had the courage not only to accept that he had made a bad decision, but to then put himself into danger time after time to return as a spy.” Harry looked up at Malfoy’s supporters. “Now is the last time to decide whether you have made the wrong choice,” he called out, voice firm. “If you give yourselves up now, it would be a wise move. Failure to do so is at your own peril.”

People looked at the riders, hovering above the pitch on the broomsticks, wands out. The atmosphere stretched, tense and uncertain. Malfoy laughed, as they stayed where they were. He was glad he had left half a dozen who were less sure of themselves behind – if any had broken ranks, it could have gone the wrong way.

Harry hoped not too many in the crowd believed in what Malfoy was saying – and that he could do enough to convince them the man was wrong.

Ginny made a slight move – undoubtedly her chest was hurting, and Lucius could feel her small breast grating under his arm as he yanked her up again.

The next moment he staggered.

She had gone.

Pointing his wand hand at Potter, he glanced around briefly as he straightened. The girl seemed to be in someone’s arms, sobbing. He noticed his own son, standing near her, and the Mudblood. So he hadn’t been hurt. The man transferred her to the Granger chit, pushing them behind him.

“Thank you, Neville,” Harry said clearly.

“You taught me how to find my magic, Mage, the thanks go to you.” Neville shouted back. He looked up at the crowd. “Harry’s taught a load of us how to access Magic that we never knew even existed; Malfoy doesn’t know what he’s talking about!”

Malfoy pulled himself up. In truth, he was shocked at what the Longbottom boy had done – his
mind was trying to conceive exactly what he had done. But it wasn’t the time for that now. The boy was a Pureblood; his parents had been strong. He would bend him to his cause later. He would come when there was no alternative.

“Well?” he demanded of Potter, “do you accept my challenge?”

“Had Mage Potter not done you the courtesy of accepting your challenge according to our traditions, giving you safe passage from the moment of stating it, you would be dead by now, Lucius,” Snape said.

“Can the boy not speak for himself as well as not perform his own Magic?” Lucius sneered.

Harry, one hand just brushing down Severus’ arm as he walked past, came round the table.

“I accept the challenge. If you fail, you will leave the wizarding world in peace, Malfoy. I ask your word on behalf of yourself and your...colleagues.”

Malfoy laughed disdainfully. “I make no such foolish demands as you, boy. You will fail and you will die, and I will show the world what true Pureblood leadership means.”

The crowd erupted into boos and hisses.

Harry stood, poised. He had no intention of going back to back with the bastard. Malfoy stepped back several paces, and the remaining people in the arena moved quickly to the sides.

Harry could not believe it would come down to this – a wizard’s duel? It was ridiculous. A small smile curled his lip, and the movement enraged Malfoy.

He fired off Avada Kedavra.

Harry approved the ruthlessness of that. And walked straight into the spell.

Malfoy’s hand actually dropped to his side in shock, and the audience went silent, before erupting into cheers.

Lucius was back. “So you’re still immune to the killing curse, are you? Well, I’ve seen you under Cruciatu boy, let’s see what your worshippers think of you crawling under that!”

Harry kept walking slowly towards the man, his staff measuring each pace. His first impression that Malfoy’s ruthlessness was sensible gave way to the realisation that this was not a war situation. To use the Unforgiveables in this context was extraordinary. The man was telling everyone that he was above the law – that the state he wanted to create did not honour the existing laws. Was he mad?

As the spell failed to take hold, and Harry stood there as Malfoy tried spell after spell on him, he could sense the crowd coming to the same conclusions, as their surprise at his imperviousness faded. Harry had his knives and darts on his legs, but suddenly, it seemed sickeningly like murdering an unarmed man.

Suddenly, and utterly by surprise, Malfoy charged him. Harry knew he could not withstand the man in close contact – he physically didn’t have the strength.

He flung up his arm, and Neville, at the signal, removed the lid of the bin.

Malfoy was on top of him, hard flesh and panting breath and hair falling in his face. Harry had the knife but hadn’t got in a clean hit. He cursed his stupidity.
His magic swirled, and suddenly shot across the pitch, flashing into his body like a lightning strike.

He had done everything wrong, left it too late... Disoriented by the influx of magic, Malfoy had got the knife from him even as they grappled. More by luck than intention, Harry’s foot collided with Malfoy’s groin. The area was already sensitive after its polyjuice disappearance, and Malfoy couldn’t help the automatic move to grasp and protect. Harry rolled away, leapt to his feet, and awash with heady power, performed the spell he had planned all along.

The attackers on their broomsticks plummeted, some screaming as they fell, or when they hit the ground with hollow thuds, others struggling to their feet almost at once. Aurors were on them instantly.

Malfoy leapt up, wand in one hand and knife in the other, his hair mussed and mud on his robes.

“What did you do to me?” he screamed, trying to make sense of the strange sensations roaring through him.

Harry glanced up. A cloud of red matter was coalescing, drawn from all Malfoy’s supporters and the man himself. It hovered above Harry.

The Mage stamped his staff hard on the earth, once, twice, thrice. The ground began to shake, the towers quivering. Adults and children screamed.

Severus stabilized them, wand out to make them float, unaffected.

Malfoy lurched, “What have you done?” he screamed again.

Harry pointed at the quivering airborne mass, and as if ordered, it shot down the narrow crack that had appeared. Harry thumped again, the plates drew together, and the grass looked as if it had never been disturbed.

“You don’t deserve to have Magic,” Harry said calmly, his voice full of authority. “I’ve sent it to the core of the earth. I don’t think it’ll survive, do you?”

Eyes horrified, Lucius cast again at Harry: as previously, there was no effect. Looking around wildly, he pointed his wand and cast Crucio! at Jack Sloper.

The boy, standing by his broom at the side, jerked in surprised horror, and Lucius let out a cry of joy.

But nothing further happened.

He turned to Harry, charging once again with the knife.

His son leapt in between them, grabbing his arm and forcing it into the air.

“Father! Enough! You have brawled already like a hooligan! Held a child hostage – a Pureblood child at that! – so much for your values! – You have cast Unforgiveables in public! You chose the wrong side, and now compound it with this folly! How low do you wish to drag the Malfoy name? I am ashamed of you!”

Lucius stared, with dawning understanding, into the face of his son, a face so like his own. Draco was implacable. And he meant every word.

He forced Draco’s arm down; he was taller, and stronger.
Neville apparated behind the man, wand ready.

“No!” Draco yelled, eyes still on his father.

Severus stood on Lucius’ other side, wand pointed at his head.

Lucius continued to force Draco’s arm, pushing it back and down. The blade came closer and closer to Draco’s face, shoulder.

Sweat beaded Draco’s brow.

Suddenly, the blade sliced his cheek, and Lucius pulled back.

Everything happened at once.

“That’s for showing lack of respect for your father,” Lucius said, as he plunged the knife up through his own heart.

Neville, Harry and Snape had silently *Avada Kedavra’d* him at the same time.

Neville charged to hold Draco, the boy’s body shaking.

Snape looked at Harry. He was alive!

He was alive!

He moved forward, joy erupting like a fountain in him.

Harry smiled warmly at him, but held up his hand.

“I’m sorry your game was disturbed, everyone – perhaps we can repeat it?” he added, causing a ripple of stunned laughter. “Without the additional elements, we hope,” he added, to applause. “I hope you find that now we will truly enter a period of peace. May you all enjoy your families and the day.”

And he walked off the pitch, Snape walking beside him, with applause roaring, into the quiet of the underbelly of the stadium.

It was over.
Snape felt tears sprouting in his eyes – a feeling he had only ever experienced when in extreme pain before. This time – this time, he knew it was shock, and pleasure, and astonishment and wonder, because Harry was alive and oh, Merlin!

They turned straight into each other’s arms, once out of sight of the crowd, in the gloomy interior underneath the Teachers’ Stand, holding tight and hard and strong.

Snape felt a sob escape his throat and couldn’t control the wobbling of his breath, his lips. The tears fell onto Harry’s head, uncontrollable.

“Oh, love,” Harry patted his back, his hands soothing and stroking.

Ron walked in, heard Severus making hideous sobbing noises, caught Remus’ eye, and they both walked out again, waiting on guard outside. Remus threw up a privacy ward.

“Hush,” Harry soothed, “I thought I’d be dead too. He’s gone, Severus, and Voldemort! You’re free! Oh, god, I’m so glad!”

Severus lifted his face, wet with tears, and took Harry’s mouth in a fierce kiss.

Harry apparated them both back to Snape’s room, spelled their clothes off, and pushed Severus onto the bed, sliding straight on top of him, skin to skin, every possible inch in contact.

Their love making was urgent, passionate, needy. It was over too fast, but Snape couldn’t stop kissing Harry, couldn’t let him go.

Harry laughed breathlessly as their hearts eventually began to slow, his head moving at last to rest in the hollow of Severus’ neck.

“So good,” he tongued Snape’s damp skin.

“Yes,” Severus said, throat husky, hands still moving over Harry’s flesh. Harry summoned the covers, snuggling into the warmth, still sprawled more on Severus than off.

“Love is so powerful,” Harry whispered, “I feel fit to burst with it.”

“Sure that’s not your magic?” Severus’ tone was teasing.

“That too,” Harry chuckled. “I feel – complete – again. The ache in here,” he slid a hand between them to touch his middle, “has gone. I lived as a Muggle for so many years – it’s hard to believe that the magic feels so integral to me being me.”

“You’re a wizard,” Snape said, a hand cupping Harry’s arse, appreciating the swell and curve.

Harry laughed. “Yeah,” he said delightedly.

“You took the magic from Malfoy’s idiots?”

“Yup.”

“Won’t they be difficult to control – impervious, like you were?”
“Sev. I know you think I’m an idiot, but I’m not all the time. I left them a tiny bit – the smallest amount a Muggle has.”

Snape chuckled. “Clever.”

“Well, I haven’t got the pretty face,” Harry said, apparently untroubled. ”That’s the most praise you’ve ever given me, I think.”

“I’m in a good mood.”

“Me too,” Harry smiled against his flesh.

Long languorous moments passed.

“You should probably see your doctors,” Severus said, reluctantly.

“But now. We’re going to make love again. I don’t think they’d want to watch.”

“Good point. Later, then. You should –“

“I know. After. Lovely you, in tight hot me. Then a sleep. Then I’ll go and see them.”

“Sounds a good plan.”

It was.

Part one and two went very smoothly.

But Harry didn’t wake up.

It had been several hours, and a couple of trips to the loo, and then a snack, and then several lots of knocking at the door, before Severus decided to wake Harry for something to eat.

Harry didn’t wake.

He was breathing, but as Snape turned him over, he realised that his lover was burning up, the sheets soaked in sweat.

He floo-called Poppy at once. His chambers were invaded by the mediwitch and the Muggle doctor, and then Poppy had asked, with a gentle face, if he wanted Harry treated here or in the infirmary.

And he knew it wasn’t over.

He had valued his privacy, but what value had it now? Harry would hate to d– would hate to have to spend any more time in the infirmary. He had opened his chambers, and there had been a constant stream of people in them for the last thirty six hours. Draco, Entwhistle, Ron Weasley, Neville, Granger, Albus of course. Both Muggle doctors.

At least the gawkers were scared off from approaching.

“His magic is trying to fight it, Severus,” Poppy had said, that first time.

His mind had turned those words over a hundred times. Why hadn’t she said his magic was
fighting it? Did trying automatically imply lack of success?

Towards the end of the first day, Albus had approached him; Severus had, in theory, been reading a book at his desk, as the doctors were once again poring over Harry.

“Severus. How are you, my boy?”

“How do you think?” he asked bitterly, raising his head to look at the old man. He saw the sorrow in Albus’ eyes, and sighed.

He went over to his shelves and got down the whiskey, pouring them both a stiff measure. As if summoned, Draco and Neville appeared, and Entwhistle. Severus called Dobby, who came straight back with more glasses and another bottle.

“Would it be alright, Severus, to add another room to your quarters?” Draco asked, after everyone had drunk a glass and moved onto a top up. “I’d like to stay close by, and so would Nathan and Bert. We’ll take turns being with him overnight.”

Severus looked at him. “I’ll be with him overnight,” he said sharply, ”unless I am supposed to vacate my own quarters?”

“No one is suggesting that,” Albus said quickly.

“Then you may do whatever you like.” He swallowed a good mouthful. “Thank you. I do not mean to be – I am grateful.“

Ron Weasley and Hermione came in, Hermione with several books under her arm. Ron saw the drinks and walked over, lifting the bottle in inquiry.

“Help yourselves,” Snape nodded. The whole room full of people – his room full of people - was bizarre. Sitting here drinking whiskey. With Harry.... Draco snapped for an elf, spoke to Dobby, who returned a moment later with a bottle of chilled white wine. Draco got up to pour Hermione a glass. Ron looked in on Harry, his own glass in hand.

“Oh bugger! Would you like some?” he asked the doctors. “How’s Harry?”

“Not good,” Nathan said quietly. He looked at Hammond.

“We don’t give a shit about rules,” Severus stood up and went to the door. “As long as you are able to care for him – go and have a glass. I can always provide a sobering solution. It works instantly,” he explained, and moved to the bed, as if just the sight of Harry drew him like a magnet.

The doctors moved into his sitting room. He could hear them, the weariness in their voices, as he sat on the edge of the bed. Harry was propped up on pillows, pale and - too pale. His hand smoothed over the silky hair, felt the coolness of his forehead. He tucked the blankets tighter.

Several minutes later he returned. There were sandwiches and hot titbits, vegetable sticks, fruit and chocolate - enough to appease the hunger and bodily needs of people too heart-weary to face a heavy meal.

“Well,” Severus said at last, a hot pastry thing whose content or taste he could not recall having slipped down his throat. Hermione had handed him a plate, lightly laden and well chosen. “Let us have an end-of-day update.”

Dr Hammond explained that his tests showed the cancer was very far advanced indeed. “I would
suggest looking for signs of distress – we can provide necessary pain relief even whilst he is unconscious.”

“Hold on,” Draco interrupted, “you’re writing him off! But you aren’t used to magic! I’ve been in there – in Harry – and his magic is putting up a helluva fight. Don’t use anything that could suppress that!”

“Even if he is in pain?” Eric Hammond said, looking down his nose at the young man.

“He’s used to pain,” Ron said quietly.

Everyone stared at him. “Well, he is – all the business with his visions, and scar, and Cruciatus and all the rest. If he has a chance of survival....”

“I’m very sorry,” Eric Hammond said. “I’m very experienced in such cases, more’s the pity.” He looked at Draco. “You can barely have completed your training, young man. And I understand this illness doesn’t happen in your world. I’m sorry to be the harbinger of bad news, but it would be dishonest to pretend otherwise. My experience suggests to me that Harry only has a day or two at most. I’m very sorry.”

The heavy silence that met this was like a weight on the chest. Severus’ eyes were on the liquid in the bottom of his glass. His head snapped up when Draco said,

“I’m sorry too. I appreciate your experience, and my ignorance, but I don’t buy that. Harry’s magic is fighting it. There’s a raging battle going on in there,” he waved to the silent bedroom.

“I don’t doubt it,” Hammond said. “You don’t believe non-magical people give up without a fight, do you? They don’t. Bodies hang on much longer than one could believe, clinging to life. That doesn’t mean they succeed.”

Draco got up, brushing his hand through his fine hair. The scar on his cheek stood out red and sharp against his creamy flesh. “Bert,” he turned to his mentor, “you’ve seen it! Your assessment is the most valuable here. No offence, Nathan, Dr Hammond,” he turned back to the doctors, ”but things have changed now Harry has his magic.”

Entwhistle sat forward, cradling his glass. “Although, as you get older and see things over and over, one’s experience obviously builds, and helps one from case to case,” he held up his glass in a brief acknowledgement of Eric Hammond, taking away any insult implied by his student, “I have to confess that there are two major factors in this case that I am not familiar with. Firstly, the illness itself. Wizards do not get it. I can, of course, see the virulent power of it, and the damage it has wrought. Based on that alone, I would have to agree with Eric.”

The wizards in the room visibly slumped. Draco turned away, hands shaking as he shoved them in his pockets.

“But you aren’t basing your judgement on that alone, surely?” Hermione asked. “What else is unfamiliar to you, Sir?”

Entwhistle smiled at her. “I have never encountered so much magic in all my life.”

“And?” Hermione prompted.

“The ‘and’ I don’t know,” Entwhistle admitted. “Wizards’ constitutions do go some way to preventing them from having illnesses, and from aiding their speedy recovery when they do. However, self-healing is very rare – we wouldn’t need Healers and Mediwitches and wizards, had
“So – it is possible that Harry could heal himself?” Ron asked, his voice eager.

“It is unlikely,” Entwhistle said quietly. “Supremely unlikely. He has not shown any indication of it before, despite having his powers and having suffered severe injuries, according to his records.”

Severus sat back, thinking that Harry had almost died when Severus’ spell had perforated his bowel, had suffered for days before seeking Muggle help.

Any hope on that score drifted away.

Harry survived the night. It was odd for Severus, the most private of men, to sleep with Harry in his arms and have people wandering in and out throughout the night, but he was not going to give up being with Harry for the sake of his pride. And it was, surprisingly, nowhere near as embarrassing as he might have supposed. They came in quietly, took readings from Harry, asked Severus’ opinion, and left again.

The day passed slowly, Draco taking regular measurements, people wandering in and out, food appearing, conversation. Reality seemed suspended.

That second night, Severus took comfort in the fact that Harry was no worse than he had been the night before.

At about three in the morning, he awoke from dozing to the sound of soft knocking on his outer door, followed by hasty footsteps in answer. Alert, hand automatically going to his wand, he recognised Draco’s voice, and Hermione’s. He was not surprised to see Neville as well when the three slipped into his room.

“He pulled himself up a little, trying not to dislodge Harry, who was lying against his side.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Professor, but I had an idea,” Hermione whispered.

It was evidence of Snape’s despair that he just said, ”Yes, Miss Granger?” in a tone of interest, with not a word about the hour or the invasion of privacy.

He hadn’t expected Hermione to settle on the side of the bed, as she launched into her explanation.

“Entwhistle said Harry had more magic than he had ever seen. We knew that. But when Harry was poorly before, and went apparating with Nev to China, he was knocked out. His magic, possibly, was depleted. But he’s drawing only on his own magic. He could be calling on external magic too.”

Severus’ brow twitched. “What do you suggest? He is not conscious....”

“And yet, his own magic is at work.” She took a deep breath. “It’s a long shot....”

“Miss Granger, anything is worth the attempt at this stage, as you know.”

“There can’t be any harm in it,” she added, as if he hadn’t spoken. “The plan is to put his Mage staff into his hand – his wand too – and make contact with the earth. He may be able to draw power.”

“Unconscious?” Snape said, his bitter disappointment tingeing his words.
“It’s worth a try, Severus,” Draco urged, “everything’s worth a try.”

Severus nodded. “Am I to take him outside? The cold...”

“I’m here to ask a favour of the castle” Neville said. “To allow Harry’s power to root to earth through his staff. His wand will take air. And if you could apply a flannel to him, to represent water...”

“Fire?” Severus asked.

“It’s already in him,” Draco said with certainly.

“But that’s his own —“

“I think the earth magic is the most important,” Neville said. “It fosters growth, and new life.”

Severus nodded. Carefully, they rolled Harry to the edge of the bed, deciding after some shifting that the best method was if he was cradled from behind by Severus. The trio made no comment or motion to make Severus uncomfortable. Both Muggle doctors had come to the door to watch.

“Shouldn’t your boss be here?” Eric questioned, looking at Draco.

“He’s a real grump if you wake him, but you’re welcome to go and try,” Draco said. “This can’t do any harm. I’ll tell him in the morning.”

“It looks mumbo-jumbo to me,” Eric shook his head disapprovingly.

“Mumbo-jumbo? Like witchcraft?” Hermione queried, tone deceptively flat.

“Ye —“ Eric cut himself off.

“Yes,” Hermione said severely. “It is witchcraft. I am a witch. These are wizards. You are in a magic castle. Do keep up.”

Nathan choked, trying not to catch the eye of his rather overbearing colleague. Too many years as a consultant could over-inflate the ego.

“Can you explain what you’re doing?” Nathan asked, to ease the moment.

Neville took pity. “Most wizards use their wands to channel ambient magic. Very powerful wizards have access to internal magic. It’s easy to forget the importance of the other. Harry as a Mage has a special affinity with earth magic, as well as powerful magic of his own – hence his ability to strip 30 odd wizards of their power in one go and send it to the core of the earth, despite – despite the state he’s in.”

“I thought that was a euphemism when I heard people talking about it,” Eric’s brow furrowed.

“I doubt it,” Neville snorted.

“But if most wizards use this ambient, earth magicky stuff, why didn’t you try this before?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“You’re in a room with some of the most powerful wizards on the planet, that’s why,” Hermione said.
Snape had Harry cradled in his arms. He had magicked off both their clothes, instinct driving him. Harry might have fire inside him, but it was external fire that was needed. Fire was warmth. His body warmth would be Harry’s source. And the skin to skin contact was – he needed it. The covers gave them plenty of decency, had he cared. His hands curling around both of Harry’s, enfolding the wand in one and the staff in the other. The wand drooped rather, but the staff made firm contact with the floor.

Neville dropped to one knee, and put his hand flat on the floor.

Everyone fell silent.

“The castle’s allowing it,” he said, standing after several minutes, brushing his hands on his arse, “but I can’t tell if Harry is drawing any power.”

“I’ll go in and look in a couple of hours,” Draco said. “I don’t want to disrupt anything.”

Neville nodded.

“Are you alright like that for a while, Severus?” Draco asked.

“A table or support under the wand would be sensible,” he answered, “otherwise, this is good.”

Hermione quickly moved a side-table to lay under their wrists, supporting the weight.

“Right,” Draco said, “call me if you need me, Severus. We’ll let you rest.”

Snape nodded, shutting his eyes as a signal to make them go.

“You need us to do anything?” Nathan asked Draco.

“Not at the moment, thanks,” he shook his head. “I just want a word with Hermione and Neville before I come to bed.”

“Sure. Goodnight,” Nathan said to the assembled group. Eric had already moved into the bedroom, and he followed him through, pulling the door not quite shut so Draco wouldn’t disturb Eric when he came through. They left it open anyway so that they could hear Harry, even though there was a monitoring spell in place.

“I was rude to Dr Hammond,” Hermione said apologetically. “It’s just he’s been so rude to you, and doesn’t appreciate –“

“Sshh,” Draco said, pulling her into his arms and kissing the tip of her nose.

She leant her head on his shoulder. “We miss you.”

“Me too,” Draco swallowed, “but I have to –“

“We know. We’re proud of you,” she touched her finger to his lips.

“You do what you think is right, Draco,” Neville said firmly.

“Yeah, but I’m – he’s right, I have no experience –“

“Neither does anyone else in this situation,” Neville said. “Harry believes in gut instinct. Go with yours, right?”
Draco nodded, his head drooping.

“Go and get some sleep,” Neville said. “And just so you know we’re thinking about you –” he slipped his arms around both of them, then moved his hand and pulled Draco’s mouth to his, kissing him thoroughly, his hand roving down Draco’s back, cupping his buttocks, pulling them together.

Reluctantly, they pulled apart, and Hermione and Neville slipped out into the corridor and away.

Touching his fingers to kiss-bruised lips, Draco rested his head on the door, a small smile playing over his face.

Severus watched under lidded eyes from the bedroom, glad that Draco had support. His father had died in front of him, his mother abandoned him, but these facts had paled into insignificance.

He rather thought Neville and Hermione were likely to be constants in Draco’s life for a very long time to come.

Draco went back into the bedchamber, nipping to the loo before climbing wearily into bed. His back sunk happily into the mattress, and he couldn’t help sigh his pleasure.

Eric was already snoring. The man probably hadn’t slept in a dormitory situation for donkey’s years, but Nathan obviously had plenty of experience of it in the military.

Draco heard him shifting.

“You okay?” he turned over. “Hermione was sorry for upsetting Eric.”

“Is she not very powerful that she thought of it? Earth magic?”

Draco chuckled. “She’s strong, but – well, traditional in some ways. Likes seeing things done in the right way. I suppose because she grew up as a Muggle, without magic.”

“None at all?”

“No. The whole war’s been about people like Hermione: Purebloods – like my father – feel threatened by them.”

“Oh. So, what did you mean by traditional?”

“I think Hermione needs to know how something is supposed to be done – before she starts breaking the rules. She’s the most amazing person I know for using the rules to suit her will. She could be a lawyer,” he mused. “The thing is, Hermione’s strong and very, very clever. That’s a very powerful combination.”

“Mmmn. And she’s your girl-friend?”

“That’s an insipid term,” Draco smiled, settling on his side. Fierce images of Hermione, sitting astride him, riding him, were hardening his cock despite his tiredness.

“They don’t mind you having – sexual relations - in this school? If you don’t mind me asking?”

“There’s wards up to prevent non-consensual behaviour,” Draco explained. “Sex isn’t encouraged, but we’re given all the info we need on contraception and the like. Boys aren’t allowed in girls rooms, for example.”
“It gives it a bit of excitement to sneak around finding somewhere, I expect?”

“We don’t need to do that. Neville can get us anywhere we like.”

Us. “He – she – all of you?” Nathan’s voice rose, and he coughed it back to normal.

Draco laughed. “Yes. Not that it’s any of your business.”

“I – I beg your pardon. Of course not. I saw you and Neville kissing as I went to the loo, and – well, I was surprised. Sorry.”

“We hadn’t meant to embarrass anyone. My apologies,” Draco said after a moment.

“No, there’s no need. Goodnight.”

”Mmm.”

A minute or two later, Nathan turned over again. “Is that common in your world, then?”

“Loving people?” Draco said with sarcasm.

“No – oh! Right. I’ll shut up. ‘Night.”

Draco turned around and faced the wall. His heart was beating heavily, but a smile began to spread.

It was as simple as that.

He did love them.

The next day, Harry remained stable all day, neither improving nor worsening.

Albus visited again.

“Severus, what do you wish me to do about your classes?” he asked, over a cup of tea that Snape did not want.

Severus’ cup rattled in the saucer as he thumped it down on the table.

“I believe after all these years I am entitled to some family leave,” he snarled.

Albus held up a hand. “I did not mean that I expected you back at work – though if you wish to do so – even for a lesson or two – of course that would be –”

“I do not wish.”

“No, no, fair enough, dear boy, it’s just that I know how much you worry about your exam groups....”

“At this moment, Albus, I don’t give a flying fuck, as Harry would say,” Severus said serenely, causing Draco, sitting at the table behind them doing a little work himself, to choke.

Snape turned his head towards him.

“If they don’t know it by now, they don’t deserve to pass,” he said callously.
“I’m sure they’ll do fine, after all the work over the years...but a little help, a little focus at this late stage...I thought of asking Jeremy Dartford to step in.”

Albus waited for the explosion. Severus had always been extremely protective of his classes, and critical of other teachers.

“Fine,” he said, standing up. “Was there anything else, Headmaster?”

Still getting over his shock, Albus said, “Professor Sinistra is managing the House, of course, but the pupils would be delighted to see you if you had a moment. And Frederick Mapleston’s mother was one of Lucius’ supporters....”

Snape took a deep breath and nodded. “Is he still here? Who is looking after him?”

“His father was killed, as you know, in the battle. His older brother has come.”

“Thomas? He’s a sensible lad.”

“Yes, thank Merlin. They may appreciate your concern, Severus.”

“Of course. Is he in lessons?”

“No, I believe the two are walking in the grounds.”

“I’ll go and find them,” Severus nodded, walking into his room to get his cloak. Nathan was sitting in with Harry, who looked peaceful. His arms were spread, fingers curled loosely on staff and wand, one lying on the coverlet, the other hand supported by a low table to the side.

Snape didn’t want peaceful – he wanted a spitting, fighting Harry.

He brushed his hand up the inside of Harry’s wrist and forearm, and stepped back into the sitting room.

He gave Draco a Roman coin from the mantel. “Use this to summon me if needed. I will not be too long.”

Draco nodded, and Snape walked out with Dumbledore.

It was good to stretch his legs, to go outside and feel the fresh air on his face. Even assuming the role of comforter rather than comforted was a distraction, and he hoped he was of some help to the boy. Thomas had proved every bit as down to earth as he remembered, and he felt sure, that with care from Hogwarts in term time and Thomas at home, Frederick would eventually be alright.

He walked back into the castle with them, and bracing himself, walked into the Slytherin common room. It was the time just before supper, and plenty of students were milling about. Sinistra sat at a table in the corner, looking over some parchments with a small group of first years. Her head came up and she smiled at Severus.

The children suddenly realised their Head of House was there, and the younger ones crowded round. The older pupils looked across and acknowledged him respectfully.

He spent several minutes in conversation, fending off the more intrusive enquiries, and looked up to find Zabini standing near by.
“Blaise. All well?”

“Not quite, Sir? Have you a minute?”

“Of course. My office in ten minutes?”

“Thank you, Sir.”

Severus made his way over to Professor Sinistra, thanking her for her continued help.

“Not at all, Severus, I’m becoming very fond of some of these urchins,” she said, smiling at the pupils at the table.

“Dangerous, Ma’am,” Snape said, eyes twinkling.

She laughed.

“How go things with you?” she asked tactfully.

A dozen offhand comments were on the tip of his tongue, but none would come out. He swallowed.

“Oh, I think Mr Goyle wanted a word,” she said quickly, realizing his distress.

Snape had spotted the two boys earlier. “Then please excuse me, Aurora,” and with a bow, he was gone.

Vincent Crabbe and Greg Goyle rose politely as he approached. He waved them seated again.

“How are you, gentlemen? And the House?”

“We’re fine, all not too bad. You know about Mapleston?”

Severus nodded. “I have just talked with him and his brother. I know I can trust you to ensure he does not suffer from any hurtful behaviour within the House?”

“Of course,” Goyle nodded.

“I do not see Miss Parkinson?”

“She spends a lot of time in her chambers. Nott too.”

Severus nodded. “Vincent, I haven’t had the opportunity to tell you how very impressed and proud of you I was at the match. You undoubtedly saved Draco from serious harm.”

The large man blushed bright red.

“Thank you, Sir.”

Severus stood up, and shook his hand.

He went quickly into his quarters, checking Harry was still the same, before explaining that he would be in his office with a student for a few minutes.

He walked through the interconnecting door, shut it carefully, and opened the outer door to Blaise.

“Come in,” he said, striding back to his desk, where he perched on the edge, rather than sitting
behind it.

Blaise strolled languidly in, and looked carefully at his Head of House.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, Sir, when you’re obviously busy, but it’s Nott.”

Severus sat up straighter, and motioned Blaise to a seat.

Blaise wiped a hand around the back of his neck. “Draco did a really good job containing people during the battle that may have – acted –“

“Yes.”

Blaise looked at him thankfully. “Theo has been really quiet, thoughtful, since. He’s brainy, as you know, Sir. I think he was more than happy, in the circumstances, to grab the opportunity of a clear name and accept the way the wind blows. Now, with his father being publicly taken in front of everyone - had his magic removed – it’s difficult for him, Sir.”

“Yes. He’s thinking of vengeance?”

Severus knew Blaise had to be really worried to come to him with this, rather than sorting it out himself, or amongst the other 7th years. But then, Draco had been busy, Pansy was not an option...


“Why do you think that? Has he given you any indication - ?”

“No, not really. It’s just – I know him quite well, Sir. I used to visit his family before Hogwarts, when we were kids. His family pride is really important. He’ll definitely be thinking of vengeance – whether he should - but on the other hand he’ll be weighing up the shame of his father’s actions. To be defeated publicly – to be stripped of his magic – to again attack a school and endanger children – these will weigh very heavily on him, Sir. He might see suicide as the only logical course. He’s the only child. To end the line –“

“Yes. You’re very acute, Blaise, and I’m grateful. I have not fulfilled my duties as Head of Slytherin as I should wish,” he said regretfully.

“I might have thought of teaching here myself, Sir, except that it seems to me far too much is expected of the professors, and even more of the Heads of House. I’d rather hoped with you making clear your relationship with Potter as you have done, it might have made the profession much more attractive to members of staff who were proud to have husbands, wives or partners. Italians are always very proud of family,” he shrugged.

Snape allowed a small smile to escape. “An intriguing discussion, Blaise, but one I do not have time for now. Perhaps we could discuss it on another occasion. Is there anything else?”

“No, Sir,” the young man said, standing. He walked to the door. “Pardon my impertinence, Sir. If Potter is unwell I wish him a speedy recovery.”

At Snape’s look, he said, “You are absent from classes – unheard of. As is Draco, Granger, Neville, Weasley. Potter hasn’t been seen.”

Snape inclined his head. “Your kind regards are appreciated,” he murmured, and swept Zabini out of the room in front of him.
In his chambers, Draco was arguing with Entwhistle, who stood there, wrapped in a cloak, his bag at his side. He turned, almost wild eyed, to Snape on his arrival.

“Sir! Please beg Bert to stay! This is ridiculous!”

Cuthbert Entwhistle turned to Snape. “I have been called to another emergency. I believe Draco entirely capable of offering as much, if not more help that I can.” He stepped closer to Snape, and laid his hand briefly on his arm. “I have just done a further assessment. I am afraid that Harry is no longer drawing on earth magic at all. You’ll appreciate, I know, that I must go where I can save life. Draco and the doctors can make him comfortable.”

Snape’s eyes shot to Draco, who stood there, head bowed, hands on his hips, disappointment in every line of his body.

“It hasn’t worked?” he said, stupidly.

“It held things at bay, briefly, but without his conscious effort, I believe his magic has been too involved in fighting to call on it. That he was able to draw on any at all, whilst unconscious, frankly, amazed me. Miss Granger has given me much to think about,” Healer Entwhistle said.

Severus nodded, his brain not really following. Having felt almost rejuvenated by his time away, to feel everything come crashing down...”How long, would you guess - your professional opinion?”

Entwhistle looked at him with sympathy. “If there is anyone who wants to see him, I suggest you call them now,” he said gently.

Severus nodded. As if recalling his manners, he held out his hand, and shook the Healer’s, thanking him.

The evening passed in a flurry of visitors, as the news spread along the grapevine of Harry’s friends. Snape had expected to hate even more infiltration of his home at this time, but in fact, he was surprised. People came and went, though most stayed. Just as the rooms seemed to be bulging beyond capacity, Neville looked to Snape for permission, and then made contact with the castle again. The rooms seemed to shift, yet without losing their character. They were larger, with the wall between bedroom and sitting room shrinking back, so that Harry was surrounded by his friends rather than in a separate room.

Molly Weasley arrived with a large container of chocolate brownies, which were tucked into ravenously. Arthur ended up in a corner talking to Eric Hammond, both engrossed. The twins put in a surprisingly sober appearance, although there was laughter too as people took turns sitting by Harry or talking of him elsewhere in the room. Ernie and Eloise, Padma, Bill and Charlie, Minerva McGonagall, and the other staff had all visited.

Draco made numerous ‘visits’ into Harry’s body, monitoring. The doctors frequently checked him over too, but using a combination of their own assessment and Draco’s, had not given him any diamorphine: Harry’s magic appeared to be keeping him pain-free, at least.

It was one in the morning, and there was still a large group present – comfortable chairs and sofas had been transfigured, and Ron, Remus, Hagrid, Albus, Hermione, Neville, Arthur and Molly, Nathan and Eric were sat there, slightly weary. Molly had her head on Arthur’s shoulder; as Harry’s honorary parents they had asked Severus if it was alright to stay.

Severus wished only that Harry was aware of how many people truly cared for him.
Draco, having once again checked on Harry, came over to Severus’ side as he stood at the window, watching wisps of cloud slip over the quarter moon.

“Severus, can I have a word?” he asked quietly.

His stomach twisting, Severus looked down at the young man. Draco looked exhausted.

“You need something to eat,” he said quietly, “have you even had a cup of tea or coffee?”

“I’ve had plenty of tea,” he said, his fingers trembling slightly.

Severus took him over to the corner of the room, where a buffet had been laid out by the house elves. He selected a plateful for Draco, poured him some pumpkin juice, and said, “Eat that first.”

Draco, weary, nodded.

Neville and Hermione watched from across the room. They both wanted to take care of Draco, but knew this was Draco at work, not play. If he needed to be with Severus, they would not interfere.

A few minutes later, refuelled, Draco looked up.

“I – I’ve been acting in an unorthodox manner,” he confessed.

“In what way?” Severus said, his voice even, his heart beginning to race.

“I – I’ve done something without asking Bert. Or – or anyone. Tried something –“

“Draco,” Snape said severely. “You’re rambling. What have you done?”

“It was an idea. Harry did a bit better with the earth magic, even if it was just a tiny amount – almost a backflow that came to him. I thought that if he could really get more it might really help his own to fight the cancer. Because his own really is fighting! But I couldn’t think how to do it. How to get the flow of earth magic into him. Then – it was something Nathan said earlier – I had a different idea. Nathan said Muggles transfuse blood that donors have given to help people with leukaemia in their world – to replace stuff they don’t have or make. Harry had refused it though, because of it interfering with his magic. But I wondered – well - I – I tried pushing a little bit of my magic into Harry,” he said quickly, not looking up. “I’ve done it four times this evening –“

“You’ve given him some of your own magic?” Severus said in astonishment.

Draco nodded guiltily.

Such an action was unheard of, he knew. When he had mentioned offhandedly to Bert, when he had first come to Hogwarts to assess and help him, that he had given Neville a bit of his magic, Bert had looked at him askew, and gone on to explain how Healer’s manipulated the internal magic of their patients. Bert had obviously thought Draco had misunderstood what he had done. Draco had acted on instinct at the time, and had thought it might be a normal Healer thing, but with Bert’s reaction and the fact that he had not been able to find any references to doing so in the texts he had studied, he knew he was mistaken.

He looked up at Severus at last, reading only surprise, not censure.

“I would never have had this without him,” he said, waving his hand in a vague gesture. “That is, if I understand correctly, I’d have had the same amount of magic but never have known how to call on it. And if I could manage without it before, with less, and still feel a pretty competent wizard, I
felt – well...”

“Yes, I see,” Snape said.

He too had lived for years with a well of magic that he didn’t know of. And even the magic that he had had, had been siphoned off at Voldemort’s whim. And yet to give it... when he thought about it, wizards obviously made more, or perhaps in the normal way, usage didn’t actually deplete the core power of a wizard.

“Let’s get this clear, Draco. A Healer would usually use his or her magic when healing a patient anyway.”

“Yes, but this isn’t the same at all,” Draco said, confirming what Severus was thinking. “I’m not using my power to heal him – I’ve tried, and it just isn’t possible. So I’ve given a little dose of my actual magic. For him to use.”

“And you think this will work?”

“I don’t know!”

Severus regarded him carefully. “You would not have given your magic away without good reason. No wizard would.”

Draco curled a hand around the back of his neck. “The question is, would anyone else be willing to? To try and heal Harry?”

“I would,” Dumbledore said quietly, from where he had moved to just behind Draco, “with the greatest of pleasure and joy.”

Severus looked up at the old man. ”Without any way of knowing whether it will work? It’s never been done before! Surely it would have if it was a viable idea!”

“Severus, you must be able to imagine how exciting it is to think of participating in such groundbreaking research! Why, it gives me tingles, just like when I was researching the uses of dragon’s blood!” he beamed.

“But Albus –“

“We had plenty of trials then, experiments that failed. Of course it may fail, Severus, but what loss is that to me? Think of the benefits! And not just to Harry, but to all wizards, should it work.”

“But you’ll be weakened –“

“Why should I care?” Albus chuckled. “Really, I have no great adversaries to deal with, thanks to Harry, yourself and these other good souls, and the adventures I hope to take are not so extreme that they will need an excess of power. Indeed, I truly will be delighted.”

“What are you discussing?” Hermione asked, coming over now that Dumbledore had disturbed Severus and Draco.

“Draco has had an extraordinary idea!” Dumbledore said happily. “Really, Draco, I think you must tell everyone.”

Draco looked at the people in the room, who were looking at him hopefully. He cast a glance at Severus, whose face was shuttered. Draco was taken aback, in his heart. He had expected Severus
to leap at the chance, however slim – he thought he’d be having to hold him back, counsel how unlikely it was to be successful. He looked away, and rubbed his hand over the back of his neck.

Hermione always found the movement endearing and erotic at the same time, showing Draco was troubled, yet he always had such grace.

“I’ve got an idea – it’s only the slimmest of chances – you can’t really hope - and the thing is, Harry doesn’t like people being forced into doing things by group pressure, especially something as serious as this –”, he said, remembering how Harry had sent his Remedial Magic class away when they would have offered him allegiance.

“We don’t have the time to waste,” Remus said firmly. “We’re all adults here, and if it is something we don’t want to do, we can say no. No one here will think the worse of anyone, I’m sure.”

“Okay, if you’re sure,” Draco agreed; really, there was no time to mess around.

“Always worth going with, if you’ve some basis for them,” Remus nodded. He looked sadly at Draco. “I’d like to offer, but I don’t think it would be a good idea with my condition.”

“I think that’s very sensible,” Draco said, pleased that Remus had come right out and refused. It would make it easier for anyone else. “Look,” he said, “I’m going to go in with Harry and start doing this. If you want to do it, come in. If you don’t, that’s fine. DON’T feel any obligation. It’s only Potter,” he grinned, causing Hermione to give him a playful swipe.

Draco turned to the quiet Potions Master. “Severus, would you come and sit with Harry? I’d like someone to be there, someone who knows him well, to watch for any signs of distress or otherwise.”

“Healer Malfoy,” Eric Hammond suddenly spoke up, having stood propped against the wall, listening.

Draco looked across.

“Yes, Doctor?”

“When we use blood, we test for illnesses, impurities, before we accept it. I understand Harry’s condition came about because his magic was removed when it was overwhelmed with.. curses? Is it possible – I’m not sure if this translates, but it’s worth mentioning – to check whether your donors have any curses attached to their magic?”

“Thank you! That is an excellent idea!” Draco turned to Dumbledore. “Professor, I know it’s the middle of the night, but could we wake Poppy? I know she has some patients in the infirmary, but –“

“Yes, of course. Molly, would you mind being responsible for the infirmary? The children should be asleep but someone needs to be there – if you have any doubts you may floo-call for Poppy, of course.”
Molly was already getting up. “Surely. Hermione, dear, I know you want to be with Harry, but when you have a moment, could you come and relieve me so that I can donate to Harry?”

Hermione beamed at her. “Of course, Mrs Weasley.”

“Do call me Molly, dear. I feel ancient being Mrs W,” she smiled, as she made her way to the fire. “I’ll explain everything to Poppy,” Molly said to Draco and Albus. “She’ll be down here faster than a snitch, I know,” and she disappeared into the flames.

Draco headed into the bedroom end. He wondered whether to ask Neville to bring the wall back across, to give some privacy, but his donors would not need to undress and maybe if the others saw how painless it was, it would encourage them.

In truth, now that he had started this in motion, he was rather fearful.

Snape had moved to sit beside Harry’s head again.

“May I just use your bathroom, Professor, to wash up first?” he asked politely, although there had been a steady stream of users ever since Harry had been cared for here.

Draco shut the door and took a deep breath, leaning back against it. He clenched his fists against his knees to stop them shaking.

He ought to have asked Bert.

He shouldn’t do this without guidance.

He might damage the donors.

The magic depletion might have dire long-term consequences.

In truth, he had voiced his idea to Severus thinking that Severus would jump to help. He hadn’t thought much beyond that – perhaps he’d hoped Severus would be willing to give enough magic to cure Harry. He hadn’t really got to the multiple donor stage. He supposed he’d thought that Severus would think the risks worth it.

He was surprised at Severus’ attitude. He had not yet offered to take part. And yet, he knew that he must not let this concern him or make him act any differently to Snape. The man had always been cautious – he had been absurd to expect Snape to just jump in, to follow his harebrained idea. And Harry had been right, you could not, or at least, should not, pressure people into action.

And now he had put Hermione at risk. Neville looked like he’d follow suit. Ron, probably. The Headmaster, Mrs Weasley....

He could cause a major disaster. Maybe he’d be sent to Azkaban...

There was a knock at the door.

“Just a moment,” he called, going over to take a piss. Who knew when he’d next get the chance?

He shot all over the wall when Neville apparated in beside him.

“Shit!”

“Oh, Draco, sorry!” Neville went bright red. “I thought you were in here worrying yourself silly. I’ll go.”
“Nev, wait!” Draco finished and shook, tucking himself back in, and Neville cleaned the wall and puddled floor with a quick *Evanesco!*

Draco washed his hands thoroughly, spell dried them for cleanliness, then turned to his patiently waiting lover.

“I was. Worrying silly. Just started taking a piss when you knocked. You scared the shit out of me!”

“I’m really sorry,” Neville hung his head. “Just wanted to help...”

“In the toilet?”

“It’s the only privacy.”

Draco sighed. “I know. I just thought ....that is, I never expected Dumbledore and Molly and Hermione...”

“You couldn’t expect Snape to give all his magic, Draco,” Neville said cautiously, his large hand coming out to stroke Draco’s arm.

“Yeah, I know, I was stupid,” Draco said, not moving in, but not moving away. Emboldened, Neville stepped closer.

“It’s a brilliant idea, love. I’m so proud of you.”

“But what if I - if I damage everyone”? Draco said, voice small, now within the circle of Neville’s arms, but still standing straight and tall.

“Bert trusted you, love.”

“Not to do this!”

“I rather think he has high hopes of you,” Neville said warmly. “I think he was well aware that being left to it might force you to try something new. All the wizards are old enough, and sensible enough, to make up their own minds, as Dumbledore said,” Neville said firmly, smoothing hands up Draco’s back. Draco leant into his body.

Neville’s lips were in his hair. He’d never felt he needed protecting, until Neville came along. He didn’t need it, but he had to admit to himself, he craved, adored Neville’s protectiveness, his care and concern. He had never really had anything like it before. Neville’s Gran might be a fierce old bird, but Draco rather suspected she loved her grandson very much, and that Neville knew it.

“Now,” Neville said firmly. “Out you go. Do what you must. Trust your instinct. And – and don’t be hard on Snape, love. He’s twice - three times – thought Harry was going to die. The hope now, when he’s finally braced himself.....”

Draco nodded. “I hadn’t thought of that.”

He leant up and brushed his lips over Neville’s, then strode over and opened the door. Neville strolled out afterwards.

Albus was already sitting next to Snape, a couple of comfy armchairs now beside the bed.

Poppy Pomfrey was bustling round Harry, with Hammond and Nathan noting things on their record sheets.
“Well, Draco, you’re very brave,” Poppy said disconcertingly. “I’ve already checked the Headmaster in the last couple of days so you can go right ahead with him. Just so you know, if it helps you judge what you need, I have eight other people out there waiting to donate, plus I would also like to, and Molly is calling her boys. Should you speak to Cuthbert, dear?” she threw in, quite offhand.

Draco had made a decision. “With your permission, Headmaster, I’d like to use you as a guinea pig. If I can’t remove a small part of your magic, we’ll know this was a fool’s errand. If I can, with no harm to you or Harry – and I would like to check you after to see whether that is the case – then I’ll run it by Bert. It should be enough to keep Harry going for a bit and give us some time. If it doesn’t work....”

“As you wish, Healer,” Poppy said, with a surprising amount of respect. It firmed Draco’s resolution. He sat on the edge of the bed between Dumbledore and Harry, and, asking for permission with his eyes, slid his hand onto the Headmaster’s soft belly, his hand just inside his robes.

The next moment he was in. He could feel the immense power- not like Harry, of course, but oodles of it anyway – and the decay, the degeneration that was Dumbledore’s life span drawing in. It was strange – the magical core itself was vibrant – ageless, Draco thought – it was just that the edifice was crumbling. Like Harry, really – his magic was still strong and powerful, just that his body was not. He panicked for a moment: if Dumbledore’s magic couldn’t keep his body from degenerating, how could more magic fix Harry? But then the magic must help prevent that degeneration – wizards after all, lived twice as long as Muggles with the same physical framework. And Harry’s situation was not the same as the Headmaster’s.

Carefully, he felt his way around the Headmaster’s magic, and summoned a little of it to him. Nothing happened, except a tugging feeling. Draco needed to talk to Albus. He had never managed to really integrate the internal and external world before, but needs must. He pulled his thoughts back a little, and managed to look at the Headmaster.

“I need you to actively, consciously release some magic to me. You’ll feel me tugging,” he suggested, seeing the puzzled look in the Headmaster’s face.

“Yes, Draco,” Dumbledore said docilely.

Draco returned his concentration to the magic, and tugged again. The resistance was still there. He tugged a little harder, and suddenly, he knew Albus had caught on to what he needed to do, and he had a strand of magic coming away.

Acting on instinct once again, and this time not able to withdraw, his other hand fumbled blindly for Harry.

“What do you need, Draco?” he heard Snape’s voice from a distance.

“Harry,” he muttered. He was sweating, just holding on to Albus’ magic even within the man himself was hard work, but the next moment he felt his hand on Harry’s stomach, and with a shove, he streamed the magic in.

It worked. He felt connected to both, felt the transfer running through him.

He felt euphoric, overjoyed.

Suddenly he realised he needed to stop, and instantly cut the connection.
He breathed heavily, head hung down.

Someone handed him a damp cloth. Poppy. He wiped his face, and then looked to Dumbledore.

“Are you alright, Sir?”

Dumbledore was sat back in his chair, a little pale, but smiled encouragingly at Draco. “Fine, Healer, fine. You have a very light touch.”

“I didn’t take too much?” Draco said anxiously.

The Headmaster waved his hand over his front and changed his robe from purple to citrus orange, with lime green wands shooting sparks all over it.

“Perfectly functioning, Draco, everything I could possibly want to do at my finger tips.”

Severus snorted, and even Poppy chuckled.

Draco’s lips curled up. Thank you, Sir,” he said sincerely, “but for the sake of the others, would you allow me to just check?”

“Go ahead, Draco,” Albus said genially, leaning back in the chair.

Draco once again placed his hand on his stomach. And was pleased to feel no difference in the older man: his magic was still vibrant, and he still had an enormous amount of it – he couldn’t have taken as much as he’d thought, but he knew he needed to be aware as he withdrew it, to cut the connection quickly, not become enthralled in the process.

“Thank you, Sir, you’re fine,” he said, trying not to show the relief he felt.

Dumbledore stood up.

“Medichocolate, Albus,” Poppy said firmly. “Always a good idea after a magical drain.”

“Excellent!” Albus beamed.

“There’s some in my medical bag in the other room. Can you floo through to Molly for some more? It’s in the medicine cabinet in my office.”

Albus tootled into the other room.

“I’ll start checking the others for curses, Healer. As the Headmaster seems fine, I’ll assume you don’t need my help in here unless you call,” Poppy finished, gave a little bow and swept out.

Eric Hammond was still standing watching. “She reminds me of a woman I saw at the opera with a colleague of mine,” he said thoughtfully.

“It probably was Poppy,” Draco said off-handedly, “she’s very fond of opera and she does have a doctor friend she goes with.” The topic had come up over tea with Poppy when Draco was discussing his next year’s plans with her. Maybe that would all now change.

Now that he didn’t have to worry about his safety.

Now that his father was dead.

“Nice woman. Firm touch,” Hammond nodded. “Is she a nurse, then, comparably?”
“A mediwitch is equivalent to a general physician,” Severus said quietly.

“I’m just checking Harry,” Draco said, and slipped his hand on to his stomach.

Hammond’s brows drew together. “Does she practice elsewhere?”

“I believe she regularly does some relief work in the summer holidays. Some parts of the world have extremely small magical communities which do not have the training facilities for mediwizardry; the wizards that leave to train elsewhere frequently do not return.”

“But – in the day-to-day week – she’s here? Just dealing with school stuff?”

Severus looked scornful. “Positions in schools are highly prized. The practitioner comes into such a wide range of challenges –“

“Pupils with diarrhoea and vomiting, scraped knees and the like?” Hammond almost sneered.

“You have not been here long enough to appreciate our world,” Snape said, with remarkable restraint. “A classroom incident here could result in – Merlin forbid – a pupil having serious burns in a potions’ accident, severe damage from fume inhalation, and that’s without considering possible effects of ingesting said potions. A misjudged movement in Care of Magical Creatures could result in a poisonous snake bite, or much worse. A sporting mishap - say, a fall of 150 feet – leads to complex injuries. That’s before we get on to any spell-caused problems. The job, I can assure you, is demanding and varied.”

Draco exited from Harry.

“Well?” Snape asked sharply, instantly distracted from his defence of the witch.

“Yes, it does appear well,” Draco gave a slight smile. “The Headmaster’s magic appears to be integrating with Harry’s. I don’t know the effect, yet, of course, but there appear no negatives. That being the case, from Harry’s point of view, there’s nothing to lose.”

Hermione tapped at the entrance. “I’ve been cleared. Are you ready for me?” she smiled at Draco.

Draco patted the seat of the chair, and Hermione came forward.

“Female magic will make no difference?” Severus asked.

“Harry’s lucky to get anything that’s offered, at this point,” Draco said, more sharply than he’d intended.

Hermione laid her hand on his arm, smiling soothingly at him. Her fingers slipped down to his, tangling together for just a moment before she slid his hand under the tee shirt she was wearing and onto her stomach.

Draco relaxed at her touch, at the comfort offered, at the familiar feel of her stomach, of her magic as he slipped inside.

Afterwards, he realised he hadn’t contacted Bert, and whilst Hermione talked to Severus, he made his way to the fire, throwing up a privacy ward. If he was going to be bawled out he’d have it done in private.

Cuthbert Entwhistle bustled to the fire after several moments. He looked rather harried.
“What is it, Draco? Is he dead?” he asked, with sudden sympathy.

“No, Sir. I’ve tried something....” and he explained.

Cuthbert was stunned, but his eyes began to light with interest.

“I’m awfully sorry I can’t come and help you, there, but things are critical here too. As for adverse affects – well, it’s uncharted territory, isn’t it? I suggest taking only a small amount from each donor. And you will need to track them for the next year at least. Take clear records of their self-reported functioning levels as soon as you have time afterwards, then check on these every two months – we can sort that out later. I must get back,” he said regretfully, looking over his shoulder.

Draco thanked him, and didn’t know whether he was reassured or not.

Some time later, after Draco had taken magic from half a dozen people, Hermione slipped back in.

“Do you need a rest? Something to eat? A drink?” she asked, not wanting to interfere with Draco in working mode, but not wanting him to exhaust himself.

He had just taken magic from Arthur Weasley, and despite knowing what a Healer’s life entailed, it was still odd to have gone into the man whom his father had thoroughly despised, and constantly disparaged throughout his childhood. To find that the man actually had quite strong magic, and felt – wholesome – to be made comfortable by his calm attitude and pleasant manner, were all rather shocking to his system. He had just thanked the man, surprising them both by standing up respectfully as Arthur rose to leave, and was grateful for the distraction.

He smiled welcomingly at Hermione. "Actually, transferring is remarkably… invigorating, but I could do with stretching my legs,” he agreed. “It may be worth giving Harry a half hour break, then I’ll have another look to see how it’s going,” he said, turning back to Severus.

Poppy bustled back in. “I’ll sit with him, then, dear, go and have a little walk and a bite,” she said, having a good look at Harry before fishing out her wand and doing a diagnostic check.

“We can cover it,” Nathan said.

Poppy looked over and gave him a vague smile. “You need to stretch your legs, too, gentlemen. Have a break. He seems to be no worse,” she said, looking at the readout of results.

She sat down in the donor’s chair before summoning a capacious bag from the other room, from which she withdrew some knitting.

The doctors left.

“There’s no improvement?” Severus said quietly.

“No deterioration,” she said, “clicking away. “Before, he was noticeably slipping away with every reading. I count it as a good sign,” she said firmly, looking up at Severus from her work.

He nodded.

Poppy watched him surreptitiously from under her lashes. He was pale and gaunt – nothing too unusual there, there had been many occasions when she had seen him so in the past. His face was tight, his eyes – he was looking at Harry with such –
“Severus.”

He turned to her at once at the firmness in her voice.

“It’s not my business and of course it isn’t your duty, but why will you not give him any of your magic? I confess myself surprised.”

Severus stared at her in astonishment. “My magic, Poppy? Do you – Merlin, you cannot think I am unwilling! For Merlin’s sake! Surely it must be obvious to the world that I’d give anything for him!”

“Then why…?” Poppy leaned forward, knitting needles suspended mid-stitch.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Snape’s hand gripped Harry’s too hard. Poppy glanced down, though Harry was unresponsive, and Snape instantly loosened his grip. “Twenty years as a Death Eater, Poppy! You must know – you’ve seen – I’m tainted – you can’t think that would be any good for him!”

Draco, who had returned to pick up his robe, having decided, at Neville’s suggestion, to go for a brief walk outside with Neville and Hermione, despite the fact that it was not yet dawn, hovered, listening.

Now he strode in and sat down, quickly, back on the bed where he’d sat before.

“Severus, whether you want to give your magic or not is entirely up to you, but I don’t think magic gets tainted. I’ve never seen it… and anyway, I’ve seen your magic. When we shut the link to Voldemort. I can promise you, there’s nothing tainted or dirty, or odd about your magic.”

Severus stared at him. “Even though I had the Dark Mark?” he whispered.

“Shall I check? To put your mind at rest? I won’t lie to you. Harry’s life is the prime concern here, not your sensibilities,” he said firmly.

That business-like coolness seemed to settle Severus, and he nodded, and undid the buttons over his stomach as he had watched the others do. Draco slid a hand inside, professional and detached.

It was only moments, it seemed, with his heart beating too fast, before Draco’s hand was gone, “It’s perfectly fine, Severus,” Draco said gently. “No taint; clean, strong, vibrant magic. It could not harm Harry. But the decision is now yours. I’m going for a bit of fresh air.” And he slipped past Poppy’s knees, and out.

Severus was shaking.

“Go and have a cup of tea, dear,” Poppy said, clicking her needles once again.

Severus got up, almost without thinking.

As he went to pass her, Poppy put a hand on his arm, as if she couldn’t hold in her words. “You’re such a silly boy, Severus! I can’t believe you thought that of yourself! You’re a good man.”

“I’ve hurt people, Poppy,” he said. “Deliberately.”

“So have I,” she said, surprisingly. “I didn’t enjoy it either, Severus. But sometimes, you have to look at the bigger picture.”

He looked down at the woman, once again taken aback by her astuteness. He didn’t think they
were quite the same thing, hurting a patient in the process of healing them, as compared to hurting someone in the bigger picture of a war, but he was grateful for her attempt at comfort.

He laid a brief hand on her shoulder, and went out for tea.

It was about half past eight that morning that Severus heard a ruckus outside his door. The people in the room turned to Snape, who once again was stretching his legs and had even eaten a piece of toast.

Sighing, he walked over the door and pulled it open, stepping into the corridor, to see the astonishing sight of a row of chairs just settling into place along the wall outside, and the pupils standing back in a bunch just moving to sit on them.

They all rose again as one, politely, as he came out.

“What is the meaning of this?” Snape demanded. “Professor Sinistra is dealing with House matters, and Professor – the new Professor -” he said, not recalling who was teaching his subject, “with Potions. Why are you disturbing the peace?”

It was Vincent Crabbe who came up to him, acting, amazingly, as the spokesperson for the group.

“We’re sorry to bother you, Sir, but a rumour was overheard at breakfast.”

“Indeed?” Snape drew himself up to his most forbidding.

“Yes, Sir,” Crabbe ploughed on, unbowed, though he could see others in the group wincing. “Derek Jarby has very good hearing, Sir, what with his, er...”

“And he heard what?” Snape asked, knowing full well the boy was a werewolf for whom he brewed the Wolfsbane Potion, and did indeed have acute hearing.

“He heard Professor Dumbledore telling one of the other teachers that Potter was...was...”

Severus glared at him. He heard one of the other pupils pulling a second’s sleeve. “We’d better get out of here,” she whispered.

“Stay where you are!” Severus snapped. “Well?” he said to Crabbe, slightly less acerbically.

Crabbe squared up to him. “The rumour is that Potter is... that Potter is dying, Sir. Draco is trying to save him by giving him bits of people’s magic. Is it true, Professor? Because we’ve all come to offer our help. Some of our magic.” He looked at Snape’s gobsmacked face. “I know I haven’t got much, Sir, but I’m used to not being able to do much. And Greg and I were planning to live as Muggles had Potter not ended the war, so we reckon we owed it to him. And if Draco had been able to help him, at the battle – “

Snape put a gentle hand on his arm. “No blame lies with you, at all, Vincent. You make Slytherin House proud, with your offer,” he said, so everyone could hear. Greg was standing behind him, face lit with a pleased smile.

Snape, unbelieving, strolled down the row of upturned faces. Ginny Weasley was no surprise. Zabini – well, that was good. Dean Thomas, Seamus Finnegan – but there were people from every house.
“I am most impressed by all of you,” he said quietly. “I will ask Madam Pomfrey to come and explain matters to you. If you have any doubts whatsoever, you must go. No one will think any the worse of you – indeed, I cannot be more proud of you all than I am now,” and he turned on his heel to return.

“Professor Snape? Is it true?” Goyle asked.

Severus looked at him, at all the faces. Curious, disbelieving. But caring.

He nodded, and ignoring the gasps, went back in.

“What’s going on?” Bill asked.

“Albus has been meddling,” he answered, but his lips were curving upwards.
Severus lay in bed, on his back, listening to the sounds of the night. The flicker of fire in the grate, dusting the edges of the furniture with its luminosity. The spatter of rain outside, hitting the covering of the ventilation shafts. The creak of a bed in the other room.

He felt irritable.

The Ravenclaw third years were demanding, but the Hufflepuffs in with them had two absolute idiots.

The truth was, he was glad to be teaching. He was not used to inaction. He couldn’t stay in his rooms forever.

Would it be forever before Harry woke up?

His head turned on the pillow to look at the young man next to him.

Harry’s chest barely rose, and he neither moved nor showed any sign of returning to consciousness.

Maybe he never would.

Snape wondered, for the hundredth time, whether they had done the wrong thing. Harry would have been dead by now.

Dead and buried and already rotting in the damp ground.

But was this any better?

This warm body, a parody of the man he had been, lying there?

Snape could suddenly bear it no longer.

Throwing back the covers, he slipped his feet out onto the cold stone floor – rejoicing in the chill underfoot, rejoicing in feeling.

He padded out to the kitchen and picked up the kettle, swilling out the old water and adding fresh, before setting a flame underneath it on the cooking hob. Harry said Muggles had electric kettles that didn’t need flames. He’d like to see one at work.

He heard the rustle from the second bedroom and got out a second cup as Nathan stumbled to the door.

“Want some?” he asked, holding the mug up.

“Thanks,” Nathan nodded, strolling in, tartan pyjamas and a towelling bathrobe on. The man had not yet become used to the uneven heat of rooms warmed by fires.

“He’s alright?” Nathan said, unnecessarily.

“The same,” Severus replied.
“I’ll check the drip and stuff whilst the kettle boils.”

Nathan was a good man, Severus acknowledged. He appreciated Nathan’s military training, his organisation, calm manner, yet easy approach.

Eric Hammond had gone – much to everyone’s relief. Neville brought him back every three days to check on Harry, but Nathan took blood samples to send off, and did all the other Muggle procedures that were helping keep Harry alive.

By all accounts – Muggle and magical – a miracle had happened in Harry’s body.

The cancer had been eradicated.

Every last hint of it, much to the disbelief of Hammond, and the cautious acceptance of Nathan.

But it had been a week since it had gone.

Thirteen days since Draco had undertaken his last minute gamble.

And Harry had not regained consciousness once.

Severus sat at the kitchen table – enlarged – to cope with the steady stream of occupants – his hands around a steaming cup, and a second waiting for Nathan as he sat down.

Draco had returned at last to Neville and Hermione, though he had demanded that Severus floo him should there be the slightest change, and he visited last thing at night and first thing in the morning.

His early euphoria had turned to panic, and now, Severus knew, a creeping despair rather similar to his own.

How long did one wait? Months? Years?

“In our hospitals we do a brain scan,” Nathan said quietly.

Severus regarded him.

“With patients in a coma. To see whether there is any brain activity.”

“There wasn’t any before,” Severus said, with his usual snark, and then blinked that he’d had the nerve to say it.

Glad that some of the frailer temperaments were not around to hear him.

Harry would have thumped him one with a grin on his face, though.

Nathan gave a snort of amusement, fortunately. “And yet, you chose him as your partner.”

“He chose me,” Snape said.

Nathan cocked his head.

“I am not in the habit of conducting affairs with pupils.”

“I wondered if that was more acceptable in your world than ours,” Nathan said, sipping his tea.

“Certainly not. I was horrified when I discovered –” He looked at the interest in the other man’s face, and for once, decided to talk. “Suffice it to say Harry was wearing a different face when we
started our relationship. Literally.”

“How did that work? Could he change between the two?”

“Oh yes. It was a good three months before I discovered his true identity.”

“Ouch.”

Snape snorted at the comment, his tensions easing.

“Everything you’ve heard of him is true. He’s been fighting – and having to kill – for years. He was, of course, right; it is a long time since he was a child, and even then, it was not a period of his life that he enjoyed.”

“So his experience – your shared experiences – make him a good partner for you?”

“You’re very interested,” Snape said, caution reasserting itself.

“I’m trying to persuade a woman twelve years older than I am that the relationship could work.”

Snape leant back in his chair.

“You’re away from her a long time whilst you’re here.”

“She’s refusing to see me at the moment. I’m hoping absence will make the heart, etc.”

“Mmmm. I think it is his qualities that make it work. He is obviously youthful and exuberant, and I am not. That is quite....exciting. It might wear in time, but then, youth wears off us all.”

“I’ll tell her that.”

“She may think you are referring to her.”

“Good point. I’m not strong on tact.”

“I am sorry to tell you, but you may have noticed that I am not a role model for that,” Snape smirked.

“So, he’s young and feisty, you’re old and experienced. Is that it? What makes it work?”

“You were right about lack of tact,” Severus grinned. “My age is young for a wizard, I’ll have you know.”

“Apologies!” Nathan threw up his hands. “Am I digging a deeper hole if I say you look like you’ve lived your years? That’s not a bad thing, is it?”

“True, as well. And of Harry, who has lived much too much, yet not enough by a long shot.” Severus drained his cup, and fetched the whisky.

He held up a glass in query.

“I’ll have it in my tea,” Nathan held out the cup. “Thanks.”

“He also has more courage than any man should, power beyond comprehension, warmth, and – understanding. He may not have a great intellect – nothing lacking though – but – he understands things as if they were simple. It’s very odd,” Severus mused.
They drank in silence for a bit, each deep in their own thoughts.

“If – when – the magic transplant works,” Nathan said, quickly correcting himself, “what are the implications? Could you transplant some magic into a Muggle, for example, and get a wizard?”

“That is not something I had even considered,” Snape mused, “though it is an incredible idea.” He looked sharply at the other man.

“I don’t like that look in your eye,” Nathan said, suddenly on edge.

“I don’t think it would be wise to allow you to take that suggestion back to the Muggles,” Severus said calmly.

Nathan sat up. “Am I sitting here drinking your whisky whilst you tell me you’re going to kill me at the end of this?” His voice was surprisingly calm.

“If that were my intention, you would not know, Nathan. My apologies for making you even consider it.”

“You trust me to keep silent?”

“I’m not a very trusting person.”

“Well? What is your worry?”

“You can see it too. Muggles forcibly making one wizard remove another’s magic and putting it into a Muggle of their choice...it is not going to happen,” Snape said.

“I’ll keep my mouth shut. I’m a doctor, not an intelligence expert. Though I can see the applications...”

“Exactly. I may need to obliviate you,” Snape said reluctantly. “It is a painless removal of memories.”

“Hypnosis?”

“A spell.”

“Will you allow me to keep my mind intact for the present? You can monitor my phone calls and...”

“Nathan, once again, I apologise. I trust you. It is anyone you may have contact with...”

“What about Eric?”

“I think Eric prefers not to even think about our world. But we need to consider it. “

He stood up and stretched, taking the cups and glasses to the sink and washing them. He hated mess left lying around.

“I truly appreciate everything you’ve done,” Snape said, leaning against the sink. “I’m sorry for the way this conversation has taken us....”

“Don’t worry. I think I prefer that you’ve said it,” Nathan also stood. “It’s been at the back of my mind that you’d need to do something to preserve this secret, after everything you did at the camp to ensure your world was unknown. I’d be happier if you told me exactly what procedures you
were going to do to me.”

Severus walked over. “Let me put your mind at rest now. I’m a very skilled Leglimens – I can look into your mind – and no, I wouldn’t, without your permission. This enables me to do a particularly accurate Obliviate, even sometime after the discussion. I can pinpoint all the thoughts relating to it, and remove only those and nothing else. I would merely need to stand here, say one word, and it would be done. It is that simple, fast and painless,” he said quietly.

“That’s scary,” Nathan shuddered.

“It is,” Severus surprised him by agreeing. “Such spells are frowned upon. Let me discuss this with Albus and our colleagues. Please don’t worry.”

Nathan nodded, and slipped away into his room.

Severus went to the bathroom, and having used the facilities, returned to bed, slipping into the warmth.

Harry turned and snuggled straight into his arms, with a sleepy, “You’re back.”

Snape’s hand slid soothingly down his spine before it registered.

“Harry?”

His heart was thumping with joy.

Harry just wiggled closer into his chest, fast asleep.

Severus lay there, arms round the slender figure, grinning from ear to ear.

“If you take the rune for......and then use Eidelberg’s proportional....”

“I can’t see how that would work. I think it would be better if.....”

“You know, I think Hagrid is becoming obsessed with those.....”

He couldn’t make sense of the words.

But they felt comfortable.

He allowed himself to swim in the vague space, keeping his eyes shut, trying to listen a little more acutely. His brain felt very slow to engage.

“....and I really wonder if Severus....”

Severus! That word had meaning!

He tried to listen harder.

“The likelihood of Snape being delusional is.... ,”

“Professor!”

“Do go on,” a deep voice said, amused, a little further away.
“Sir!”

“Mr Weasley, pray don’t hesitate to insult me in my own rooms. I’m just wondering if Draco was about to defend me....”

“I didn’t mean...”

Harry felt his lips curving up. Severus. Snark. Home.

“Do, please, explain what you meant then,” Severus invited.

Harry could almost feel Ron’s discomfort.

“Just wondered if...well, you could’ve dreamt it!” Ron suggested.

“Indeed. My dreams involving Harry usually involve more than him being asleep,” Snape said silkily.

Harry bet Ron’s face was as red as his hair. Maybe it was time to intervene.

“Pleased to hear it,” he tried to say, forcing his eyes open.

“Harry!”

There were yells and shouts, then strong arms raising him and deliciously cool water at his lips. He looked up into Severus’ dark eyes, and smiled.

“Why’m I alive?” he got out, through a mouth that felt thick and rubbery.

He passed his hand over it, unconsciously doing a breath freshening charm.

“How do you feel?” Draco asked, leaning over Harry from beside Severus.

Harry thought about it. “Weird.” He searched his thoughts, feelings. “Less achy, I think. My head’s fuzzy. Mouth’s fuzzy. I’m not dead. That’s got to be good, hasn’t it?”

“Your cancer has gone, Harry,” Nathan said quietly, checking over Harry’s blood pressure as he spoke.

“Gone?”

“As far as we know. All the tests are clear. Normally we’d say that you’re in remission. Cancers do have a habit of coming back, but given that you are a rather different case....we’d still like to check you over regularly, however.”

Harry looked at everyone in amazement.

“Gone?” he repeated. He tried to drag his thoughts together. “Because of having my magic back?”

“Actually,” Ron said, surprising everyone, “we have Draco to thank.”

Harry looked at the blond boy fidgeting on the bed. “Draco? You healed me?”

Draco shook his head, and looked up, taking a deep breath. “Harry, I did an experimental procedure. It’s never been done before. I’m afraid you may feel different, or find your powers different....”
“You did?” Harry said stupidly.

“You were close to death,” Nathan said. “I would not have expected you to last the night – indeed, you had already outlived what we would have expected given our test results.”

“Tell me,” Harry asked. He snuggled his body back against Severus, who was sitting behind him now, half supporting him. His hands went over Severus’, which were wrapped around his middle, and he turned his head enough to smile delightedly at the man.

Severus’ arms tightened in response.

In a shaking voice, Draco explained what he had done.

“People gave me some of their magic?” Harry said in disbelief.

“It’s just like you to be so surprised,” Hermione teased.

“But....but...”

“But nothing,” Draco said. “A by-product is that we’ve discovered you’re right. Do you remember when you thought your magic was growing back?”

“But it wasn’t.” Harry protested.

“No, because you had no magic at all. But magical people do regrow their magic – we’ve been monitoring all the donors –”

“All? How many?” Harry almost squeaked.

“Fifteen. A lot more offered – they were queuing along the corridor –”

“You’re joking now, right?”

“They were,” Severus’ voice rumbled in his ear. “Even some of my Slytherins.”

“I – it’s – I...” Harry couldn’t express his amazement.

Ron couldn’t cope with the embarrassment. “Hey, mate, do you want a bite to eat? You must be starving after all this time!”

“How long?” Harry said, still dazed.

“A couple of weeks,” Hermione filled him in.

“Really?” Harry screeched, then coughed to lower his voice.

“I’d suggest some light soup,” Severus said, rubbing his hand along Harry’s arm. Funny how different flesh felt when there was a conscious being behind it.

Dobby was thrilled at Harry’s reawakening, and managed, at Snape’s request, to restrain himself from providing a feast.

Harry ate, people chatted, and Harry drifted off to sleep again against Severus.
Harry groaned as Severus’ lips brushed over his nipple. His cock was aching; it felt as if it had been hard forever, and his hips moved restlessly, seeking the pressure and touch he needed so desperately. But Severus was teasing him, driving him mad. Lips slid down his stomach, whilst fingers slid slowly up the inside of his thighs. Harry spread his legs, desperate, needy.

“Sev’rus,” he moaned, his own hand slipping down to his balls, already tight and so ready for Severus’ touch.

Lips slid wetly over the head of his cock, making him buck frantically.

“Oh, please!” he gasped, “please!”

He rolled over, legs spread, cock now finding the friction Severus was denying him against the mattress. A needy whine slipped from his lips.

Severus’ hand on his shoulder, turning him back, caused a moan of denial, and he opened his eyes, protest on his lips.

To see a red-faced Hermione shaking him.

“Harry! I- uh – you’re dreaming!” she gasped.

Harry’s eyes darted, from his position face down in the pillow, around the room. Ron was redder than a Gryffindor flag, Neville was giving him a sympathetic look, and Draco was smirking.

“Oh god! Anyone else here?” he whispered, not able to bear the thought of turning over and coming face to face with Professor McGonagall.

“No, you’re all right, mate,” Ron got out.

“Guess we know who’s the bottom in your relationship, huh?” Draco smirked.

“Draco!” Hermione scolded. “Maybe he likes turn and turn alike. Not everyone is a natural bottom like you.”

Ron let out a loud snort. “I knew it! Ha!”

“Mione!” Draco was rivalling Ron’s colour.

“What? People who live in glass houses....”

Draco’s brows drew together. “What? It’s Neville who lives in the greenhouses...”

Hermione humphed. “It’s an expression! People who live in glass houses shouldn’t throw stones. Duh!”

“See, wizards would never have such a silly saying,” Draco began. “I mean, with magic, who gives a shit?”

Ron was still grinning. “Neville does you, then? Go, Neville!”

“Nothing wrong with bottoming,” Neville said calmly. “I like it too. The sensation is incredible –”

“No! No, no, no! I admit I started it, but too much information!” Ron was crossing his arms in front of his face to ward them off.
“Just ‘cos you’re too cowardly to try it...” Draco taunted, old rivalries not entirely forgotten.

“Na, it’s not for me,” Ron shook his head vigorously. “Arse – crap. No interest in what comes out or anything going in. Not interested in other men’s dicks. Yueuk! No offence meant, each to his own and all that, but – no thanks.”

“You do know there are spells for hygiene, Ron?” Hermione asked, the giver of information to the last.

“Well, I’m pleased to hear it, but let’s put it this way, even this conversation has got my balls trying to creep back into my body and pretend they’re not there. I’m just not tuned that way. Women, now –”

“Yeah, maybe not a safe topic either,” Neville said, looking seriously at Ron, reminding him with just a glance of Hermione walking in on him and Lisa. Neville looked across at Harry and smiled easily. “You okay, now, Harry?”

Despite the conversation Harry was still hard. And he desperately needed to pee.

“Uh, turn round, Hermione, need to go to the loo.”

“I’ll nip down to the kitchen and bring back some food,” Hermione suggested tactfully, and exited the room.

Harry slid over to the far side of the bed and swung his legs over the edge, sitting up. He instantly wavered as dizziness muddled his head.

Draco and Ron shot around the bed to help.

“Give it a second and get up slowly,” Draco suggested. “Would you rather have a bottle?”

“No thanks,” Harry grimaced. He’d never get his cock into one the way it was at the moment.

He stood up, the covers sliding back. At this point, he realised that he was naked, but he needed the loo too bad to care.

“Holy shit!” Draco gasped.

“What?” Harry’s startled eyes flew to his.

“You’re – nothing!” Draco was red again.

“Is it serious?” Harry asked, staggering forward.

“No! Nothing!”

“It must be something,” Harry said, swinging round as he grabbed hold of the door frame.

Draco leapt out of the way.

“It’s nothing! I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“Draco! For fuck’s sake!”

“It’s nothing! It’s just – look – I just didn’t expect you to be – it doesn’t matter!”
“Draco!”

“Hung like a horse?” Neville suggested.

Draco and Harry both turned to him, and Ron sniggered.

“Yeah, well,” Draco was almost stuttering, “I shouldn’t have commented. Noticed.”

“It’s hard not to, isn’t it?” Ron said. “You don’t think I fell out with Harry in fourth year just because I was jealous over the Goblet of Fire, do you?”

Neville snorted behind him and Ron grinned. “Not only was he rich and famous and doing this brilliant thing - or so I thought until I saw those bloody dragons – but he used to fall out of bed in the morning with that enormous thing poking out of his pyjamas –”

“Hey!” Harry protested, holding the door frame, “It’s not that big –”

“You’re right, Harry, it’s only ’cos you’re so small that it looks that way,” Neville said, rolling his eyes.

“I’m going for a piss,” Harry said firmly, “and then,” he sniffed his armpits, ”a shower too.”

“Are you up to that?” Neville asked.

“Let me go to the loo first!” Harry said, and shut the door.

“Shit!” Draco grumbled. “Must he have everything?”

”You didn’t want a death sentence illness, or – or Snape, did you?” Ron said quietly.

“True,” Draco said, looking quickly at Ron.

They both remained hovering. The shower could be heard going on.

Ron went to the door, and pushed it open a bit.

“If you need help, give us a shout,” he called.

“I didn’t think you were that intimate with Harry,” Severus’ silky voice said from behind him, as the Potions Master returned from lessons with a basket of scrolls.

“Jesus! Must you creep up like that?” Ron held a hand to his chest.

“Must you proposition my lover?”

“Hey! No way! He’s having a shower –”

“On his own?” Severus said sharply.

“That’s why Draco and I are standing here like idiots in case he needs help,” Ron snapped back.

Severus strode into the bathroom and shut the door with a firm click.

“Honestly! Doesn’t he trust us?” Ron grumbled.

Hermione had reappeared and Ron’s face lit up at the tray of delicate pastries, cakes, slivers of fruit and vegetables, and other items to tempt Harry.
Some time later, Ron wiped his lips with his hanky and finished chewing his last mouthful. “Do you think Snape needs help?” he asked, “They’ve been ages.”

“How you can have shagged half the school and still be that innocent I don’t know,” Draco shook his head.

“What? What! They’re getting up to – whilst we’re here?! Just the other side of that door?”

“You are such a prude at times, Ron!” Hermione grinned at him.

“Well, that’s – I mean – it’s not very polite! And Harry’s sick!” he added in indignation.

“Well, judging from earlier, he’s well on the way to recovery,” Draco smirked, “and Snape’s just helping him along a bit.”

Suddenly the bathroom door opened and they all looked up as Snape walked out.

“What?”

“Where’s Harry?” Ron demanded. “If you’ve made him ill again –”

“I’m just getting him some clothes, unless you have some objection,” Severus looked down his nose at Ron as he went over to the wardrobe and hauled out a pair of combat pants and a shirt.

He walked back to the bathroom.

“Hey! What about pants?” Ron called after him.

Harry appeared in the doorway a moment later.

He had obviously lost a lot of weight, and the combats were slung very low, Harry’s hip bones sticking out. He was just pulling the shirt over his arms.

“Is that a tattoo? Oh, the one Sna – ah, yes,” Hermione tailed off.

Harry looked down. And went to pull up his trousers. “I need a belt,” he looked at Severus.

Hermione came over. “Can I have a look? At your tattoo?”

Severus slipped past and sat in one of the chairs in the corner, summoning the basket of parchments.

Hermione knelt just in front of Harry. He popped the top button and slid the trousers down enough so that she could see the whole design.

“He has got no pants on!” Ron said, “Hermione –”

“Do shut up, Ron,” she threw over her shoulder. “Can I -?” her finger moved out to touch the design.

Nathan walked in.

And came to an abrupt halt.

“Oh! Er-”

Severus looked up at him, eyes alight with amusement. “Good afternoon, Nathan. Contrary to
impression, it is not wizarding practice for a witch to service a wizard with a crowd of gawping onlookers. Miss Granger is investigating Harry’s tattoo.”

Draco and Neville were grinning, and Ron started laughing. Nathan relaxed, and smiled too.

“It’s good to see you’re up,” he said to Harry, “that is —” he glanced down at Hermione, still on her knees with her eyes in Harry’s groin.

“Much as I like Hermione, definitely not up,” Harry chuckled.

Hermione swatted his leg.

“Really! You men! Schoolboy humour —“

“We are schoolboys,” Ron protested, still giggling.

“So puerile,” Hermione said sniffily. “I’m sure I’ve seen this design,” she looked up at Harry, “but something’s off.”

“I’ve just showered,” Harry sniggered.

“Harry Potter!”

“Well, you’ve got your nose in my groin and tell me —“

“Come on,” she said, to more guffaws behind her as laughter began to overtake the group.

She knelt back, resting on her heels. “It’s not from the Book of Kells,” she said, “is it?”

Harry shook his head. His eyes were twinkling, and he leant nonchalantly against the doorpost.

Severus thought he looked the sexiest sight he had ever seen, shirt still open, trousers low with the trail of fine dark hair on his stomach pointing down, hair still damp and messy, and eyes alive, alive, alive!

He shifted in his chair, his fierce arousal from earlier returning full force. He had stripped off and slipped into the shower behind Harry, washing the young man all over. Harry had become aroused almost instantly. He had taken that beautiful cock into his mouth and worshipped it, and Harry had come within moments. Severus could still taste him in his mouth, bitter and salty and Harry. He licked his lips unconsciously. Harry’s eyes shot straight over to him, and he moved away from Hermione, turning away to do up his trousers and button his shirt. He came over and sat on the arm of Snape’s chair, the clean scent and delicious body beside him doing nothing to dissipate Severus’ desire.

They needed to get rid of their guests.

Severus had not allowed Harry to return the favour in the bathroom, or taken him with an audience outside the door – now, he was regretting it as he hardened further.

“Got it!” Hermione exclaimed. She was still kneeling on the floor, quite comfortable. “It’s from Ciaron’s Book of Celtic Wards!”

“Only you would know that, Hermione,” Harry grinned, nodding.

“Yes, but I was put off. It’s not quite right. Which is odd, because the quality of work is brilliant.”
“It looks complete to me,” Nathan said, in surprise, “though of course I’ve never seen the original. It has the usual form of an intricate Celtic knot – they’re very popular in Muggle tattooing at the moment,” he commented, by way of explanation.

“Yes, you’re right, but this is a Wizarding one,” Hermione said. “And if I remember correctly – Harry – oh, clever to miss it out, and not give the game away!”

The others looked at her.

“This ward has a Mage’s staff vertically overlaid,” she explained.

There was silence, and then the wizards in the room – apart from Harry, whose eyes were alight with laughter – and Nathan, who looked bemused – all guffawed.

“What have I said now?” Hermione asked, getting up, feeling in a bit of a huff at being laughed at. Neville grabbed her hand and pulled her onto his lap.

“’Mione, use your brain. Harry has a Mage’s staff....”

“I know –“

“No, he means a - an attached one,” Ron’s eyes were leaking water.

“An attached – “ Hermione’s brow furrowed. “Oh! You mean his penis!” she exclaimed, to more hoots of laughter. “Yes, but in the original design, the staff crosses completely and...”

“Oh, it does, Miss Granger,” Severus smirked.

“But the design is too high for that to work –“

“Uh, it’s not,” Neville snorted.

Hermione turned wide eyes to Harry.

“What?” Harry blushed. “We’re not going on about my size again! I’m a tiddler compared to Severus!”

All eyes turned on the Potions Master, several dropping to his groin. He had never been so grateful for voluminous teaching robes.

“Thank you, Harry, do tell every intimate detail of our lives and bodies to your friends,” he murmured.

Harry had gone bright red, and was horrified in case Severus was mad at him.

Seeing the look of worry in his eyes, Severus laid a hand on his thigh. Harry instantly caught it in his fingers.

Coughing, Hermione turned away and made up a small plate of food for Harry, bringing it across to the two wizards who were involved only in each other.

“Here,” she said, pushing the plate at Harry. “You need to eat. We’re really pleased to see you so well, love. We’re off. Nathan, do you want to come and see Neville’s greenhouse? Or there’s a quidditch practice you might find interesting. I expect you’ll be leaving us soon,” and she gave Harry a quick peck on the cheek, then a big hug, and hustled everyone out of the room.
“I’m really sorry,” Harry began.

“I’m not,” Severus said, “they’ve gone.”

“You don’t like them?” Harry said wistfully.

“Surprisingly, they are remarkably acceptable company,” Severus contradicted. “Only, I have had rather more of their conscious presence in the last few weeks than yours, and that is a situation that needs to be rectified, don’t you think?”

Harry grinned, and slid off the chair into Severus’ lap.
“So where’s Snape?” Ron asked, “He’s coming, right?”

It was a beautiful evening, in late August, and the garden was full of the scents of *nicotiana* and roses and steak cooking on a barbecue.

Music floated in the air, but not enough to drown out conversation. There would be time enough for that, and dancing, later.

“Italy. He’ll be here soon, I expect,” Harry smiled, sipping his beer.

“You don’t know for sure?” Ron asked in surprise.

“I asked him,” Harry said simply, as if that was enough to explain everything.

Molly Weasley wandered over. “Harry dear,” she said, giving him a rather tipsy kiss.

“Mum!” Ron gasped, as she landed one on his cheek for the second time that evening, “How much of that have you had?” he pointed at the champagne glass in her hand.

“Molly,” Harry said warmly, “how are you?”

“Very happy,” Molly answered him, holding her glass out of Ron’s reaching hand. “Ron! I’m allowed to celebrate!”

“The anniversary?” Harry asked, looking inquisitively at her. Molly seemed to have more on her mind.

“Oh, yes, of course! It’s so wonderful! And to think...well.” She was at a loss for words.

Harry could understand that.

Molly brightened, and continued, “And Arthur and I are going on a Muggle cruise! Those share thingies you gave to Arthur – you shouldn’t have, dear, but we’ve already had that argument - well, they seem to be making lots of money – especially since Arthur got involved in the company. We’re going on a cruise with one of the other directors and his wife – Marjorie and John, nice people. Marjorie says you don’t have to do anything, or think of doing anything, or organising anyone to do anything. And we’re travelling round the Mediterranean. And do you know what, Harry? I think I’m going to love it!”

Harry grinned at her. “That sounds wonderful! I’m really pleased for you.”

Harry knew Molly had gone through a period of depression, when she realised that all her children, except Ginny (who was away at Hogwarts most of the year anyway), had left home – and wouldn’t be coming back. She had, he knew, considered starting a new family, as witches remained fertile for much longer than their Muggle counterparts. Ron had been horrified. But then, Bill’s wife Fleur had become pregnant, and the fact seemed to have snapped Molly out of it. She had decided she didn’t want to have a son or daughter younger than her grandchild, and had started a new career, to the amazement of her family. Harry knew it was her success, as much as Arthur’s, that would be paying for their trip.

Molly had written *Household Spells*: it was not the first book ever to have been written on the
subject, but Molly’s practical, chatty style, laced throughout with humour and her own illustrations, had won her record sales, and a weekly slot on the Wizarding Wireless Network. Molly was still involved, as well, in the task Harry had asked her to undertake, the supervision of care arrangements for orphaned wizards and witches. This task, allied with her enjoyment of her role as a grandmother, fulfilled her maternal instincts, whilst her business success had led her to enjoy a renewed sense of confidence in the wider world, creating a most formidable personage.

Albus Dumbledore and Emmie Buchannan strolled over to join them, and Harry was hugged into the soft beard, before turning to kiss Emmie’s paper-soft cheek.

Albus had retired two years ago, and gone to Kent to study under Emmie, who was a renowned portrait artist. Despite the sixty-year difference in their ages, the two had become inseparable. Harry tried not to think about their love life. He was just glad to see Albus so happy, and looking years younger than he had in his last year or two at Hogwarts.

Neville had remained at the castle – indeed, the garden they were standing in had been created entirely by the young horticulturalist, and he was beginning to gain a reputation for his outstanding work with difficult and fragile species, and was fast gaining clients from potions’ supplies shops around the globe.

Hermione was studying at Cambridge, a joint honours course in Potions and Wizarding Law. The potential for a Potions Mastery, when her partners were a herbologist and a Healer, was obvious, but Law too had a fascination for her, addressing her pleasure in detailed research, and her zeal for doing what was right.

Draco was continuing to study under Healer Entwhistle, but his remarkable cure of Harry Potter had led to worldwide renown. Draco had been anxious about long-term effects, and had written a paper shortly after Harry’s cure, a follow-up paper on the donors twelve months on, and a third, just published, detailing the position after two years. Fortunately, there had been no negative outcomes to date, though Draco intended to study both Harry and his donors over several decades.

However, he was perhaps even more famous because the knowledge gained through his idea with Harry had led Hermione to make a further suggestion, which had led to the party today.

Because they were gathered to celebrate the twenty-fifth wedding anniversary of Frank and Alice Longbottom, who were sitting at a table at one side of the garden, surrounded by friends, their son and Mrs Longbottom senior, and laughing in the flower scented air.

Neville had been very anxious when he had first taken Draco and Hermione to meet his parents. He knew Hermione had met his mother and grandmother before, and would know what to expect, but Draco – years ago, Draco had mocked their insanity. He knew Draco had changed, but the little nugget of knowledge was still there. But Draco had been immensely respectful, talking with quiet courtesy to them, even though it was obvious that their reality was not everyone else’s.

Afterwards, Draco had asked Neville if he could have permission to enter them. Neville had been rattled. What would Draco find? Hermione had suggested that although Neville was of age, they should discuss it with his Gran too.

Neville hadn’t told his Gran about his living arrangements, and decided that he needed to forewarn her before taking them to visit.

He had apparated down to Lancashire, finding his Grandmother busy in the garden, which was rather auspicious, as he had brought her a new plant. It produced rather astonishing flowers, which Neville suggested his Gran might like to use to decorate her summer straw hat. He knew she was
all for outrageous costume – he had been quite old before he realised how idiosyncratic her vulture-adorned headwear was. As he had grown older he had come to appreciate what a remarkable woman she was. She had continued throughout the years to visit her son and his wife, to accept the terrible damage that had been inflicted on them, and to love them and feel proud of them despite their enfeebled state. She had brought Neville up single-handed, even taking the trouble to keep him in contact with his maternal grandfather, a much younger man who could have taken Neville on, but had allowed his grief at his daughter’s fate to be laid at Frank Longbottom’s door for encouraging her to be an Auror. It had to be said, that he had also rather enjoyed his freedom, and had moved to America to be away from the Voldemort business, as he called it. Neville wondered if it was the regular long distance apparating that he had done with his Gran – or her natural talent passed down to him – that had made apparating so easy for him. He had seen Grandfather Albert die, in America, after the man had become critically injured after attempting a bungee jump. It had seemed such a ridiculously pointless waste of life, but Gran had just said that at least he was doing something he enjoyed, a practical comment that had actually had quite an impact on Neville.

Nevertheless, telling Gran that he had found his own happiness – with two people, one of them a Malfoy, hadn’t been easy. Gran had been tight-lipped, but had told Neville to bring them to tea. Draco had been relentlessly courteous. Mrs Longbottom had been stiffly civil to them all. It was a painfully formal meal, with rattling dainty tea-cups, precisely cut sandwiches and fruit cake.

They had all gone home rather depressed.

Hermione had realised that this was a battle that they couldn’t give up. Mrs Longbottom was too important to Neville, and therefore too important to them. She suggested they return the invitation. With stunned looks, the boys agreed. Mrs Longbottom was invited to Sunday lunch at Grimmauld Place. It was the summer after they had finished at Hogwarts; the three had moved into the house and had been working hard at doing it up. Neville had declined the Hogsmeade house, despite Harry’s protests that he wanted him to have it. Neville had cinched it by saying that he’d never be able to walk in the backdoor without that flash memory of Harry and Snape going at it on the kitchen chair. Harry had laughed, and accepted Neville’s decision, glad that at least they were accepting Grimmauld Place, and knowing that with Neville’s ability to apparate, and his own changed plans, they really didn’t need the Hogsmeade house.

Which, frankly, he was rather fond of.

The dinner had been a disaster. They hadn’t been there long enough to get used to the cooking facilities, and none of them had had that much experience at cooking. Hermione, having pressed the boys to make the invitation, had felt responsible, and when everything began to fall apart, and even the lovely vegetables that Neville had grown ended up over-cooked and nasty, she had burst into tears, feeling she’d let everyone down. She knew it was the wrong time of the month, which always made her more temperamental, but she was horrified to cry in public and especially in front of Mrs Longbottom, and leapt to her feet, dashing out of the room with apologies flying off her lips.

There was a stunned silence.

“T’d better see you home, Gran,” Neville said, getting to his feet shakily.

Draco stood up politely. “If you’ll excuse me, Mrs Longbottom –“ he made to head to the door.

The old witch regarded the two young men with beady eyes. All at once she appreciated how much they were trying to include her. They hadn’t needed to come and see her, or sit through that painful
They certainly hadn’t needed to invite her to lunch – they would have had every excuse to say that the house wasn’t ready – for sure, they could have stretched that excuse for several years. But they hadn’t. And now, she could see how both were desperately worried about the young woman. The Malfoy boy was barely keeping his exquisite manners, and Neville was shovelling her out of the door, though trusting the other boy to look after the girl.

At once, she could see how this was working. The girl had been trying so hard to please her, for the sake of Neville. And from all she had heard, she had rather expected the witch to be as tough as old boots.

“Is she pregnant?” she asked sharply.

The Malfoy boy gasped.

“What?” Mrs Longbottom snapped. “I’m assuming it’s a possibility. She’s not here to mother you two, is she?”

Neville, more used to his Gran’s bluntness, said quietly, ”No, Gran, she isn’t."

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely positive,” Neville said, equally matter-of-fact, though this was not the sort of thing he had ever discussed with his Gran.

“You are sleeping together?” Mrs Longbottom said, eyebrows drawing together. If they weren’t, no wonder they were all tense.

“Gran. Yes we do, all of us,” Neville said firmly. “It’s the wrong time of the month, though that’s Hermione’s personal business, so we know she isn’t pregnant. We do take precautions, I assure you.”

“Good. She’s got a lot to achieve, that one, before bringing any sprogs into the family – though I’ll look forward to it,” Gran said, causing both their mouths to drop open. “Whoever the father is,” she continued, eyes darting between the two, “as it looks like you’ll all be together. Has she had any pain relief potion? A heat spell to her back? I saw her rubbing it earlier.”

The two of them gawked at her.

“Just because a woman is capable of doing all that for herself, doesn’t mean a little coddling wouldn’t go amiss,” she said firmly. “Now, you two clear this up. That roast lamb will be fine if you put it back in and set the oven a little higher,” Gran said. “It’ll make decent sandwiches or rissoles tomorrow. Throw those vegetables into some soup, Neville, like the one we used to make at home. Add a little ginger and plenty of milk. Draco, if there’s no decent bread in the house, nip out and get some. I’ll go and find Hermione.”

And leaving two open-mouthed young men, she made her way upstairs.

Hermione and Mrs Longbottom – Augusta – now got on like a house on fire. Both strong women, they appreciated the feminine within each other – and Hermione encouraged the men to appreciate this – flowers Neville had grown that weren’t practical, just pretty, brought to grace Augusta’s fine oak oval table; Hermione, realising Mrs Longbottom was a woman with an intriguing clothes sense, had made a hit in buying her a new handbag for her birthday.

And Hermione talked to Augusta – about life, ideas – and about Neville. Hermione was utterly shocked to discover than Augusta had no idea that Neville had become such a strong wizard, or that
he held the Hogwarts wards. Augusta was astonished that Hermione not only obviously doted on her grandson, but was incredibly proud of him – and told Augusta what a wonderful job she had done bringing him up. As Mrs Longbottom had secretly worried about how well she had managed this task – alone, and without the support of a husband, and with Neville’s parents still to think of and visit, this observation had been worth more than she could ever say.

Draco had still been a concern for her, though the trio had continued to invite her to meals and she had continued to go, and over time she had come to realise that the Malfoy boy did not boss her Neville around – in fact, the blond boy tended to look to Neville for direction and approval. The day she had realised this, she had looked quickly at Hermione, who had given her a secret smile and nod of understanding and agreement. Somehow, that had put Mrs Longbottom’s mind at rest. Neville was a man, and respected by his partners. She suddenly felt glad that he had found this happiness, and glad that they had worked so hard to include her in it.

Things were much easier after that.

It was some time later when Draco had come to see her alone, and talked to her about Frank and Alice. The young man in Healer mode was a different person altogether, and to her surprise she found herself giving permission for Draco to assess the two. She did not get her hopes up. They had been in hospital so long, seen so many people, that she had long ago given up hope for change. And Draco had not promised anything, just asked to look and assess.

And now, Frank and Alice were sitting here, in Hogwarts garden, enjoying the evening and their anniversary.

Their recovery still had a long way to go; the missed years weighed heavily on them, their physical bodies were still adapting to full movement with muscles and bones that were nearly two decades older than when they had last been at their willing command; their careers were gone and their son – a child – was a man – not much less than the age they had been when they had slipped into half-life. In some ways, it was easier for them to treat him as a friend, to begin to enjoy him as the adult he was. They found it hard to accept that he was with a Malfoy, despite everything said Malfoy had done for them. It was, after all, Draco’s aunt who had tortured them into their insanity. Augusta found herself as the intermediary, promoting Draco as a decent person to them.

Nevertheless, they were all here, alive, living, enjoying themselves. Augusta Longbottom had not expected to have such happiness again.

“So where is Severus?” Albus asked, “Emmie here has been longing to meet him, ever since he wrote that article on the chemical composition of paints in early Venetian art,” he smiled down at the woman against his side.

“Should be coming from there at any moment,” Harry smiled easily.

After Harry had recovered, and they had grown used to the idea of Harry living – and living a life without Voldemort – they had had to decide what they wanted that future to hold. At first, it had seemed as if their plans could not coincide: Severus wanted to leave Hogwarts, and Harry felt it important to stay and teach Remedial Magic to others who were not reaching their full potential.

They had finished out the summer term – Harry and his classmates taking NEWTs despite the disruption of the war and its aftermath – and over the time they had found a compromise.

They had started with a long holiday away together, travelling in Europe, and for the first time for both, just exploring and relaxing and enjoying life. It had been blissful. And they had discovered
that they could be together, happily, all the time, without getting on each other’s nerves – a worry that had been in the backs of their minds, that their age gap, their different life experiences, and so on, might make the dream of living together a nightmare. But it hadn’t been so, and it had made their term-time living not only acceptable, but exciting.

They had returned to England and visited Derek and Andy, staying in Harry’s room in the flat. They had talked for a long time about whether to tell the men about their magical life, but had, in the end, decided against it – as they had decided not to mention Harry’s leukaemia. The time visiting Harry in the camp had made Severus much more comfortable with Muggle equipment – the kettle, for starters - and Hermione had introduced him to the delights of the computer. Despite their initial reservations about Severus, Derek and Andy had seen how relaxed and happy Harry was, how well the men interacted together, the constant snarky banter almost a love-song between them, and the visit had been successful. They had visited again since, and Harry had also visited on his own. Harry knew that at some point they would invite his friends to visit them – but that, with all its complications, was for another day.

Severus had had many requests to come and lecture at various universities – throughout his career at Hogwarts he had continued to research and to publish in the journals of his profession – and he had regularly spoken at conferences. A conference at the beginning of their summer holiday had led to several requests to come and talk, to take master-classes with students, and Snape had agreed. Snape effectively taught/lectured/became involved with other Masters or students for four days a week; Harry taught at Hogwarts for three, teaching Remedial Magic, but also a fitness class, apparating out to wherever Severus was for the remaining four days. He would spend some time either exploring on his own, or seeking out Master Magicians himself to consult – Severus had often done the groundwork of finding people whom he thought Harry might be interested in meeting – and they had five nights together, and usually two or three days exploring, relaxing, or as often as not, cultivating wizarding relationships that had nothing to do with potions but were of interest to them both.

It worked exceptionally well.

Harry loved helping others find access to their own magic, and in truth, still needed the contact with his friends in England. The fitness part kept him in excellent physical shape. And he and Neville had worked on making the wards at Hogwarts manageable and powerful, so that both of them were able to move freely around the world whilst still ensuring the castle, and its inhabitants, were safe.

It was interesting too, to see the change under a new Headmaster.

Minerva had declined to take the Headmaster’s job, saying that she was very happy to be a deputy but had no desire to run the school. With the wards not an issue, the governors had advertised the post, and appointed Brice Allen, an Australian, to the post, on a five year contract. His approach had caused waves of shock throughout the wizarding community, with letters to the Prophet flying thick and fast with every alteration from the existing schedule, but the man seemed able to weather the storm, and Minerva’s and the other Heads of House’s support for the reforms had gone a long way towards helping things work.

For a start, although the four Houses remained for accommodation, the house tables had gone from the Great Hall, to be replaced by lots of smaller, round tables, where pupils could sit as they wished. And although the House quidditch competition still ran, there were also now inter-year competitions, with players from any house selected by merit to get onto their year team. These two factors alone seemed to have gone a long way to making House rivalry a friendly, rather than nasty business, and to encouraging mingling between pupils of the same age before hormones made it
happen later on, allowing friendships to develop.

There were also more subjects on the curriculum – the cross-curricular Design and Technology was extremely popular, with broomstick-making being the all-out favourite, and permanent and semi-permanent transfigurations for household use being a close second. There were many pupils trying out rickety hand-made brooms around the school, leading to a much greater appreciation of the difficulties of creating excellent brooms, and many dormitories sporting completely transfigured themed furniture. Flitwick reported a huge increase in interest in spell-work since the start of the classes, with Minerva McGonagall finding a similar rise in interest in Transfigurations. Madam Hooch said there were far fewer complaints about the school brooms. The guest lecturers – from Quality Quidditch Supplies, Weasley’s Wizarding Wheezes and the like – followed up with several weeks of lessons in the company of the appropriate teachers in school.

There was a crack of apparition, and the group turned to look at the point from where the sound had emanated.

Neville grinned across at them, his arms around two men.

“Good heavens! Oh, charming!” Albus said, quickly changing tack. He looked down at Emmie. “Vincent Crabbe and Gregory Goyle. Were students here, dear,” he explained, though Emmie’s face showed that she understood that no explanation had been made, really.

“I asked for them to come,” Harry said, causing Ron to look at him in surprise.

“You did? I thought they’d moved to Canada?” Ron’s brow furrowed.

“They have – that’s why Neville went to pick them up.”

Further explanations went by the wayside as the three men strolled over, and Draco, standing talking to the new Headmaster and some other guests, excused himself and came over, taking both Crabbe and Goyle by surprise as he gave them a hug.

“Hey? What about me?” Neville asked, hands on hips.

Harry was astonished to see that Draco could still blush, but he quickly walked over to Neville and stretched up to brush his lips over the bigger man’s cheek.

“Blimey, Neville, hadn’t realised how much you’d grown,” Ron said, noting how petite Malfoy looked next to his friend. As everyone was shorter than him, he didn’t usually notice such things. His eyes darted between Crabbe and Goyle, as he shook their hands. “You’re taller and broader than these two. Hi Crabbe, Goyle,” he tacked on.

“You’ll fill out later,” Molly said comfortably to Ron, “the Weasley men shoot up first and then fill out. Look at Charlie. Hello, Mr Goyle, Mr Crabbe,” she smiled at the new arrivals. “You both look very well – the Americas obviously suit you.”

“I’m taller than Charlie.”

“You’re taller than everyone,” Harry said, looking up at his friend and making everyone laugh.

At six feet five, and apparently still growing, it was true.

Crabbe and Goyle had been introduced to Emmie, and greeted Dumbledore, shyly and politely.
“Thanks for inviting us,” Vincent said, looking at Harry, curiosity in his gaze. He looked round the garden. “This is new, isn’t it? Or was it a secret part of Hogwarts?”

The conversation turned general.

The evening sky was fading into ever-deepening tones of streaked greys and pinks and purples, but burners had been lit, giving warmth and light.

People had moved to the barbecue and serving tables, heaping plates with meat and salad. Harry found himself next to Ginny Weasley, Hermione and Hagrid, plate in hand, being served a large steak by one of the elves. “Not waiting for Severus, Harry?” Hagrid asked, slight censure in his tone.

“If he’s working on a potion—” Harry began.

“— who knows when the famous man will arrive,” Peter Smithson finished, from the other side of Hagrid.

He was the new Potions professor, and was the only thing about Hogwarts that Harry didn’t like. He had made his interest clear to Harry, and been turned down on numerous occasions. Smithson seemed to have an indomitable spirit, however, and took the lack of Severus’ presence as an indication that the relationship could not be serious, despite Harry’s departures to stay with Severus every week.

Harry sighed, trying not to show his irritation, when the man joined them at the long trestle tables.

They began to eat. Wine bottles dotted along the table were poured, glasses clinked, music continued to play in the background.

“Good lord, who’s that talking to the Headmaster?” Ginny said, round a mouthful of mixed salad.

They all turned to look.

“Good thing you’re already tied up, Harry,” Peter said lasciviously. “If that man’s not straight, he’s mine. That is an arse to die for.”

Harry had to agree. The man had his back to them, form fitting black trousers moulded to firm round buttocks and cinched with a belt round a slim waist. A white shirt spread over broad shoulders, the short hair neatly cut.

“Is he a Muggle?” Peter continued, noting the hair and lack of robe. Though several people were wearing non-wizarding fashions – including many of the ladies, delighting in summer dresses on the balmy night – the hair cut was very unusual in a wizard. Even Harry now had longish hair, tied back in a ponytail.

“Don’t be silly,” Hagrid said, turning back to his food.

Harry gave him a grin, and slipped off the bench, going over to the newcomer.

They all watched as Harry’s arm slipped around his waist, the taller man’s arm going automatically over his shoulder. Harry’s hand slid slowly down, caressing an arse cheek, as he turned and grinned cheekily over his shoulder.

Severus caught the hand in his, but held it there, fingers intertwining as he turned his head, and the watchers saw the hooked nose turn down into inquiry at his companion, even as he said something...
“Holy shit! Snape!” Ginny gurgled.

“That’s Snape?” Peter’s throat tightened. The pictures he’d seen of the previous Potions teacher looked nothing like this hot piece of masculinity.

Poppy laughed, coming to sit down next to Hermione. “Give up any hope, Peter,” she chuckled, affection and warning in her tone as she looked at the pair, so comfortable together.

The Headmaster moved away. None of them could stop looking as Snape turned the younger man in his arms. They were both shadow figures now, backlit by one of the burners. There was the briefest brush of lips, of their bodies moving into each other’s orbit, before they pulled away and walked to the table hand in hand.

It was enough to say everything about their relationship – the love, desire, and ease that bound them together.

The next moment Snape was greeting them all. Hagrid had lumbered up and hugged Severus, Poppy held out her hand from the other side of the table – Snape knelt on the bench and leant across to kiss her fingers, causing the witch to bat his hand playfully and Ginny and Hermione to exchange wide-eyed glances, lips twitching.

“Miss Granger,” Snape said, deep voice reverberating in her stomach. She had never thought of Snape as sexy till this evening, but – Wow!

“Hermione,” she reminded him, and he nodded his head.

“Hermione,” he corrected. “And Miss Weasley. You’ve left this place, no doubt? You must tell me in a moment what you are up to.” He turned to look at the other man. “Professor Smithson, I believe,” he said, his tone so neutral that everyone who knew him knew the danger signs.

Peter stood up and shook his hand. “Pleased to meet you, Sir. I’ve read most of your articles, of course – “ he began obsequiously.

“I doubt it,” Severus interrupted. He looked down at Harry. “You’ve started eating?”

“Yes, but let’s get you some,” he began to walk to the barbecue with Severus.

Completely ignored, Peter looked at Harry’s plate. “But your food will get cold,” he said, stupidly.

“I’ve done a warming charm on it,” Severus looked back briefly, as he bent down and once again brushed his lips over Harry’s. The desire between them was almost tangible.

“When?” Peter snapped, touching a finger to Harry’s plate.

Hermione choked behind her hand.

Peter poked at it. “The plate’s not hot.” He stated.

“Well, there’s salad, in’t there?” Hagrid said reasonably.

“But he didn’t do any spell.”

“Wandless and wordless, I expect,” Hermione nodded. “Just the meat.”
“He can do that?”

Hermione just looked at him.

“But Snape is a Potions Master,” Peter’s eyebrows drew together.

“And a very powerful wizard,” Draco said, coming up behind Hermione and kissing the top of her head. “And he’s got a foul temper and a possessive streak a mile wide. Not to mention, rather vast knowledge of the sorts of magic that we’d all rather not know about, and the experience to know how to use it.”

“You’re warning me off,” Peter said, irritably. He was American, and had little knowledge of the war or the principle players, although he knew that Harry was a Mage and a hero.

“Just saving myself some work,” Draco said easily. “Dark curses are exhausting to deal with.” He looked down at Hermione. “I’m going to sit with Neville, if that’s alright?”

Hermione’s fingers slipped through his, stroking over his hand. “Course. Dance later?”

“Mmmm.” Draco, surprised to find himself more circumspect than Snape, went against the Malfoy grain and gave her a quick kiss.

“Is everyone here slobbering over each other?” Peter commented grumpily.

“We’re a happy bunch,” Dumbledore said, seeing Emmie into a seat next to the Potions teacher and pecking her cheek.

Ginny giggled, and Dumbledore grinned at her.

“Have you a young man – or lady, Miss Weasley?” he asked jovially.

“No Sir,” I’m rather enjoying life without,” Ginny smiled back. “There’s a very social crowd at work. I think romances might complicate things too much.”

“Good for you!” Albus twinkled. “And where are you working?”

“Diagon Alley, Sir, I’ve apprenticed to Madam Malkin.”

“Ahh! I thought you looked resplendent! One of your own designs?”

Ginny nodded, happily.

“You should design something for Albus, dear,” Emmie looked her over. “In fact, I’ll commission you. You know how to use colour – with taste.”

Severus and Harry had returned, with Crabbe and Goyle in tow, and sat down to the occupants of the table sniggering.

“What’s so funny?” Harry asked, pushing along to make space for Vincent and Greg. Snape made his way round to the other side, slipping in next to Hermione.

“I’ve no idea,” Albus said airily, which caused the bottled laughter to suddenly explode.

The evening was a beautiful success. Alice and Frank, only just getting comfortable with talking to
people, were happy to get up and move slowly in each other’s arms to the music from the old record player. Ginny invited Vincent Crabbe to dance, much to the young man’s embarrassment, and stuttered comments that he didn’t know how.

“Neither does Ron,” Ginny said, “but I’d far rather dance with you.”

“Hey!” Ron butted in, “nothing wrong with my dancing!”

Weasley eyes all along the table rolled.

“You’d better show me then,” Fleur purred at her young brother-in-law.

“Really?” Ron leapt up, and then realisation dawned that actually, he was crap at dancing. “Er...” But the next moment, Fleur had led him onto the grass. Ron’s panic-stricken face over her shoulder had them convulsing in laughter.

Emmie and Albus were soon on their feet, and the table cleared as more couples started to dance.

Neville and Draco slipped into vacated seats on the other side of Hermione to Snape.

Goyle was watching Vincent.

“Can you go dancing together in Canada?” Harry asked, turning to the thickset man.

“Don’t know, we’ve never tried,” Greg answered.

“But you can be together without any hassle?” Hermione picked up the conversation.

Greg looked across at her, a little nonplussed at the attention.

“Yeah, we run an English tea shop together. They seem to like us being English and eccentric. Though I don’t think we are very eccentric,” he said, brows drawing together. “Though maybe they think all English guys are gay,” he added. “Don’t seem to bother no one, anyway.”

“And you’re happy?” Hermione pressed.

“Oh yeah,” Greg agreed, a genuine smile hovering around his lips.

“Good,” Draco said quietly.

Greg grinned at him.

“Who would’ve thought, eh? This has all turned out well.” He turned to Harry. “This is great to be invited and all, Harry, but why are we here?” he asked bluntly.

“I wanted to talk to all the people who donated magic to me, and thought we could meet tomorrow morning. But most of the people were due to be here, as they know the Longbottoms; I thought you might enjoy the party too, the chance to see people. I hope that was alright?”

“Sure,” Greg said easily. He looked Harry over. “You okay? Do you need more?”

Harry’s heart did the weirdest little flip in his chest. Generosity was the most amazing thing. Here was this man, who knew him so little, really, and who had so little magic of his own, still offering him more.

”No, thanks, Greg. I’m good,” he said, a quick hand to the man’s arm. “Fancy a dance?”
“What?” Greg looked gobsmacked.

“Vince is dancing.”

“That’s with a girl.”

“You don’t think men should dance together?” Harry regarded him with interest. He and Severus had found many places on their travels where same-sex couples were accepted, and he’d be damned if he shouldn’t feel at ease in his own world. Everyone here knew he was gay, after all.

“I – we don’t rock the boat,” Greg said quietly.

“I don’t think there’s anyone here who’ll be upset,” Harry said gently.

“I don’t know how –“

“Don’t let that worry you,” Severus said from across the table. “Harry is an idiosyncratic dancer, to say the least,” he added with a grin, as he sat back in his chair, sipping his wine.

“Hey!” Harry gave him a mock glare, his eyes, however, taking in the open throat of Severus’ shirt, and the chest hair just visible. “I can do this slow stuff! It’s just I might tread on your toes,” he turned back, smiling, to Greg.

The large man laughed.

“Nev, let’s spur them on. Dance with me?” Draco asked, standing up and holding out his hand to Neville with a quick look to Hermione, who smiled her approval.

“Perhaps you’d dance with me, Hermione?” Severus offered, standing politely.

“You don’t have to,” she said, feeling a little awkward.

“Indeed not. I suspect there are very few women I would care to dance with, but I believe we can tolerate each other until it is decorous enough to swap partners.”

Hermione laughed, and got up, sliding easily into his arms.

“You’re tall,” she said in surprise.

“You’re not,” he commented, his hand warm on her back.

“Smaller even than Harry,” she agreed. “You look – very well,” she stuttered. Hot, was the word on her mind. She was very conscious of the lean muscles of his back, the chest visible on level with her eyes, the faint aroma of his body.

His laugh rumbled against her. “I am,” he smiled down at her. “It must be some relief to future generations of students here to know that I will not be teaching them.”

“You’ve no plans to come back?” She looked up at him quizzically. “But you enjoy teaching at a higher level?” she added, thinking of what he was doing now.

“I will only ever be here as Harry’s partner; but you are right, I had forgotten how pleasant it is to teach those who truly wish to learn.”

“And are you likely to settle to a permanent job, or will you continue travelling?”
“Cambridge have asked me to become a lecturer,” he slid in, watching to see her reaction.

He was taken aback to see her eyes light up, expecting that she would be attempting to hide her displeasure.

“Oh good!”

Before they could discuss it further, they were interrupted by Tonks, who was in Remus’ arms.

“Swap!” Tonks said cheerfully, moving Hermione into Remus’ embrace.

It was quite a little while later that Harry finally had his arms draped over Severus’ shoulders, and his nose buried, nuzzling, against his chest.

“This is good,” he mumbled.

“My chest hair? I thought you wanted me to try that depilatory potion?” Snape teased.

Harry chuckled. “This evening,” he corrected, “being in your arms again,” he added. “Would you? How does it stop the hair on your head from falling out, if it’s not topical?” he quizzed his lover. “Not that you might not look interesting bald. You look utterly delicious with short hair. I think you’ve got half the company drooling over you.”

“The male or female half?”

“The younger half,” Harry grinned.

“You’re wrong there,” Severus smiled down at him, a hand sliding lazily down to rest on an arse cheek, the pressure just enough to hold Harry discretely, but firmly, against him.

Harry couldn’t resist rocking his hips, arousal uncoiling in his belly. “Why’st?” he got out, reaching up to rub lips over Severus’ neck, inhaling his scent, a tongue sneaking out to taste the salt of his skin.

“Emmie has asked to do my portrait.”

“Really?” Harry leaned back. “Do you know how much of an honour that is? She’s really famous.”

“Albus, unfortunately, overheard, and suggested he could paint me at the same time.”

Harry began to laugh. “Oh, lord, that could be interesting!”

“Indeed. The first abstract talking portrait,” Severus’ lips twisted. “My magenta nose will twitch, my orange slash of lips –” Harry was laughing so hard that he hugged tight against Severus to stop his knees buckling.

“No one else will have anything like it,” he gasped, giggling.

“He suggested they come out to Italy and do both of us over the Christmas holidays,” Severus continued, straightfaced.

“What!” Harry stretched back, laughter dropping off.

“Then my magenta streak can talk to your pink slash,” Severus went on. “He’s thinking of gifting them to the school for the Great Hall,” he finished.

“No! Oh my god, I wish you were joking but I bet you’re not,” Harry groaned, burying his head in
Severus’ chest.

“I’m not,” Severus smirked, hand trailing lower and shifting Harry even closer to him. His young lover seemed to snuggle in without even thinking about it. “He’s debating between a true abstract or a Picasso-esque type with your eyes somewhere on the side of your head or something,” he elaborated.

“Do you think paintings like that can talk and see like regular wizarding portraits?” Harry wondered, turning his head to rest in the crook of Severus’ neck, the fight and humour morphing into interest.

Severus loved this about Harry.

“I think we’re going to find out,” he chuckled. “Anyway, there’s going to be a much more interesting picture before that.”

“Mmmm?” Harry’s mouth stroked over the Adam’s apple tempting his lips.

“Mmmm. Colin Creevey’s been filming us for the last several minutes.”

Harry stiffened, then slid even closer. Severus’ hand couldn’t resist pulling him flush against him.

“Better not let go,” Harry whispered, “my erection might shock the Prophet’s readers. Not to mention yours,” he surreptitiously rubbed against Severus as they turned slowly to the music.

“I thought this was a private party,” Severus commented, lips against Harry’s hair.

“Still better not let go. D’you think we can have a copy, then? You look incredibly hot tonight,” Harry’s breath slid over his throat.

Suddenly, unexpectedly, Severus found need bursting through the damn of restraint that he hadn’t even consciously put in place. “Do you need to stay much longer?” he growled, his hands tightening.

Harry’s own arousal doubled as he heard the needy quality in Severus’ voice – something that he had only been willing to show over time. His hand slipped up Severus’ chest, surreptitiously brushing over the hardened nipple.

They both groaned.

“I’ll apparate us straight home,” Harry whispered.

Severus held him tight, trying to fight the waves of desire. His hand held Harry’s against his chest, preventing further explorations.

“I need to say farewell to Alice and Frank,” he said reluctantly.

Harry nodded against his shoulder, biting the inside of his cheek. “Yes,” he acknowledged. They allowed themselves to drift slowly down from the tight urgency of their need, knowing that soon they would be alone and able to pleasure each other. They danced languidly, hands still linked on Severus’ chest, until they were able to make their goodbyes, basking in the delight of each others’ embrace, the pleasure of the company, and the joy of being alive.

“Thank you all for coming, and staying today,” Harry spoke to the group of people gathered
loosely in the Great Hall the next morning. “Two years ago, you all gave me some of your magic, so that I could live; I still can’t believe how wonderful, how generous – well – what can I say – how amazing I still find that! I can’t tell you how honoured I am. It was brave and courageous and – just – incredible.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Ron grinned, “get on with it, mate!”

People laughed off their embarrassment.

Harry grinned. He was sitting on one of the tables, swinging his legs, Draco standing a little further along.

“Alright, just – thanks,” Harry blushed. He turned to look at Draco. “My thanks, too, to Draco, for going out on a limb for me, trying something unheard of.”

Much to Draco’s embarrassment, Severus started clapping, and everyone took it up, cheering the young Healer.

“Now, I know Draco’s been keeping an eye on you and you’ve all regained your previous levels, thank Merlin, though I also can’t believe you gave me – without knowing –” he shook his head, swallowing around the lump in his throat.

Severus watched him. His lover still did not appreciate how much he meant to people – not the hero-worship of the masses, but to these real people, people that knew him. Harry’s eyes flashed up, green and startling, and met his. Severus smiled his silent encouragement. They had gone over this.

“No, we’ve discussed doing something new again. It’s entirely optional,” he said quickly, holding up a hand to stop any interruptions. “I wanted to return what you gave me, now I’m well and my own magic is back to full strength.”

There was a murmur of surprise in the room.

“But we’ve got our own power back, ‘Arry,” Hagrid said bluntly.

“Yes, but I’ve got mine – and all yours too,” Harry said swiftly. “The thing is, Draco and I have looked at and talked about this a lot, but there’s no way, I’m afraid, to untangle each contribution. And we can reveal another fact about magic that isn’t yet published data, and that’s the fact that everyone has a unique type of magic, so that when you gifted me a bit of yours – you’ve gifted me a huge amount of understanding, because of all your different styles and types. So I need you to think really carefully about this; I want to give you all back some magic, but it will be mixed magic. Not just your own, but mine and a tiny bit of everyone’s here.”

There was a rush of murmuring, of people glancing round to check who else was there, whose magic was on offer.

“So I’ve two things to say, really. If anyone objects to the sharing of the magic, then we won’t go ahead at all – it’s your magic, and you may prefer not to share it with everyone, and that’s fine, really. Say now or come and tell me in the next day or two. IF anyone objects, we won’t go ahead at all and that’s truly fine. But if there are no objections, we could be doing something really interesting here. But again, if you would rather not receive anyone else’s magic, that’s understandable too. You can agree to share but not receive, if you see what I mean.”

There were a few laughs at that.
“Anyway, Draco and I are here for the next few days. If anyone objects to this in principle, as I say, let me know in the next 48 hours. After that, we’ll go ahead. The Headmaster has kindly allowed anyone who wants to stay at Hogwarts to do so, but if it’s inconvenient, Draco and I will come and visit you wherever you wish at your convenience.” He looked around. “Any questions, anyone?”

“We’ll have more magic?” Ron asked.

“Yes, a bit,” Harry agreed.

“What does it feel like, having different magic in you?” Eloise asked, sitting holding Ernie’s hand.

“Good question,” Harry said. “It does feel – different – inside. And that difference might feel worse for you than me, ‘cos of my mage thingy,” Harry said self-deprecatingly. “That’s why, if there are no objections in principle, Severus has agreed to be a guinea pig – go first. Then he can tell you what it feels like.”

Several people turned to look at Severus, but his face was as inscrutable as ever.

“Won’t it take time? To take effect?” Arthur Weasley asked. “You took some time to recover...”

Harry nodded. “That’s true, but from the minute I was awake I was aware that it felt different. It hasn’t changed at all from that first feeling.”

“And you don’t mind it?” Bill asked.

“I don’t,” Harry shook his head. “I welcome it. But that won’t necessarily be true for everyone.”

“Can you see any disadvantages?” Vincent Crabbe asked.

Harry and Draco looked at each other. “No, only that it’s a bit different,” Harry answered.

“There’s a lot of Weasley in there,” Ron commented again, causing an outbreak of laughter.

“Yeah, a lot of magic from a noble family. An honour for everyone,” Harry said softly, looking at Arthur and knowing how the family were used to constant disparagement.

Molly sniffed. “Thank you, Harry, dear,” she said. “But I’m definitely going to say no. Not to giving,” she said quickly, “just to the receiving.”

The roomful turned to look at her. She raised her shoulders in a shrug. “I’m comfortable with my own magic. And I didn’t really notice the lack even before mine grew back. Thank you,” she said again, “but I’m happy as I am.”

Harry nodded. “Fair enough, Molly. If you ever change your mind...”

There was a bit of awkward silence.

“Well,” Ron said, “anyone for some rough quidditch? Forget numbers, just split in half? While we’ve got the pitch to ourselves?”

Severus came up to Harry on the edge of the pitch, as his lover mounted his broom.

“Do you mind not playing?” he asked, brushing lips over Harry’s.
“Refereeing can be fun,” Harry shrugged, grinning. “Merlin knows what this lot will be like!” he said, placing a wandless cushioning charm over the whole field. He rose in the air, hovering a little, as Severus mounted his own broom and donned gloves. “Besides,” he murmured, bumping thighs with Severus, ”I don’t need to play quidditch to get my pulse racing, a thorough cardiovascular workout , a sore arse and the most exhilarating time of my life,” and to hoots and cat calls, they twined together, kissing, as Firebolt and Cleansweep rose twirling together into the clear sunshine.

The End.

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