Fate Is A Four Letter Word

by Philo

Summary

Harry’s only aim has been to create a safe and happy life for his family, but his efforts are destroyed one spring afternoon. Harry meets new friends and old enemies, old friends and new enemies, whilst trying to find a path through a changing world.

Notes

Previously posted at HPFandom.

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My thanks to JK Rowling for all the pleasure her books have given.
“Harry!” the voice in his earpiece called. “Sorry to bother you; there’re two Aurors here. They say it’s urgent.”

Harry’s annoyance at being disturbed in the middle of the spell-working – he thought he’d made it damn clear to his new assistant, Janine, that he wasn’t to be interrupted under any circumstances, short of the return of Voldemort or one of the kids falling off their brooms - gave way to a sudden and awful rush of fear, pumping adrenalin into his heart and making it kick violently in his chest. Voldemort was dead and gone and dear God, had Lily fallen off her new Phoenix 25? Two Aurors surely meant that something terrible had happened.

“Be right out,” he said back into the speaker. He looked at the spell-weave hovering in the air around him, wondering how he could save some of the work he had done in the last three hours, when suddenly the reality of it really hit him. One of the children might be hurt. Why in hell was he wasting a second? With a slash of his wand, he yanked all the tendrils towards him, pulling them tighter and tighter, and finally, with a twist of his wrist, condensed them all into a ball, took the mass of almost-matter into his hand, and crushed it. His whole body spasmed as the magic jolted up his arm, all the power he’d exerted creating the working trying to leap back into his body, even though it was now twisted and tangled. He breathed in, letting it come, letting it settle and even itself, before clapping his hands together. The last of the energy dissipated in a tremendous thunderclap.

Harry brushed his hands off, a sparkle of dust glittering in the air before disappearing, and stuck his fingers in his ears to clear them.

He pointed his wand up at the lid of the box: it opened silently on its hinges. A narrow face loomed over the edge looking down at him; squinting up, Harry wondered if he knew the Auror, though from the strange angle, and with the light behind the man’s head, he couldn’t really tell.

The Auror said not a word and drew back.

Heart pounding, Harry climbed the ladder quickly and swung his leg over the top of the chest, dropping to his feet in his workroom. Automatically, he shut the lid and sealed it with a spell before turning back to the two Aurors.

Harry took in the tension in their posture, the unsmiling faces. The woman was staring at him, although the man’s eyes dropped as Harry looked at him.

“What is it?” The words sounded deafening despite the thumping of his heartbeat.

Janine was hovering uncertainly. Harry wished his old assistant, Toby, hadn’t retired: he was a master of the discreet exit.

“Perhaps you could go and make some tea?” the female Auror suggested.

“Oh! Er, yes, of course! But – the shop?” Janine looked anxiously at Harry.

“Close it,” the male Auror said firmly.

Harry’s legs suddenly felt like jelly. He could barely wait for the girl to leave the room.

“What’s happened?” He couldn’t control the quaver in his voice.
“Mr Potter. I’m Auror Hencliffe and this is Auror Franklin.”

Harry felt as if he’d fallen into an alternative reality as the young man stepped forward to shake his hand, with just a flicker of his eyes heading to Harry’s forehead. Having put out his hand in automatic courtesy, Harry withdrew it quickly. Fortunately, the woman remained where she was. She was considerably older than Hencliffe, and Harry turned to her.

“Please? What’s this all about? Is one of the children hurt?”

“We’ve just sent Aurors to Hogwarts now, Mr Potter, but we’ve no reason to suspect that your children are not perfectly alright.”

“Oh god. Are you expecting some sort of attack? On Hogwarts? Or – or on my children specifically?” Harry gasped. “But – James and Albus aren’t at Hogwarts anymore. James is working for Doherty’s – you know, the wizarding holiday agency? In Croft Lane, off Diagon Alley. Albus should be at Gringotts - he started there this summer. What – who – why are you thinking that they might be attacked?”

“Please sit down, Mr Potter,” Auror Franklin said, pulling Harry’s chair out from behind his drawing desk.

“Why do I need to sit down?” Harry said. “For Merlin’s sake, tell me what’s wrong!”

Franklin came over to stand facing him. Harry stared at her, and then glanced at Hencliffe, who was a few feet away, with his head turned to the window.

Harry didn’t think he was interested in what was going on outside.

He looked back to Auror Franklin.

“I’m afraid it’s very bad news,” she said gently. “I’m so sorry to have to tell you this, Mr Potter, but Mrs Potter is dead.”

Harry could hear the words but they didn’t seem to make any sense.

“What? No. No, that can’t be right. She wasn’t playing today. You must mean someone else. That new girl was –”

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Hencliffe said firmly.

“But she wasn’t playing!” Harry argued. “How can she be dead?”

“It wasn’t a quidditch accident,” Franklin explained, touching his arm. “I know this must be a terrible shock, but … Mrs Potter was murdered. I’m so sorry,” she said again.

Harry felt a weird sensation, and realised that his legs were actually beginning to give under him. Auror Franklin guided him across the floor towards his chair. Harry grasped the wooden arms and lowered himself down. He felt like his spine, his bones, were dissolving. He tried to speak but words wouldn’t seem to form. The room was distorting – the next moment, he felt a hand pushing his head between his knees. He took great gulping breaths of air. Tears were sprouting in his eyes, weird and hot, scalding his skin and utterly uncontrollable.

“Try breathing slowly,” she said, her hand still resting between his shoulder blades, a steady pressure holding him onto reality.
He was bizarrely aware of the shiny shoes Auror Hencliffe was wearing, just catching the edge of his field of vision, and that one of the laces was coming undone. Hadn’t his mother taught him a ‘Knot-Last’ charm?

Mother.

Ginny…mother of his children.

He screwed his eyes up, as if he could squeeze himself away from the world, from what was happening, as if it would go away if he didn’t look at it.

His nose was full of snot. He reached into his pocket for his handkerchief, blowing hard, and then scrubbed his cheeks with the back of his hand. The pinprick tears were still threatening and he spoke to drive them away. “Why would anyone… not now…it’s years…” He went over what had been said. “The children: you said you’ve sent Aurors to check the children? There’s a threat against my whole family? Who from?”

“That’s just a precaution, Sir,” Hencliffe said, in a reassuring tone. “We already have the murderer.”

“What?”

“We have him in custody,” he said in a satisfied voice.

“I don’t understand.” Harry stood up shakily. “Was this because of me? It can’t have been to do with Voldemort, surely? Not after all this time? Not Death Eaters.”

“It was a Death Eater,” Hencliffe said, and he was unable to keep the hint of excitement out of his voice.

“Then – then Ron – Ron Weasley must be involved. Why – why are you here, and not Ron? His department deals with Death Eater related business, I know it does. God, he hasn’t been hurt too?”

“Not exactly, Sir –”

“Not exactly? What does that mean?” Harry screeched.

“Mr Weasley is not involved in this case - ” Auror Franklin began.

“He’s at St Mungo’s having his knuckles healed –”.

“That is quite enough, thank you, Auror Hencliffe,” Auror Franklin cut him off, her face furious.

The cogs clicked in Harry’s brain. “He punched Ginny’s…Ginny’s murderer, and they’ve taken him off the case?” he summarized wearily.

Auror Franklin drew herself up. “I’m afraid I can’t go into details, Mr Potter,” she said, in a formal tone. “Obviously, it isn’t appropriate for an Auror to be part of an investigation that involves a member of their family.”

Harry couldn’t think whether it was a good idea or not for someone involved to be part of the case. Ron surely had a right to be involved: what was the point of being an Auror if you couldn’t protect your own family? But…but it was too late for protection.

For Ginny.
Harry needed to know the children were safe. He needed to see them, hear their voices.

God, he’d have to tell them…

“I need to see the children,” Harry voiced the one thing that seemed to make any sense at the moment. He strode to the floo.

Janine wobbled in bearing a tray overloaded with a steaming tea pot, cups and saucers and a plate of biscuits.

Harry halted as he reached for the floo powder.

“Shall I pour?” she asked.

Harry’s hand, shaking, raked through his hair. “No, thanks Janine. You – you can go home. I – I’ll be in touch. Later. We won’t be open tomorrow. I – “

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

It was a ridiculous question. Of course something was wrong. There were two Aurors here telling him that his wife has been murdered. Harry could hear her curiosity barging its way past her concern, but the absurdity of it was eliciting an appalling and inappropriate desire to laugh. Harry had to fight with his face, which seemed to be writhing in weird motions out of his control.

“Mr Potter has had some bad news,” Franklin said quietly.

“Oh dear –” Janine began to wring her hands. “What can I do? I can run the shop for you –”

Harry moved abruptly, cutting her off.

She looked a little affronted.

“I – I’m sorry,” Harry said. “I can’t think about that now. I – I’ll be in touch,” he said again.

“But – shall I come in tomorrow?”

Harry felt like he’d explode.

Hencliffe walked Janine to the door. “I suggest you come and put a note on the door tomorrow to say that the shop is closed due to a family matter. Mr Potter will owl you to let you know when he needs you back.”

They had reached the shop door. Hencliffe opened it politely.

“Oh! Oh, of course! Is someone ill?” she asked.

“Mr Potter will be in touch,” he said firmly, and pushed her out.

“She’s new,” Harry said, irrelevantly. “I need to talk to the children.”

“I’ve sent two Aurors to Hogwarts,” Franklin said. “I’ll send more to find your sons.”

“They won’t tell them, will they? I need to be there,” Harry said. “Can you take them home? There’ll be safe there; it’s best I tell them there.”

Something flickered across Hencliffe’s face.
“What?” Harry’s eyes darted from one to the other.

They both looked grim.

“I’m afraid that’s not a good idea, Mr Potter. The house is – ” Franklin seemed to steel herself.

“Mrs Potter was killed there.”

“At home? No, that’s not possible! The wards there – I strengthened them myself –”

“I’ll explain in a moment. But first, where would you like me to have the children taken? Perhaps you have another house, or…?”

“No. Just Grimmauld Place, and the flat above here.”

“I’ll organise a safe house,” Franklin said quietly. “Just until we finish our investigations. I’m sure the Headmaster won’t mind having your boys at Hogwarts for an hour or two to be with their sister while I get something sorted.”

“I want to see the children. I need to be there,” Harry said again. He felt like a broken record, repeating over and over, but all he could think of was Lily and Albus and James. His mind sheared away from thinking of Ginny.

“And we need to talk to you alone first,” Franklin said firmly.

“That sounds...” Harry drew in a shuddering breath, his eyes looking pleadingly at the Auror.

“It’s not good,” Franklin acknowledged quietly. “Give me two minutes.”

Harry sat in a daze whilst she made arrangements.

When Franklin had finished, Harry took the Aurors upstairs to the flat, leading them into the kitchen. He hadn’t touched the tea downstairs, but now poured them a glass of water, and waited with dread for them to begin.

He watched the look that passed between the two, the agreement that Franklin was going to do the talking. He saw her visibly bracing herself.

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this,” she began, and stopped.

“Yes. But for Merlin’s sake get on with it! I’m imagining something probably much worse –”

“It’s bad.” Franklin took a deep breath and Harry almost wilted at the pity in her eyes. “We believe Mrs Potter was…assaulted…first. And – it wasn’t a clean death. I’m so terribly sorry.”

Harry stiffened, as if a *Petrificus Totalis* had been performed on him.

“She was …assaulted? What does that mean? Someone hurt her?”

“Our first impressions are that she was severely beaten.” Hencliffe joined in. “And we believe she was sexually assaulted. Of course, we won’t know for sure until –”

“Are you saying she was – she was - raped? By a Death Eater? In our home?”

“We believe so, Sir,” Franklin said quietly.

Harry walked away to look out of the window; below, shoppers scurried along the street or lingered...
to look at the displays. It seemed inconceivable that people should be going on with their normal lives.

“And you’ve caught him?”

“We have one man in custody. Don’t worry, we’ll get information out of him on whether he had accomplices,” Hencliffe said confidently.

Harry’s hands, resting on the windowsill, clenched into fists, the knuckles white. “You think there might be others involved? That this wasn’t just a Death Eater with a grudge from the past? Do you think the Death Eaters are re-forming?” Harry asked, still with his back to them.

“As I gather you know, Auror Weasley’s team monitors any activity we think might be suspicious, from those who’ve finished their sentences, of course. There was no warning of anything of this nature. Also,” Franklin paused, and rubbed her cheek.

“Also…?”

“It wasn’t – the man we have detained didn’t go to Azkaban.”

Harry’s brows drew together. “But – the papers said – all the Death Eaters were found and –”

“Junior Death Eaters didn’t get sent to Azkaban,” Franklin interrupted. “I believe you yourself suggested that they be put on probation, and instigated the One World education programme, Mr Potter.”

Harry stared at her. “Who was it?” he whispered.

“His guilt is, of course, for the Wizengamot to decide –”

“WHO!” Harry bellowed.

“Malfoy. Draco Malfoy.”
“Fuck!” Hencliffe stared at the blank space where a second earlier Harry Potter had stood.

“Did you have to just spit it out?” snapped Franklin. “And watch your language.”

“He’d know soon enough,” Hencliffe shrugged, unchastened.

“You’re unbelievable,” Franklin fumed, checking the doors, locking and warding both front and back entrances. “Were you deliberately inciting him to go and do the same as Ron Weasley?”

“Malfoy’s in custody, he can’t reach him.”

“No? Have you ever read any history books, Hencliffe? Even as a boy that man got everywhere: into the Ministry, the Department of Mysteries – heck, he broke into Gringotts and practically destroyed the place –”

“I think all that is really exaggerated. He’s only a trunk maker –”

Franklin stalked up to him and grabbed the front of his robes. “You idiot! That man’s wife has been savaged and murdered. Whatever you think, he did kill Voldemort. And he killed a teacher at Hogwarts in his first year. Just because he chooses to lead a quiet life, doesn’t mean he isn’t capable of violence. If we don’t want two murders on our hands, you won’t underestimate him. Got it?”

“Got it,” Hencliffe mumbled, shaking himself free. “So where do you think he’s gone? To the Ministry holding cells? After his children? To his house? And what do you mean, he killed a teacher at Hogwarts?”

Harry had apparated right into the sitting room at Grimmauld Place. An Auror came rushing in as he opened the door, almost knocking into him.

“You can’t come in here! This is a crime scene! How did you –?”

“Where is she?”

“Pardon? You shouldn’t have been able to get in here, Sir, there are Auror wards –”

“Where is my wife?” Harry bit out.

“Mr Potter! I’m sorry, I didn’t –”

“WHERE IS SHE!”

“Upstairs, Sir, but you can’t –”

The Auror chased after him as Harry took the stairs two at a time; a second Auror came out of their bedroom and made as if to stop him.

Harry apparated, straight into the room.

“What the fu –!”

Ginny
He’d narrowly avoided occupying the same space as a man standing casually, hands in pockets, watching a wizard in yellow robes who was leaning over the blood-soaked bed, passing his wand slowly over Ginny’s breasts.

Or rather, over the gaping wound across one of them.

The Auror had bitten off the expletive as he’d recognised Harry. “You shouldn’t be here, Mr Potter. We set wards –”

The yellow-robed man, straightened. He had CAW embroidered in large letters on the front as well as the back of his robe. “This is a crime scene, Sir –”

“And that’s my wife,” Harry said.

In the ensuing silence, he approached the bed.

How could one body bleed so much? The air reeked with the tang of it. The whole scene was like some abstract painting, where tins of paint had been thrown against a canvas. Ginny’s glorious russet hair, spread over the red and white of the blood-splattered pillows, the eerie grey of her skin, the unfocussed blue of her eyes, the shiny steel of the handcuffs that bound her wrists to the black metalwork of the bedstead.

He could not bear to look.

He could not bear to look away.

Footsteps sounded outside and the door crashed open.

Harry didn’t bother to turn. He ignored the whispered conversation, the wash of magic as he felt the Auror wards being tested.

This was his wife.

The mother of his children.

A woman he had known from childhood.

Sister of his oldest friend.

Ginny.

He slipped down, to sit on the side of the bed.

“Mr Potter –”

He ignored it.

His hands reached up. He touched the cuffs, felt the metal and the magic. The locks clicked open. He slid his fingers in, expanding the grip. Ginny’s hands suddenly slithered out. The flurry of movement as her arms dropped and her body shifted, released from the unnatural posture, was horribly disconcerting, as if she had suddenly come back to life. Harry’s heart thumped loudly in his chest.

And then she was still.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breaths.
Harry reached out and picked up one small hand, his fingers smoothing over the damaged wrist.

She was cool, though not yet cold.

Ginny was dead, and yet there was a hint of the life that had been in her.

“You can’t do that! You’re destroying evidence –” the Crime Assessment Wizard began.

Harry looked up, his eyes sliding between the three men now in the room. He recognised Dawlish, from years back, looking older and slack-jowled. His free hand cast a quick spell.

The noise disappeared.

The shield he’d erected kept them out.

He turned to look at Ginny again.

This thing that had once been Ginny.

His fingers stroked the hand between his own. There were callouses on hers, from the years of quidditch. He looked at his own hand, then touched his own callouses against hers. Her nails were painted a deep maroon, shiny and fresh and newly done.

His eyes wandered from her hand across to her stomach, the tiny gentle curve that was the only legacy of the children that she had borne within it, the trimmed topiary of her fiery pubic hair, down across the splayed legs. One leg had a fine stocking on it, a whisper of flesh-coloured silk, a black stiletto-heeled shoe still on her foot. The other was bare.

There was a slash right across the thigh. Another slash across her ribs, yet another deep one had bitten across her breast and nipple.

There seemed something particularly awful about that.

The last cut had peeled open her cheek and the corner of her mouth.

Whoever had done this had known _Sectumsempra_.

The spell Harry himself had cast on Malfoy all those years ago.
“Dad! Thank Merlin you’re alright! I thought something must’ve happened to you! They won’t tell us why everyone’s here or anything. What’s going on?”

All three of his children were already assembled in one of the parents’ visiting rooms at Hogwarts, but it was Lily who spoke, leaping up from the squishy sofa where she had been sitting next to Albus. James had been sprawled in a single chair next to them, but both he and Albus got to their feet too.

Lily had come straight over, putting her hand on his arm and looking up at him.

She looked so like her mother.

Harry’s arms went round her, his face instantly entangled in her blazing hair. She was the smallest of his children, and yet was more or less the same height as he was. All of them had inherited long limbs from the Weasley side, tall and lean like Bill and Ron and George. Both boys stood there, towering over him, exuding vigour and strength, and he felt so frail, so reluctant to bring their freedom and happiness crashing down, to change the lives that he had worked so hard to give them: happy, normal, ordinary lives.

That would all dissipate like steam over a cauldron the minute he spoke.

“Is it Grandpa?” Lily asked.

Grandpa Weasley had had several strokes within the last two years; wizards seemed no better at healing such damage than Muggles. It was a reasonable suggestion – one that hadn’t even occurred to Harry – for them being collected together and for Ginny’s absence. Except –

“Why the Aurors?” Albus queried.

Harry looked at the boys over Lily’s head. His whole life since James had been born had been committed to keeping them happy, to being a good father, to trying to give his children the security and love that was missing in his own childhood. He had learnt, of course, that it wasn’t possible to protect them from everything – that there would be illnesses, and bumps and scrapes, and that loving them meant giving them the freedom for those bumps and scrapes to come about, and that they had to make their own friends and sometimes that was painful too. But he had tried. He had – the last three years – all pointless. He swallowed. He had got it wrong. It was his fault that this had happened. He had failed them. He shut his eyes a moment, hugging Lily tighter.

“Dad?” James’ voice quavered.

Harry put Lily away from him.

“Sit down,” he said, taking the single chair.

The children all squeezed together on the sofa, looking like they had done as little children sat before a film on their converted television set. Now though, they were looking at him rather than at a screen, faces concerned rather than excited.

“It’s Mum.”

“What?”
“What’s happened?”
“She’s left?”

The last came from James, and Harry looked at him sharply. James’ eyes flickered.

“Sorry, I –”

Harry shook his head. He could think about that later. It didn’t matter, anyway, did it? Not now.

“I –” It was impossible to get the words out. Harry didn’t want to have to do this. His eyes took in their anxious faces; he had nothing good to offer them, to take that worry away. But at least he could break the news to them.

Before someone else did.

“Mum’s dead. I’m so sorry,” he whispered.

“What?”

“How? How can that be? What happened? Dead?”

The phrases were almost the same from a minute ago, but now the meaning was entirely different.

Lily just had her hand over her mouth, absolute disbelief etched onto her features. He reached out to take her hand. His own were shaking.

“Was she hit by a bludger?” James’ brow was drawn down tight as he thought out the possibilities. “Did she fall? God!”

Harry shook his head. “She – she - god, this is hard.” He rubbed his hand over his face. His skin was clammy. “She was murdered.”

“Murdered? Mum?”

“Why?”

“Where?”

“At home. Grimmauld Place,” he clarified.

“How did they get through the wards?”

“Who would want to murder Mum? That’s ridiculous!”

“Did she know her murderer?” Albus asked, in shock, following along James’ thought track. “Did she let him in?”

“I – they don’t know all the details yet,” Harry prevaricated.

“Do they have any idea?”

“How do they know she was murdered and not just had an accident?” asked Lily.

Harry closed his eyes. He could see the scene, smell the blood…

“She was murdered,” he said firmly.
“Avada Kedavra?” James asked.

Harry shook his head. He didn’t want to go into details. But his children weren’t really children, were they? They were all adults now, or near enough, he thought, looking at Lily.

“It was - I think it was probably Sectumsempra,” Harry said, not mentioning the other atrocities that Ginny had also suffered. “I – you won’t have heard of it, I don’t think. I – I haven’t seen that spell for – a long time.”

A silence followed whilst his children absorbed this. Although their father never talked about it, they knew that probably meant back in the war.

“A Death Eater spell?” Albus asked.

“No. Yes. That is -” Harry’s thoughts on the spell were too muddled. It was obviously key that it had been used; but he didn’t know if it had been widely known among Death Eaters or not. It only mattered that he had used it.

He did not want to admit that to his children.

“It’s like a slashing hex,” he said instead.

“Oh god.” James walked over to the window, a hand over his face.

“Did – did she bleed to death?” Lily asked tremulously.

“I don’t know,” Harry shook his head. “The Crime Assessment Wizard will let us know the cause of death when he’s finished his investigations, I think. I suppose they’ll let us know, anyway,” he added. “I don’t know how these things work, I’m sorry.”

“No reason you should, Dad, unless Uncle Ron had told you,” Albus said. “Does Uncle Ron know?” he asked, suddenly thinking. “Murder cases aren’t his department, I know, but does he know who’s dealing with Mum? He’ll be able to tell us stuff, won’t he? Do Gran and Grandpa know?”

“I – I don’t know if they know. Ron does, so I’m sure he’ll have told them if he’s been able to get to the Burrow. I suppose I ought to go and see them, but I could only think of you three.”

Suddenly, both boys were touching him too, standing on either side, their arms around him and Lily. Harry fought the tears that sprang to his eyes, and then looked and saw the same on James’ cheeks. Albus stood looking stoic.

“I’ll ask the Aurors if we can go to the Burrow,” Harry got out. “We need to see everyone, and I expect they’ll all be there, because Grimmauld – well. We can’t go there.”

“Is Mum still there?” Lily’s voice was thready, Harry's chest damp where her face was pressed against it.

Albus reached across him to stroke her hair.

“No, love, they’ll have taken her away by now, but they’ll still be looking through the house for evidence, and stuff.”

“Everywhere?” Lily squeaked. “In my room?”

“What are you hiding in there that you’re so worried about?” James raised an eyebrow, though it
seemed to wobble as much as his voice.

Lily’s blotchy cheeks went bright red. “I don’t want them poking around in my underwear drawer or anything.”

“Right, like they’ve not seen knickers before,” James snorted. The tears had made so much snot he almost choked on it.

Harry realised James was trying to distract Lily. It was a weak attempt, and pointless in the long run, but he appreciated the thought. And he also wondered exactly what Lily was concerned about concealing.

He realised too that he couldn’t hide anything from the children: it would be in The Prophet in the morning without doubt, every sordid detail would be gloated over, and he needed to prepare them. He had always kept a low profile, and part of the reason for that had been to protect the children from the speculation and lies and pettiness of the press.

Another thing he had failed at.

It would come as an awful shock to them. In recent years Ginny had been the newsworthy one, but her successes with the Harpies usually received positive reporting. A lot of that, he knew, was due to Draco bloody Malfoy, who had diversified his family interests into the media, and was also a major shareholder in the whole Harpies franchise.

He had no idea what would happen now: Malfoy owned The Prophet: what tack would they take, with him arrested for murder? Would they dig up every bit of dirt they could find about Ginny? Somehow try to foist the blame on her? Say that she had incited him to kill her? Harry dreaded to think of what they might say; he well knew that truths and half-truths would be twisted into ugliness. They would prod and poke into the lives of all of them.

“Let’s go to the Burrow,” he said. “Gran’s going to need us.”
The First Night

It was 3am, and Harry, Ron, Albus, Bill and Molly were all roaring drunk.

There were several Aurors stationed outside the Burrow: Harry had come to an agreement with the Ministry for a protection detail there, rather than going to a Ministry safe-house: for now, they all needed each other. The whole family were there; Molly had fussied momentarily about sorting sleeping arrangements, until Hermione had handed her a huge glass of fire-whisky and told her that everyone would be glad to muddle up together and seek comfort from each-other. Molly took one look at her daughter-in-law, nodded, and slugged the whole glass back before holding it out for a refill. Hermione had folded Molly into her arms, both standing there for long silent moments of comfort, and then filled it right back up.

Hannah and Neville had put through a floo call, and then appeared with a crate of fire-whisky, another of beer and a third of butter beer, plus a hamper containing pub-sized hot pies and ever-hot chips. They’d stayed only long enough to hug Harry and Ron and give their condolences to Molly and Arthur, and withdrew quietly, saying if they needed more supplies they had only to floo through to ask. Their kindness touched Harry to the core. Harry gathered that they’d overheard Aurors talking in the pub: Ron had gone almost berserk when he’d heard that.

They’d all been together at first, and Harry knew that not everyone was asleep, but some had moved towards bed and no doubt some of them were talking and supporting each other in the makeshift dormitories they’d turned the bedrooms into. Hugo was being a sterling support to Lily, he knew; they had years of friendship and rivalry under their belts, but seeing them together reminded him of the friendship between Mione and Ron and himself back in their Hogwarts days. James had floo-ed Teddy, and he knew they’d be upstairs talking with Victoire and Dominique. Percy and Charlie had gone up some time back to help put Arthur to bed; his right side was paralysed and his speech, after the fire-whisky, was even more tangled than it usually was, but the boys knew how to help him with tact and swift efficiency. Molly had tried to cope on her own when Arthur had first come home from St. Mungo’s, but when the strain had begun to tell, the boys had brooked no arguments and had got into a routine of helping out on a regular basis.

Harry wasn’t sure where everyone else was – Angelina and Audrey had been in and out of the kitchen with coffees and some cheese, but he thought they might have gone to bed at last. He looked at his son. It was strange to think of Albus as a man, but there he was, holding his drink and holding down a job. Harry had killed Voldemort at his age, and was just beginning to face up to actually having a life of his own. He was glad that the children had had a childhood free of anything but the usual worries, but he was scared for them now. He could not allow himself to believe that Malfoy had killed Ginny because of a Death Eater plot, but he was stunned that the Ministry had enough evidence to seriously believe that a real threat was starting again.

It was weird, but they hadn’t really talked much about Malfoy killing Ginny. Ron had been tight-lipped and hadn’t said anything about the Death Eater business, and Harry knew that in the morning he would need to collar him and find out what the hell was going on, and why Ron hadn’t told him that there was a new threat arising. Harry read the papers and there hadn’t been any concerns screaming out from them in the last months or years.

He was pretty sure he knew why Ginny was dead; the thought that he had misjudged the situation was eating away at his soul. He didn’t know what to do about what had happened.

Only one thing was certain: he would need to go and see Malfoy.
Ron, Harry and Hermione were in the garden of the Burrow. Whilst the others had been getting rat-arsed the night before, Hermione had not been asleep, but had been in the kitchen with George brewing a first-rate Hangover potion. Consequently, Harry felt almost disappointed that the fog of pain and queasiness had been ripped away, and he had to face reality.

“I know,” Hermione said gently, seeing more than he said, as she usually did. “We hardly talked about it last night, but Ron mentioned a little. What I don’t understand is why Malfoy would kill her now, when he’s worked so hard to win back respect for the Malfoy name. Why would he ruin all that effort? Malfoy’s not stupid. He can’t have thought he’d get away with it?”

“Slytherins harbour grudges,” Ron grunted.

“But why would he have a grudge against Ginny?” Hermione said, then stopped abruptly. Harry saw Ron’s eyes dart away from his, and his heart fell.

“You think the grudge was against me,” he said flatly to Ron.

Ron squared his shoulders and looked back at him. “I’m not blaming you,” he said quietly. “You’re just a figurehead for what he was against –”

“But it’s over twenty years ago!” Hermione exclaimed. “You can’t think Malfoy was holding a grudge against Harry all this time! He’s been supporting all sorts of charities –”

“So did his father, but that didn’t stop him from being Voldemort’s right hand man,” Ron cut in.

Hermione nodded. “Fair enough. But – well, I’ve worked with Malfoy several times, you know that. He seemed to have turned into a decent human being.”

“Are the Death Eaters really forming again, Ron?” Harry asked, changing the subject.

“Not the old ones,” Ron shook his head. “I’ve made bloody sure of that. But there’s rumours about a new organisation. It looks like it’s pretty much the old wizard supremacy thing again. You’d think –”

“You’ve never mentioned anything,” Harry said, his brows drawn together.

Ron shrugged, and didn’t look at him.

“What?” Harry asked.

“It’s work.”

“You haven’t said anything because you’re supposed to keep it secret?” Harry said incredulously.

“I can keep a secret, you know!” Ron snapped.

Harry sat back against the bench, his hands held deliberately loosely between his knees. “I don’t doubt it, Ron. But something important – something like the old days –”

“Since when have you been interested in any of that?”
Harry was so taken aback by Ron’s curt tone that he literally sat upright and stared at his friend.

Hermione’s eyes were going from one to the other. “Ron, Harry’s done his bit –” she started diplomatically.

“I’m not saying he hasn’t. Merlin knows, Harry,” he sighed, “I know you have. But let’s be honest: you’ve made quite clear that you’ve got no intention of being involved in anything anymore. You didn’t join the Aurors; you went off woodcarving, for fuck’s sake. Muggle woodcarving!”

“Furniture-making, actually,” Harry corrected quietly.

“Harry needed a break after Voldemort,” Hermione said. “I’m just glad you came back from the Muggle world,” she added, looking at her friend warmly.

“Did you think I wouldn’t?” His lips quirked.

“A lot of people thought you wouldn’t.”

“Yeah, and even more hoped you wouldn’t,” Ron said. “When you first reappeared everyone – all the criminals – even all the Aurors – sat up waiting for something to happen.”

“Oh, come on, Ron! You did not expect me to become an Auror after all that! I talked to you about how much I enjoyed what I was doing, creating things – remember, that night at Luna’s? Out in the garden?”

“I know, I know, but I don’t think anyone thought that you wouldn’t be involved in some way. Politics, or policy making, or something. A job in the Ministry.”

“Me? Sitting at a desk all day? I could barely manage it in school. You really didn’t expect me to want to do something like that?”

Ron rubbed his neck again, then took a swig of his now cool coffee. He grimaced, then pointed his wand at it to reheat it.

Harry waited. He couldn’t believe they were having this conversation.

“I don’t think people thought about what you might want to do,” Hermione stepped into the lull. “Only that they knew doors would be open and you could do anything you chose.”

“I did do what I chose.”

Hermione grinned. “I know. It’s just that I expect people thought you’d go for something prestigious, something where you had some power.”

“The papers would have been full of me abusing my status if I’d done that.”

“Yes, but then when you didn’t they were a bit taken aback. You know they always find the negatives. People thought then that you just didn’t care.”

“Well, why should I care? Any more than the next wizard on the street, anyway? We’d got rid of Voldemort. I think the whole ‘it was my destiny’ thing was crap, but I did it, we did it. Surely the whole fucking point was to then have the freedom to live normal lives. Unless,” he smirked, “you’re like Ron and enjoy all that gung-ho sort-the-world-out stuff.”

“Hey!” Ron bumped shoulders with him in mock outrage.
“Nothing wrong with you liking it. Just – we’ll, we’ve always known we have a different approach to things.”

The spectre of Ron abandoning them, back when they were hunting horcruxes so many years before, raised its head, a silent, malevolent beast. Harry hadn’t meant to awaken it, awaken those memories. He felt the stiffness in his friend.

“Come in the kitchen and let’s make some fresh coffee,” Hermione said, eyes sharp.

“Tell me about this new group,” Harry asked, ten minutes later as they wandered back down the garden, steaming mugs in hand. The kitchen had been crowded, and Harry had brushed his hand over Lily’s and James’ backs, assuring himself that they were ok before leaving them to it. Albus and Rose were standing over the cooker, organising a massive fry up for anyone that wanted it.

The ease of old friendships had washed the earlier tension away. It was easier, too, to talk about this than about Ginny’s murder. Harry wondered how much Ron, or any of the rest of the family knew. The previous night there had been lots of reiterations of shock and horror and grief, but there seemed to be an unspoken agreement that the cause of Ginny’s death would not be mentioned. Harry wasn’t sure if this was because it was too awful to contemplate, or a matter of tact because of him and the children, or because of the swelling across Ron’s knuckles, and all that that implied. Harry felt on tenterhooks. He was also profoundly conscious of the distance that he felt between himself and the Weasleys – the older generations, at least, which was weird and unpleasant. His brain was full of possible reasons for it, but he shied away from thinking about them. At least the younger generation were all straightforward, and he felt a huge sense of relief that his own children were getting support and comfort from their cousins.

But things needed to be discussed.

He needed to know what Ron thought, what Ron knew.

“The thing is,” Ron said, “there’s not much I can tell you.”

Harry took a deep breath.

Ron looked startled, and then went on hurriedly, ”Not because of secrecy, Harry, because I – we – don’t know that much yet. You know my team’s job is to keep an eye on Death Eaters from the War. When I was training, back then, it was all about rounding them all up, tracing leads for ones that had gone abroad, and so on. Later, it was all about monitoring the DEs that were released from Azkaban once they’d finished their sentences. Five years of monitoring, and then we leave ‘em alone if they seem to have settled back properly and are behaving themselves. Most have done, to be honest. It was only recently that we picked up on one of them being involved with this new group. That came about almost by accident, too: one of the guys at work said his kid had had a run-in with another one up at Hogwarts, someone using ‘Mudblood’ – he looked across at Hermione, but Harry could tell that they’d already discussed this between them – “and then his kid had been beaten up by three or four others. Phillips went up to the school ‘cos his son ended up in the infirmary, and had a chat with the Headmaster about it. Seems the school had been pretty worried about this new ‘mood’, as they called it, that was taking root with some of the kids.”

“Merlin’s bollocks,” Harry said. “I can’t believe it! What the hell did we fight for? Why hasn’t the school stamped on it? Is it just among the youngsters or are they getting it from their parents?”

“That’s what we’ve been trying to find out,” Ron said. “And it’s been pretty worrying, frankly. I think quite a bit of it is tied up with dissatisfaction with the Ministry – you know, especially since
they put the tax rate up, and of course there’s lots of paperwork for everything since Benningdean got into office.”

“What on earth has that got to do with anything?” Harry said, astonished.

“I think it’s an excuse, an opportunity,” Hermione cut in. “They blame the need for extra taxes on the provisions for schooling Muggleborns, on the fact that Muggleborn parents aren’t paying into the economy even though their children are getting the benefits – “

“But they pay taxes in the Muggle world!” Harry said. “Surely they can’t expect them to pay twice? And haven’t we got some funding through the Muggle government because of all the kids that come out of the state system?”

“Yes, but it doesn’t actually cover costs. Education in the Wizarding World is much more expensive. When they’re younger, the teacher/pupil ratio is much better than in the Muggle world. Well, it has to be, doesn’t it? Can you imagine some poor teacher on their own trying to look after a class of seven year olds who’re all coming into their magic and without any proper control?”

Ron snorted. “It was bad enough at my school and there were only eight of us in my class. Madam Winter was always pulling her hair out. Mind you, she said anything was bearable after the twins,” he chuckled.

It always pleased Harry when Ron could talk about the twins without the awful look of sadness that had come over him for at least five years after Fred’s death. Now he was able to remember the good times. Harry gave him a little encouraging smile in response.

“Then there’s Hogwarts,” Hermione said. “Boarding costs loads more than a regular day school, and the British Government isn’t prepared to pay for it.”

“But surely there’s always been Muggleborns?” Harry said.

“Yup, and in fact the number of Muggleborn students has hardly risen at all,” Hermione agreed. She saw Harry about to protest and continued, “What has risen is the number of children from mixed marriages – ones between Purebloods and Muggleborn witches and wizards, or even Muggles. There’s been an absolute explosion.”

“Because Purebloods feel free to marry Muggles now?” Harry asked.

“Because they feel free to marry who they want, regardless of background,” Hermione agreed. “And they seem to produce lots of kids – more than most Pureblood families do, with the exception of your parents, Ron.”

Ron grinned. “Well, what’s happening now is that they’re all growing up and going into work. For the first time, graduating wizards and witches aren’t just walking into jobs. And when Johnny Inbred-Pureblood can’t get a job, his family blame it on the influx of Muggle or mixed heritage kids, rather than on the fact that their kid is just plain too thick.”

“Ron!” Hermione expostulated, but she was holding back a smile and Ron just shook his head.

“You know it’s true,” he said.

“Being a Pureblood hasn’t addled the brains in your family,” Harry pointed out.

“Yeah, but look at families like the Goyles, Crabbes, Buntons. All as daft as daffy-down-dillies.”

“It’s an expression,” Ron defended.

“You just made that up,” Hermione teased.

“I’m sure I heard it somewhere,” Ron argued. “Mum says it.”

“She does not,” Hermione chuckled.

Harry was quiet.

“What, mate?”

“Nothing wrong with the Malfoy brains either.”

There was silence.

“What can you tell us, Ron?” Harry prompted.

“About Malfoy?” Ron shifted on his perch on the old log.

“Yes, about Malfoy. About anything you can tell us. To do with Ginny.”

Ron slumped.

“You saw her?” he said at last, voice low.

“Yes. They tried to keep me out, but…”

Ron nodded. “Must have been a shock,” he suggested.

Harry glanced at him and looked away. “You saw her too?” he asked with dread.

Ron nodded again, not looking at Harry.

There was silence.

“Would it help if I went away?” Hermione asked.

Harry and Ron glanced at each other. Ron was obviously looking to Harry to decide.

Harry sighed. “I’m surprised you haven’t talked about it already.”

“We both have work things that we don’t share,” Hermione shrugged.

“Yeah, but – this is family,” Harry said. He looked at Ron. “That’s why you didn’t say anything?”

“I don’t know. Both,” Ron shrugged. “I didn’t want to put any of that into words.”

“It’ll be in the paper soon enough,” Harry said. “Merlin knows how much they’ll have in The Prophet this morning. I’ve told the kids about it,” he added.

At Ron’s startled look, Harry explained, ”I couldn’t have them read that in the papers, could I?”

“You told them she was raped?” Ron said in shock.
“What?” Hermione gasped. “Malfoy raped her?”

“We don’t know for sure,” Harry began.

“Bloody hell, Harry, face facts!” Ron snapped. “He’d handcuffed her to the bed and she…she…well, it looked that way for sure.”

“Oh god!” Hermione moaned. “Oh god, poor Gin. I imagined Avada Kedavra or something. Quick and over with.”

Harry and Ron avoided looking at her.

“Oh my god,” she whispered again, joining the dots of their behaviour. “I can’t believe it. They seemed so chummy. I’d seen Malfoy at Grimmauld Place having tea in the kitchen one day, and they seemed as friendly as anything. They were doing the crossword.”

Another silence followed.

Cogs whirred in Harry’s head, and he glanced across at Ron.

Ron looked at him quickly then glanced away.

“Ron?”

Ron rolled the empty cup around between his large palms. “Look mate,” he said at last, “I really, really hate to tell you this, and if I could avoid it I would, but it’s going to come out and you need to know. They’d been having an affair. I’m so sorry.”

“You knew?” Harry whispered.

“What? You knew?” Ron’s eyes bugged out of his face.

Harry nodded.

“For how long?” Hermione asked. “Why on earth didn’t you tell us. Oh, Harry!”

“Like I could talk about that with her own brother. Come on, Hermione, that wouldn’t have been fair to either of them.” Harry said.

“But…but…if you knew, why didn’t you stop it?” she asked.

Harry hung his head. “She was happy,” he said quietly. “She wanted to marry him.”

“Hold on, you can’t tell me you would have let her,” Ron’s brow creased.

“Ron, you know Gin, how on earth can you stop her doing something she wants?” Harry asked. “Besides, it wasn’t fair. I wanted her to be happy. But I asked her to wait until Lily had finished at Hogwarts. I didn’t want the kids to have to deal with the crap they would have got at school. I felt bloody mean about it. Hell, I thought Malfoy was a good chap for agreeing. He seemed to really love her. To be exactly what she needed. God, I can’t believe I was so deceived! If I’d…”

“We were all deceived,” Hermione touched his arm gently. “You can’t blame yourself for this, Harry.”

“We checked him out at work. He seemed clean as a whistle. A new start, and he appeared to have done so well with it, made something of himself….” Ron mused. “Not that I was happy with the
Ginny thing, of course,” he glanced across at Harry.

I’m surprised you didn’t tell me,” Harry said.

“I’m surprised he didn’t tell me,” Hermione added.

“Merlin, it took me forever to decide what to do,” Ron said. “It was privileged information, but on the other hand, I mean, you’re my mate. But she’s my sister. I went to see Gin in the end.”

“You did?” Harry said, startled. “She never mentioned it.”

“Told me to mind my own bloody business. Told me work and home were two separate things. We had a blazing row about that! I told her she was one to talk as she was shagging the boss – oh, sorry, Harry, but you know –“

“Yeah, I know what you mean,” Harry agreed. “So she didn’t say anything about me? That I knew?”

“Not a word. She had that stubborn look she has, you know, and it’s not worth arguing with her when she’s got that on: you just make things worse. So I hoped it would just blow over.”

“What would just blow over?” Lily said, appearing from behind the hedge.

“Just your uncle reminiscing about your Mum,” Hermione said smoothly. “Saying that you could never win an argument with her.”


Harry reached out and pulled her to sit next to him. Ron and Harry sat protectively either side of her.

“The paper’s come,” James said, coming across the lawn with it in his hand. “And there are reporters in the lane behind the wards, and the floo keeps flaring. Bill’s put a filter spell on it so that only people we know can get through, but it just flares enough to let you know that others are trying. It’s a really cool bit of magic – he could sell that.”

“He and George could look into that. Later,” Hermione agreed. “What does the paper say?” she asked James.

James passed the paper to her. A picture of Ginny in her team kit, smiling and punching the air as she hovered on her broomstick, filled most of the front page.

The headlines leapt out, flashing between **GINNY POTTER MURDERED! DRACO MALFOY HELD BY AURORS! POTTER FAMILY TOO DEVASTATED TO SPEAK TO REPORTERS!**

“It starts,” Harry said, and gripped Lily’s hand tightly.
Three days later, Arthur drove his converted Muggle wheelchair into the study, where Harry was alone, sitting staring at the piles of condolence post that was stacked on Molly’s desk.

Harry looked up at his father-in-law. “Arthur,” he said, getting to his feet.

“Have you got a - a - time, Harry?” Arthur asked.

Harry swept a hand towards the towering stacks of mail. “Anything rather than look at these. What is it?” he asked, settling down on the armchair on the other side of the fireplace to where Arthur had manoeuvred his chair. He knew that it was important not to beat about the bush. Arthur still found talking, as well as moving, a strain, struggling more to find the right words as he got tireder.

“I hope you won’t think me inter…inter…” Arthur stumbled.

Harry waited.

“Interfering,” he got out, “but I asked “Bi..Bi…Ron when they would rel..rel…let us have Ginny back. For the funeral,” he said.

“They haven’t told me anything yet,” Harry said. “Has Ron got any idea, then?”

Arthur shook his head. It was a strange movement, with his body not under full control.

“Yes? About the funeral? What do you want, Arthur? She’s your daughter, of course we can do whatever you want.”

Arthur gave Harry a pleased smile. “You- you’re a good boy, H-Harry,” he said. “We wanted to do the F-Full Trad-Trad-Traditional …thingy. N-not so common nowadays. Would that be all - alright?”

“I should think so, but I don’t know what it means. Can you tell me?”

“Get Molly. Lurking in the…the…” he waved his hand towards the door. “Wanted me to do the asking.”

Harry patted his father-in-law’s hand as he got up.

“Am I so fearsome?” he queried.

“Think she f-f- thought you might find it… harder to say no to her. If y-you didn’t want it.”

Harry opened the door. He could see Molly in the kitchen with Angelina, but she looked up straight away and came over to Harry.

“Got a minute, Molly?”

She kissed him on the cheek and bustled in, wiping her hands on her pinny. “Always. You asked him, Arthur?” she moved across and pulled over the desk chair to sit next to her husband, leaning across to straighten his collar.
Harry thought it would annoy him if he was in Arthur’s position, but Arthur just stuck his head up a bit, and smiled when his wife dropped a kiss against his cheek.

“H-Harry doesn’t know it,” he said.

“Hmmm?”

“The Rites you mentioned,” Harry explained, settling back in the other chair. “I’m sure it will be fine, but I don’t actually know what it is.”

“Oh! Well, it isn’t done much, nowadays, gone out of fashion, but what with the way she died,” Molly took a deep breath, “we thought it might be the best thing.”

Harry’s eyebrows twitched together.

“How does the way she died affect things?” he asked. Molly and Arthur still didn’t know the details, neither Ron nor he had felt able to tell them, and anyway, even they hadn’t yet had the CAW report. He felt suddenly on edge.

“Being murdered. It makes things different.”

“Why?” Harry asked, surprised.

“Well, it’s more likely she’ll come back as a ghost,” Molly said, “and although that in itself – well, we might see her –” Molly sniffed and got out her hankie, blowing her nose loudly, “the thing is, ghosts are usually there because they had a horrid death, because they’re unhappy. If we give her the proper Rites, it should help her to move on.”

Harry sat there stunned. It hadn’t even occurred to him that Ginny could return. He thought of Nearly Headless Nick, and the idea of a half-naked Ginny with those awful wounds all over her trailing through Grimmauld Place was beyond bearing. The children might see her. He couldn’t have that.

“That sounds a very good idea, then,” he nodded at his parents-in-law. “Why have they dropped out of fashion, then?”

“Not so many people dying unnatural deaths these days, I expect,” Molly said. “Thanks to you, Harry. Lots of Full Rites were performed when Voldemort was rampaging, and then in the past there were always battles and the like. It’s been peaceful, so people have got more Arty Farty with their funerals,” she said.

“But Dumbledore didn’t have this Full Rite thing,” Harry queried.

“No,” Arthur said, “Albus p-p- wrote the Rites he w-wanted in his w-willhewon’t-he.”


Arthur nodded. He leant forward awkwardly.

Harry worried that he might tip out of the chair, and tried not to look as if he was tensing ready to catch him.

“Should have known then,” Arthur confided. “Albus giving us a clue.”
Harry looked confused. “A clue?”

“Snape,” Arthur said.

“What?”

“That Severus hadn’t m-m-murdered him. Not really.”

“Blimey,” Harry was dumbfounded. “But that’s…”

The door opened and they all looked up.

“Sorry,” James said, looking at everyone. “Shall I come back later?”

No, come in,” Harry invited, glancing across at Arthur and Molly for agreement. “We were just talking about funeral arrangements,” he added.

“Oh,” James said, walking across the room and shuffling some of the post aside so that he could lean his rear against the edge of the desk. “Are they finished with their investigations?”

Harry shook his head. “Not yet, but we’re just preparing for when they do. Gran and Grandpa have suggested a Full Traditional Rite. They were just explaining what it was to me.”

“I don’t know either. How is it different, Gran?”

“Well, I know it sounds a bit odd, if you’ve never been to one,” Molly said carefully, “but it’s really quite…helpful. There’s a good, final feel to it. And everyone involved feels – well, part of it. With her. It’s not easy to explain.”

“Tell us what you actually do, then, Gran,” James suggested.

Harry thought how good he was with dealing with his grandparents.

The door opened and Lily peeped in.

Harry made a quick decision. “Lily, you came at just the right moment. Can you get Albus and come back? We’re just talking about funeral arrangements for Mum, so I think you ought to be here.”

“Talk about something else till I get back then,” she said quickly, “I think he’s down the garden.”

“Are you sure she’s not too young to be involved in this?” Molly said carefully, looking a bit severe.

“Molly, she’ll have to be there. I think she’s old enough to talk about it,” Harry said firmly.

“Oh,” Molly said faintly. “Don’t you think she’d prefer to stay here? It’ll be rather upsetting –”

“I think she’d be a lot more upset to be told she couldn’t come,” James said sharply.

“But a funeral – at her age – “

“Molly, think back,” Harry said gently. “How many funerals did Ron and I attend at her age?”

“She should be there,” Arthur said gruffly, reaching across with his good hand to pat Molly’s arm. “All the f-family.”

The door opened again and Lily and Albus came in. They settled on the floor with their backs
against the desk, one on each side of James, looking up inquiringly.

Harry gave a quick explanation of what they’d been talking about. “And Molly was just about to explain the practical details,” he prompted, with a smile at his mother-in-law.

“It will seem a bit odd, compared to other funerals,” she started, then thought. “I don’t suppose you’ve been to any though, have you?”

“I went to Barnabas Tomkins’ one,” Albus said quietly. At the querying looks, he went on, “Boy in my year at Hogwarts. Got Dragonpox. He had a weak heart anyway. Didn’t make it.”

“Oh dear! How awful!” Molly exclaimed.

“He was buried in the wizarding cemetery in York,” Albus said. “They had a family tomb. His brother played some sort of tune on a whistle-type of thing. Really moving, actually.”

“Ah, that’s quite traditional as well,” Molly nodded approvingly. “The whistle’s called a flauter. We could do that too,” she said, thinking.

“It made me want to cry,” Albus said awkwardly.

“Nothing wrong with crying at a funeral,” Molly said sharply. “Very important. All that emotion in the air. Helps the spirit pass.”

Harry and his kids stared at her.

“Didn’t you know that?” Molly said fiercely. “Really! It’s all very well having Muggle Studies in school, but I really think what is needed is Wizarding Studies.”

Everyone continued to stare.

“No, I am not being elitist,” she snapped. “It’s a very good thing that it’s now compulsory for Purebloods to have to take Muggle Studies, but children from mixed backgrounds or Muggle families should have to learn about wizarding tradition too. How else are they going to find out if school doesn’t teach them?”

“You’re right, Gran,” Albus said. “I mean, we’re lucky because we’ve learnt lots of stuff from Mum and you and Grandpa, but this just shows you, there’s still so much we don’t know. I don’t know why it isn’t on the curriculum.”

“Tell us about the Rite, then Gran,” Lily said, after a moment. “I thought Mum would be buried in the cemetery down the road with all the other Weasleys.”

“Well, Lily, for a start, your mother’s a Potter, isn’t she? Godric’s Hollow is where most people would expect her to be buried, but if your Dad allows the Full Rite, the ceremony will be done at Grimmauld Place.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“With an…an unnatural death,” Molly said, her face tightening, “you need to perform the Rite as near to the place where the death occurred as possible. Ideally, you place the body,” Molly took a deep breath, gulped, and then steeled herself to go on, “in the exact place of death. Would that be possible, Harry?”

Harry felt absolutely collared. He’d told his children the basics of what had happened, but now he
really didn’t know whether Ron had told his parents. The papers had been remarkably lacking in
information. He didn’t know whether that was because Malfoy was the owner of The Prophet, and
so they were being very careful. Luna’s father was still the editor of the Quibbler; their weekly
edition had come out the day before and featured a front cover entirely devoted to a story on a
sighting of a hogwizzle in Tasmania.

“What does it involve, Gran?” Albus asked.

“Everyone close comes, everyone who cared about the deceased. You need to learn the spells
beforehand, and you have to fast for twenty four hours and abstain from love-making.”

James choked.

“Or any sexual activity,” Gran continued firmly. “I know what young men are like,” she said
severely.

Harry watched his children trying not to giggle. God, he thought, he really did not need to think
about his children wanking. There were some things parents didn’t need to know; he couldn’t
believe Molly could come out with these things just like that. Then again, she’d had a houseeload of
hormonal boys to bring up. It was nice to see the kids having something to chuckle about, even if
only for a moment.

“Are there any other preparations?” Albus asked, keeping his face straight.

“Well, you need to decide in advance who is going to conduct the Rite, and you have to provide a
place to rest and refreshments for those involved. It can be very exhausting,” she said. “We’ve got
a very big family, and Ginny had so many friends, that it will ease the effort, of course.”

“What effort?”

“Well, the Rites – for cleansing, and wishes of love and freedom – take magical energy. Everyone
has to focus that. Then, when they’re done and goodbyes are said, everyone focuses for the
Banishment Rite.”

wrong.”

“The name does sound grim, I agree, Lily,” Molly nodded, “but what you’re really doing is freeing
the spirit from the body and place.”

“What? Are you suggesting that Mum could be around otherwise – like a ghost?” James asked,
sitting forward.

“Exactly,” Molly nodded.

“But – but Gran,” Lily said after a moment, “wouldn’t it be nice if Mum were still around? I mean,
I know she won’t have a body, but we could still talk to her, and she’d know what was going on,
like the ghosts at school –“

“And she could tell us if Malfoy really killed her. If he was acting alone or what exactly
happened,” Albus said.

Harry drew in a sharp breath. He’d never even thought of that. Trust his clever son – but Molly was
shaking her head.
“Oh, my darlings, I don’t think time is like that when you’re dead. It could be years and years before the ghost would appear. I think the first recorded appearance of the Grey Lady was about a hundred and fifty years after her death. You wouldn’t want your mother to come back and have only strangers to talk to, would you? And also, think about the school ghosts: despite what they get up to, they all have rather an air of sadness about them, don’t you think?”

“Molly’s right about the time thing,” Harry said without thinking. “It feels like time doesn’t matter at all -”

He ground to a halt as he realised everyone was staring at him. He’d never really talked about what had happened, how Voldemort was defeated. “Anyway,” he floundered, “Molly’s right. She usually is,” he tried to joke. “Er. So. Well. What, er, happens next? Do we then take Gin’s body away to be buried? I’m more than happy for her to come home to the cemetery here –”

Arthur made a noise. Molly looked at him and nodded. “I haven’t explained very well,” she said. “With the banishment, with enough power, that’s it. There will be no body. It goes.”

“It goes?” said Albus, his brow furrowing. “Where?”

Molly threw a look at Arthur, who wobbled his head.

“Well, I don’t really know, dear. Back into the magic that’s all around us, I suppose.”

“What?” James leant forward, hands on his thighs. “You mean, it just disappears?”

Molly nodded.

“Does the ritual focus on a place?” Harry asked. “Could the body be sent somewhere in particular? What do you mean ‘into the magic’, Molly?”

“I don’t know how it all works, Harry, just that it does,” Molly said, beginning to sound exasperated.

“Sorry, Mum,” Harry said, using the word that he knew would calm her. “It’s just you know what I’m like, I don’t understand so much and I never know what the boundaries are of what everyone knows and what is just sort of taken for granted. A bit like Arthur,” he nodded at his father-in-law, “thinking that I’d know how a computer works, because I grew up with the Dursleys, whereas of course, hardly any Muggles know how they work, only that they do.”

Molly’s eyes had softened and Arthur was looking interested at the comparison.

Harry looked at his children.

“Molly, is there anywhere we can look stuff up on this? Because I think the children and I would feel much more at ease if we could understand it better first.”

“Oh! Of course, Harry. I wasn’t trying to rush you into a decision. We have no idea how long it will be…”

“Book by Cornelius…Brick,” Arthur said.

They all looked at him.

Arthur nodded.

“Have we still got a copy?” Molly asked.

“Attic,” Arthur jerked his head upwards.

“I’ll get it for you, Harry dear. But first, lunch. What about shepherd’s pie?”
Two days later Harry received a visit from Aurors Hencliffe and Franklin. Apprehensive about what they might say in front of the children or Ginny’s family, he invited them to walk in the garden.

It was a bright day, the spring sun warm against Harry’s skin. The apple trees were in blossom, and Harry led them to the bench set amidst the gnarled old trunks.

“Do you have news?” he asked.

“Yes indeed, Mr Potter,” Auror Franklin nodded, seating herself with a neat tidying of her robes.

Auror Hencliffe stayed standing, facing them. “The trial is to be on Friday,” he said. “We don’t expect it to last more than an hour or two, as Malfoy has pleaded guilty. We can release Mrs Potter’s body straight after.”

“What?” Harry’s eyes swivelled from one to the other.

“This will all be over with by the end of the week, Mr Potter,” Auror Franklin said gently.

“What?” Harry said again. “No!”

“I beg your pardon?” Auror Franklin said, looking affronted. “The Wizengamot moved a number of cases so that this matter could be dealt with swiftly, Mr Potter –“

“Well, exactly!” Harry said. “There shouldn’t be any special treatment! And Malfoy has pleaded guilty? Really? And – and surely Ginny’s body can be released before the trial? I thought that we were just waiting for the CAW results.”

“Mr Potter, the case is very high profile, as I’m sure you’re aware. It is in the best interests of both the family and the Department to clear this matter up swiftly.”

Harry’s head was reeling. “In the best interests of the family?” He lurched to his feet. “Rubbish!” he bit out. “What the hell does the trial matter to us? Will it bring her back? Will it give my children their mother back? You’re just thinking of the Department! How it’ll bloody look in the papers!”

George had come running across the lawn, having heard Harry’s raised voice from where he was smoking his pipe outside the back door. Not that he’d been watching, of course.

“Harry! What’s up?” He came and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with his brother-in-law.

“They’re going to do the trial on Friday. As if I can even think about that. They’ve probably beaten the confession out of Malfoy for all I know –“

“Mr Potter!”

“Well?” George said, hands on hips. “Are you going to tell us that no-one laid a hand on him?”

“Your brother did for starters!” snapped Auror Hencliffe.

George’s chest swelled.
James, Lily and Albus came dashing up, with Ron close behind. Fortunately he didn’t appear to have heard the last comment.

“What’s going on, Dad?” Lily asked, putting a hand on Harry’s arm.

There was a general reining in of tempers.

Harry looked over at the Aurors. “Is there any reason that Ginny’s body cannot be released at once, if you’ve completed your investigations?” he demanded.

The Aurors glanced at each other.

“I don’t see why there should be any reason, if all the tests have been completed,” Ron said challengingly.

Auror Franklin nodded. “We can release Mrs Potter. But the trial – “

“We would much prefer to be able to grieve without having to consider listening to the trial before we can even give our Gin the proper rites,” Harry said firmly. “Is that a problem? Is there overcrowding in the cells, that you’re in such a hurry?”

“We just thought you would – “

“I have no idea why you should think that you would know what I would want,” Harry said coldly.

James and Lily exchanged a glance. Their father was always so mild: they had never heard him take that tone with anyone. He never mentioned his role as Saviour of the Wizarding World, never lived it, and yet there was an authority about him, a poise, that sent a shiver down the spine.

“I beg your pardon, Mr Potter,” Auror Franklin said, looking as if she were sucking the proverbial lemon. “The family may collect Mrs Potter at your convenience.”

“And our house?” James asked. “Have you finished with that? Can we return home?”

He didn’t understand the look that flashed between Harry, Ron and the Aurors. Only that it meant there was something they knew that they hadn’t been sharing.

“We’ll let you know when that is possible,” the woman said firmly.

“But if Malfoy has owned up, there is no other threat,” James pushed. “Surely that means we can go about as normal now? We no longer need to hide out here?”

Everyone looked at the Aurors.

“You are free to go where you like,” Auror Hencliffe agreed. “We’d planned to leave a team on watch here until after the trial as a matter of courtesy, but we do have other cases and as you wish to delay the formalities…” he said disdainfully.

“Watch your tone, Auror,” Ron snapped. “Harry, if you haven’t any other questions for these two, I’ll see them out.”

“I can’t think of anything else at the moment.” A quick look passed between Harry and Ron.

“If we can help in any way,” Auror Franklin said in an ameliorating tone, “please don’t hesitate to get in touch, Mr Potter.”
Harry nodded, and Ron led them across the garden.

“What’s going on?” James’ brows drew together as he asked his father.

Harry opened his mouth and then shut it again. There was no point beating about the bush.

“Look,” he said, his eyes passing over his children, “you remember what I told you on the day that we learnt Mum was dead?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“How’s going on?” Lily asked.

Harry nodded. “I – well, I’m surprised that there hasn’t been anything in the papers yet – probably because The Prophet still don’t know how to handle it, and the Lovegoods aren’t going to make anything any worse. The thing is, I haven’t told anyone else – Gran and Grandpa, in particular – exactly how Ginny died.” He gripped his hands together.

“I don’t understand,” Lily said.

Harry put his arm around her and pulled her to his side. “Lils, think about it. Gran wants the Old Rites, which means we must do it at the house. But…look.” He took a breath. “Ron and I need to go there first and – and – tidy up a bit,” he said, his mind full of the blood-washed room. Better to say to make it better for Gran rather than have his children realise that he couldn’t possibly let them see the room in which their mother had died. He had no idea how the Aurors had left it, but there was no way that he wanted them to see all that blood, or the handcuffs snicked onto the metalwork of the bedframe.

“So Ron is asking the Aurors if you can go in and sort it out?” George asked.

Harry gathered that George and Hermione had now been given the details from Ron, judging from the lack of any probing questions.

“Yes, because if we have Gin, we really need the house too to do the Rite in,” Harry nodded.

“Will we move back in? After the funeral?” Lily asked.

“I – it’s up to you,” Harry said, looking at his children. “How do you feel about it?” He was stupid; he hadn’t really thought about that.

“Well, I’ve moved out anyway,” James shrugged, “so it doesn’t really affect me. What do you want to do, Lils?”

“I like my room,” she said. “But if you’d rather live somewhere else, Dad, we can go where you like. I was thinking of sharing a flat with Genna Flaubert after school,” she said tentatively.

“Genna? Isn’t she going back to France?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Lily whispered. She looked up at her father. “I was thinking of doing a course at the wizarding uni in Paris. Where Fleur went. But I’ll look for somewhere here if you need me, Dad.”

Harry hugged her tight. He couldn’t believe his family was falling apart like this. Lils leaving home? But if Gin had been alive…it would have made things easier that the children had lives of their own, plans of their own. And wasn’t the point of parenting to prepare them to go off into the big wide world? He couldn’t hold them back.
"Get Fleur to give you some advice on where to look," Harry said, his throat closing around the words.

"Dad!" Lily hugged him.

"What course are you thinking of?" he asked, then looked down at her. "Well, maybe we’d better talk about this later." He looked from Lily to James to Albus. "I’m proud of you all," he said quietly, "and you know I just want you all to be happy. There’ll always be a room for you wherever I live, and you’re welcome there for a day a year or for every day. Albus, what about you? I know Grimmauld Place is convenient, but you could floo to work from my flat above the shop if you’d rather not live there. I can expand it so there’s enough room for everyone. Find somewhere else….

"I think you need to see how you feel about the house after you’ve been back with Ron," Albus said. "It’s easy living there, but I can find my own place –"

"Only if you want to," Harry said quickly. "Let’s not make any hasty decisions, okay? Hopefully Ron has bullied his colleagues into letting us back into the house," he said, raising his voice as Ron strode across the garden to them.

"Yup, no problem," Ron said. "Merlin knows why they were stalling at all. I can’t believe those two are in the Seriously Horrible Incidents Team. Lives up to its name, with wallies like that."

The kids were laughing. Harry couldn’t help grinning either.

"Well," Ron remonstrated. "Dull as ditchwater, the pair of them."

George patted the side of his nose. "Double act," he said. "Like in the Muggle movies. She’s all sympathetic and he pretends to be an idiot. Makes you spill all your secrets."

"I don’t think there’s much pretending going on with that twerp," Ron grimaced. "Must’ve cheated on the exams, if you ask me."

"Takes brains to cheat, Bro," George said, slinging his arm across Ron’s shoulder. "Just ‘cos you sailed in first time round."

"I’m not brainy," Ron said, preening and surprised at the compliment from his brother.

"Na, I suppose not," George nodded equably. "The cleverest witch of her generation married you for the famous Weasley tackle, no doubt."

A fresh outbreak of sniggers followed this comment.

George grinned at his nephews. "I’ve seen you two in the bath. You might have been toddlers, but glad to see the old Weasley genes passing along –"

"George!" Harry screeched, but everyone was laughing, and as ever, George had lightened the situation and put everyone into a positive spirit. "And on that note, Mum’s got bangers and mash on for lunch."

The giggles filled the garden as they headed into the house.

Later, Ron and Harry found themselves in the dark hallway of Grimmauld Place. Harry waved his hand and the wall sconces lit, illuminating the passage.
“You up for this, mate?” Ron asked. “I can do it –“

“Let’s just get it over,” Harry said, and silently they headed up the stairs to the bedroom.

Harry could not believe the relief he felt as they walked through the door.

There was no blood anywhere.

The bedframe stood empty, with no mattress or bedding. No handcuffs either, Harry noted.

“I asked for Doherty on the clean-up team,” Ron said quietly. “They don’t gossip and they don’t give tips to the newspaper. I tried to slip him fifty galleons but he wouldn’t have it. As honest as the day is long, that man.”

“God! Thanks, mate,” Harry said. “I thought – “

“Yeah, I know. They came in yesterday. They're used to it, Harry,” he said gently.

“Horrible job,” Harry said quietly. He went and sat on the chair in front of the dressing table where Ginny did her make-up.

Used to do her make-up.

“It pays well, and they’re not involved with the people,” Ron shrugged. “But yeah, I couldn’t do it.”

“Malfoy was still here when you arrived?” Harry asked.

Surprisingly, he hadn’t had a chance to talk to Ron alone.

“Yeah. He made the call.”

“What?” Harry said. “You never mentioned that!”

“Not really had time to talk,” Ron said.

“Tell me,” Harry demanded.

“Well, I was in my office, and suddenly his head was in the floo –”

“Wait! You’re saying that he called you? Especially?”

“Yeah. That’s why I was so mad. I thought he was gloating.” Ron rubbed his hand round the back of his head.

“But?”

“Well. I mean, I hit him,” Ron said. He ducked his head, then looked up at Harry.

“Yeah, I know that bit,” Harry nodded.

Well, I wasn’t really thinking straight,” Ron pointed out.

“Understandable,” Harry soothed.

“He – she – he –“
“Get it out, Ron.”

“Well, I came through the floo, and he didn’t say anything. Or maybe he said, ‘This way,’ or something, but nothing I expected. No - attitude. His shoulders were down. I think – ” Ron paused. “Well, he was like a robot, or something. Like In the Muggle movies. I wasn’t really getting anything off him. It was sort of creepy.”

Harry nodded, encouraging Ron to continue.

“Then,” Ron stumbled again. He looked at Harry quickly, and looked away. “He brought me straight into the bedroom, and – well, I sort of lost it.”

Harry could imagine. Despite being a brilliant strategist, despite years of training, when his emotions or temper were aroused, Ron still acted first and thought later.

“When I arrived,” Harry said, “the Aurors and their team were here. I don’t know if they’d moved anything or changed anything. Gin was – handcuffed to the bed,” Harry said, glancing a quick look at Ron.

Ron nodded at once. “Yeah. I saw that. Both hands. She – there was blood everywhere,” he said.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed, voice low. “Did you see a knife at all?” he asked.

“Wha -?” Ron stopped to think. He paced across the room, his hands on his hips. “No. I assumed a spell,” he said at last.

“Me too. I just wanted to be sure. It’s easy to see what you expect.”

“You expected to see your wife tied up and murdered?”

“I meant that I assumed it was *Sectumsempra,*” Harry said quietly.

“*Sectum* – oh! Merlin’s balls, Harry, was that what Malfoy looked like when you did it to him? Bloody hell!”

Harry’s head sunk into his hands. “Yeah. I just couldn’t believe – I mean – ”

“Payback after all these years?”

“Yeah. I – it just seems unreal. I was so sure he cared about her. That he’d really changed, Ron. Damn it, if I hadn’t thought that I wouldn’t have agreed to what they wanted! I mean, when they married he’d have been the kids’ stepfather, for god’s sake. I can’t believe anyone would harbour a grudge for all that time, go to such lengths. It’s my fault she’s dead,” he whispered.

Ron’s silence, his back as he stood staring out of the window, was like a stab wound in Harry’s heart.

After a minute, Harry stood up. “Well, the room’s ok,” he said quietly. “Will the rite need to be performed actually in here? Molly said there’d be quite a few people. I could expand the room – “

“To take a hundred or so?” Ron said disbelievingly.

“Ron, I manipulate space for a living.”

“Point. OK, I didn’t think of it like that. But maybe we could do it in the garden?”
“I’ll talk to your Mum.”

“I don’t really want her to know what happened,” Ron said. “I mean, coming into the bedroom, everyone will get ideas.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “I couldn’t bring myself to say anything to her before now. The garden would be better. I wanted the funeral rites first because I don’t want anyone thinking anything less of Ginny before the rites.”

“Why should anyone think any the less of her?” Ron said sharply. “She didn’t ask to be raped.”

Harry took a breath. He’d wondered how much investigating Ron had done about Malfoy and his sister. This was not going to be easy. “I know that. It’s just, I don’t want them even thinking about that at the funeral. And lawyers always try to come up with anything nasty they can –”

“Yeah, well there’s nothing nasty anyone can say about Ginny! She’s famous and well liked. You might not see that –”

“Yes, of course I know that,” Harry interrupted. He did not need Ron being a defensive prick at this moment. As if Harry wanted any scandal attached to Ginny’s name. “But I don’t want them even thinking about how she died, the awfulness of it, Ron. It’s bad enough that she’s dead, without any or the horrid details, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, okay. We’ll just say to Mum that she died in the house but would the garden be the best place, then? If she presses for it to be in the house we’ll have to rethink.”

Unfortunately Molly said it was by far the best for it to be in exactly the spot where death happened.

Harry decided to completely clear the bedroom, just have Ginny and the bier in it, and arrange portkeys directly into it. Then it would be the right place, without throwing it in anyone’s face that it was the bedroom. His children would know, from the views from the windows, but Ginny’s team mates, and her other friends wouldn’t know this was usually a bedroom.

He spent the whole of the next day preparing the room. it was tiring and complex magic, to extend space. There was something akin to transfiguration in it, but it was much harder than transfiguration, where one had a physical object to focus on. In creating and extending space, one was essentially creating a void, a nothingness that yet had the capacity to be filled, to allow any number of objects, animate or inanimate, to occupy it, that was flexible enough to allow people to move seamlessly from normal reality into the created space. Most wizards had no idea of the complexity and the power of the magic needed to do it, which had suited Harry just fine when he had set up his trunk-making business.

Rather like Muggles used televisions and computers with no idea of how they worked, wizards took the magical capacity of his trunks for granted. People focussed on the beauty of the craftwork, of the physical skills he used to create the trunks, learnt from Muggle craftsmen in an apprenticeship in the heart of the Hampshire countryside.

He found calm and pleasure in the work, shaping pieces that brought out the best of the wood itself, or bending the timber to his will, under his hand, to suit the purpose he wanted from it. Such physical work was rare in the wizarding world, almost out of fashion. Real wizarding furniture invariably lasted for hundreds, if not thousands of years, and was handed down through the
generations. In England, there were very few practitioners making modern pieces, and certainly none who had also had the hands-on craftsman training that Harry had.

Initially, people had come looking at his work because of his name; Harry had expected that. But eventually, commissions began to come in. Harry loved the fact that every piece he made was unique, tailored to its owner. He had made everything from tiny cases for Gringotts, which carried huge quantities of precious jewels, to alchemists’ cases, to trunks and closets for Madam Malkin to store a whole season’s new range. Many of his customers now came from overseas. Europeans and Americans alike seemed to like the clean, unapologetically modern lines of his work. To these customers especially, his work stood on its own merits, not his name. He had a waiting list now, as every piece took months to make.

Before he could extend the space, though, he had to clear it. The bed frame stood staring at Harry, accusing and cold, the twisted iron leaves at head and foot seeming to mock him with their pretence of life, whilst the bare springs of the base looked skeletal and threatening. The mattress – undoubtedly blood-stained – had been removed by the aurors. Harry felt glad that he didn’t have to think about whether he had to keep any remnants of Ginny’s blood in the room for the rites to work. Harry focussed his power on the bed, until the metal branches began to writhe, and the springs began to curl tighter and tighter. The bed bucked and screeched as the metal wrenched at itself, finally pulling in and in until if formed a solid ball of iron. Harry banished it to a corner of the garden. He turned to look at the furniture: the dressing table, chests of drawers and wardrobe. He knew there would be things that Lily would want of her mother’s, but he didn’t want her having any surprises. He opened drawers, whizzed through the wardrobe, and extracted several items from the magical spaces he had created in them. He looked at the small pile on the floor. He tried not to think, to react. Calmly and with focus, he burnt them with a magical fire, then sent the furniture along to one of the attic rooms. He could bring it back after the rites for Lily to sort through when she felt ready.

The room was now bare. Harry could feel alien magic tingling in the space, and looked carefully at the walls. He realised that magic had been used to scrub the wall behind the bed clean. Ginny’s blood must have sprayed there, he realised, though he hadn’t been aware of it at the time. The paper there looked too clean, too pristine. Harry focussed, and slowly all the paper began to sag and peel, bubbling out from the walls and eventually drooping to the floor. Harry summoned a broom and swept it into a pile, glad to have the physical effort. The heap too was burnt.

Harry looked at the bare space, and then tried several effects on the walls, from oak panelling to white paint to what he thought might be an elegant stripe in Ginny’s team colours. Then he remembered that Malfoy was the owner of the club and banished that, and settled at last on a neutral cream.

That done, he went downstairs, where Mitty wordlessly made him a cup of tea and a sandwich in the kitchen. The work to come would take it out of him, he knew, and he needed the fuel. He was glad to be doing the practical stuff, though – he had left everyone at the Burrow making floo calls and sending owls to invite the other participants to the rites tomorrow.

It felt odd, the house.

Too quiet.

Harry was rarely in it without the children or Ginny around. Things had been a bit awkward since Albus had returned home, not that he’d ever tell him that. For the previous few years, during term time Harry usually lived in the flat above the shop. It was an arrangement that had suited them
both. When the children were home, he had returned. When James had finished school, he had moved straight in with his girlfriend, much to the Weasley’s disapproval because neither seemed in a hurry to marry. Harry had had to come down firmly on James’ side. The relationship hadn’t lasted, but that wasn’t the point. When Albus had finished at Hogwarts, he and Lily had both come home for the summer, and when Lily had returned to school, Albus had just stayed on. Harry was glad that his son had felt that the house was his home and that there wasn’t any atmosphere that had made him want to find his own place as fast as possible. He’d enjoyed Albus’ friends sitting round the kitchen table and Albus putting his own stock of beers in the fridge. Ginny was away a lot anyway so it was often just the two of them, yet somehow it always felt like home, properly, with one of the kids there, their stuff lying about in the sitting room and books and papers on the kitchen table.

The house felt dead.

It couldn’t be because Ginny was dead.

Molly was the heart of the Burrow, and for years, Harry had thought that Ginny had been the heart of Grimmauld Place, making it warm and welcoming and home.

That was until Kreacher had died unexpectedly. They’d found his body one cold winter morning, clutching the locket, cold and stiff in his little den off the kitchen. Harry had called St Mungo’s at once, despite the fact that he was pretty sure Kreacher was dead, but just in case there was something about elf anatomy that might be giving him false signals. St Mungo’s only sent help because of his name, and the mediwizard stared at him stiffly before pronouncing the elf dead without even touching him. Harry dismissed him and fire-called Hagrid, who came at once with one of the elves from Hogwarts. The elf explained to Harry that although they lived a long time, elves were as mortal as any other living creature, and that Kreacher had been very old indeed.

Harry had buried him in the garden. He had long since removed the elf-heads from the walls, but he hoped the gravestone, inscribed by the children as well as Ginny and himself, would honour him in a different way. It was only in the weeks that followed that Harry realised how cold the house felt, how the little touches that he had attributed to Ginny were missing – the kettle whistling in the morning, the fire alight in the hearth when he got in, the scents of cooking, flowers in odd corners. He realised at once how foolish he was – how stupid he was to have expected any of it of Ginny – she was a career woman earning much more than he did, for starters. He felt guilty that he had never thanked Kreacher. To be truthful, when they had first had the children he had been terribly anxious about Kreacher’s influence – that the elf, despite his allegiance to Harry, might try to impart his pureblood beliefs on his children. But, to his utter astonishment, Kreacher adored children. He was willing to accept any restrictions Harry made, in fear that Harry might prevent him from looking after them. The children had grown up adoring the elf. Under their warmth and love, Kreacher had mellowed unbelievably.

Eventually, Mitty had come to replace Kreacher, but it wasn't the same. Maybe it took a long time for an elf to get attached to a house.

Harry sighed heavily. Kreacher was gone, and Ginny was gone, and the children were all near enough to finding their own ways in life.

Maybe he’d sell Grimmauld Place.

But first...Harry poured a second cup, downed it, and headed up the stairs.

The room already looked nothing like a bedroom, Harry was pleased to see. He stood in the middle, pulled his magic to him, and set to work again.
Twenty four hours later, he stood alone in the room again. Now, its silence resonated with the magic and the after-images of the dozens of people who moments before had occupied the room. The Rites had been completed. Harry felt a huge sense of relief, of gratefulness to Molly and Arthur, because the form had felt right. Somehow the horror of it had been ameliorated by the participation of everyone, the need to all work together preventing him and the children from being in the spotlight, the physical focus of everyone else’s grief. With these Rites, everyone was needed, everyone was able to use their emotions to help ensure that Ginny would be freed from the trappings of the place where death had come unwelcomed.

Harry had asked Molly to be in charge of refreshments, and his children had led everyone through the portal Harry had created that took everyone straight out to the garden. Neville had come earlier, working to make sure that the garden looked as good as was possible on a spring day, and the sun had come out to add its warmth to the heating charms that Charlie and George had worked. He knew his children would be out there, mingling and comforting, which seemed to be a bizarre task for those most bereaved, but one they had all grown used to over the last few days. He took a last look at the room, at the scorch marks on the floor where the magical fire had consumed Ginny.

It was hard to believe that she was gone, even though he had watched it with his own eyes.

He felt deathly tired, but couldn’t bear to leave the room as it was. He took a deep breath, closed off the garden access and then allowed the magic to collapse back in. He felt dizzy as the room contorted and the walls wavered, and then suddenly, with a snap, it was done. He fell to his knees.

He was hunched over, his head resting against his knees when he heard the door open quietly. He straightened up, and looked into Albus’ face.

Albus came over and placed a hand on his shoulder awkwardly.

Harry allowed himself to lean into it for a moment.

“I’d better come down,” he said, struggling to his feet.

Albus stepped back and nodded. “We need you. I think Lily’s more disturbed by the Rite than I first thought.”

“Yes. I’m not surprised,” Harry said, striding to the door. He stopped and looked at his son. “What about you, Albus? How’re you holding up?” he asked gently.

“I wish they’d all bugger off home,” Albus said, then grinned sheepishly. “I just want to slump on the sofa, drink too much beer and have an Indian takeaway. I know Gran’s cooking is great, but….”

Harry nodded and rubbed his hand over Albus’ hair, even though he had to reach up to do it.

“Sounds good to me. Here, or want to go back to The Burrow?”

“He. Just us – you and me and James and Lily. Can we do that? Can we come home now?”

“I don’t see why not. Come on then, let’s go and do the mingling crap, and if we look anything like as tired as I feel, hopefully they’ll all bugger off sooner rather than later.”

Albus had been right about Lily, she had been shaken up, even though you wouldn’t know it if you
didn’t know her well. She was talking to various of Ginny’s team mates, handing tissues out and fetching glasses of wine. She looked very like her mother, Harry thought, her red hair burnished with golden highlights from the sun. Harry moved up beside her and put his arm round her. Her instant smile of relief made him regret having delayed coming down. He should have left the room till tomorrow. It was just….He gave her a quick sideways hug and Lily butted her head against his shoulder, just for a fraction of a second.

It was alright. Everything was alright. It had to be.
The funeral had been on Friday, and the children had stayed home over the weekend, just being together. Nothing much said. They watched movies on TV. Their friends dropped by. Harry made tea and got beers and cooked pasta for however many people were in the house. It was not different from any weekend they had ever spent, when Ginny had been away on tour.

But Ginny was not away on tour, and her absence was more keenly felt than her physical presence ever had been.

Harry knew about bereavement. Even the children, after the death of Kreacher, knew what it was like to lose someone they cared about.

It didn’t make it any easier.

Come Sunday evening, Harry was glad to take Lily back to Hogwarts, and he could see that she was glad to go. Next time she came back, things would be different. The rawness of it all would have passed. And in the meantime, she would have her friends around her, routine to help her.

They apparated just outside the gates.

Harry felt a sense of comfort, seeing the ancient building. People had come and gone for over a thousand years, but still the castle stood, welcoming and protective, proclaiming in stone and magic that life went on.

It was a long time since Harry had walked up the path from the gates. The light was dropping from the sky, the chill of a Scottish spring was in the air, and he breathed deeply, letting the peace and tranquillity settle into his bones.

Mrs Banton, who had replaced Filch and offered a completely different approach to her role, stood waiting at the top of the steps and welcomed them.

“Supper’s just about to be served, Miss,” she said in an authoritative tone.

Lily dipped her head. “Yes, Mrs Banton. I’ll just take my bag up to my room –“

“You get along and eat, lass, I’ll see to that,” the redoubtable lady said firmly. She might not threaten torture and punishments, but she always got her way.

“Thank you,” Lily acquiesced.

Harry gave her a huge hug.

Mrs Banton looked them over, then flicked her wand at the bag. “You’ll see yourself out, Mr Potter, no doubt,” she said, moving away. She turned back quickly. “My condolences,” she added, and without waiting for a response, disappeared through the door.

“Formidable,” he said into the top of Lily’s head.

“She’s great.”

Harry chuckled. He couldn’t have envisaged anyone, ever, saying that about Filch.

“Good. Now, if you need me, owl or fire-call. I mean it, Lils. Don’t get upset and not call, okay?”
Lily nodded into her father’s shoulder. “Love you, Dad,” and then she was gone.

No one had said that to Harry in so long. He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing, and turned and headed back down the path.
It was two days later. Lily had sent a letter to say she was fine, James had returned to work and he hadn’t heard a thing from him. Life was almost normal. Harry had even been into his shop to look over his post. Janine had done a reasonable job of sorting it, and after the initial awkwardness was behaving alright. Despite being almost twenty years his junior, she was obviously trying to be a mother hen, making him enough tea that he needed to constantly go to the loo, and had even made home-made brownies to try and ‘cheer him up’.

Harry was glad to get back to work. On the second day, he descended once again into the trunk that he had been working on when the news came. He put that thought behind him and spent five hours completing the job, climbing out exhausted and shaky and relieved to have done something so ordinary.

He was cooking supper when Albus came in.

Harry turned round and smiled. “Chicken jalfrezi: sound alright?”

“Great. Smells good, Dad.”

“Lay the table then, will you? And get us both a beer. And some water. I think this might turn out a bit hotter than I meant.”

Albus laughed and got a couple of beers out of the fridge, opening them and handing one to his father before having a swig of his own and then rifling through the cutlery drawer.

They were three-quarters of the way through the meal before Harry became aware that there was something odd about Albus’ manner.

“Albus? Something up?”

Albus shifted in the chair. “Not up, but – well. Let’s finish this first.”

Something serious then. Harry ate the remaining mouthfuls with a lot less pleasure. He couldn’t think what might be bothering Albus, unless the papers had printed anything….he hadn’t had time to look at The Prophet today, he realised.

But when Albus had finished, and they’d cleared the table, washed up and got themselves a cup of tea each, Harry was taken aback when Albus spoke.

“Someone’s asked me for a favour, but I don’t know if I can help.”

Harry leant forward in the armchair.

“Is it illegal?”

“’No! Oh, nothing like that, Dad. Just – well…”

“Well?” Harry prompted after a moment.

“I can’t do the favour,” Albus said.

“You can’t or you won’t?”
“I - the thing is, – “

“Come on, Albus. Does it hurt anyone? Is it for a friend? There’s got to be some reason you’re not keen, because I can’t imagine you refusing otherwise.”

“It’s Malfoy. Scorpius, that is.”

God. Harry hadn’t thought about Scorpius Malfoy. How bloody awful must it be to have your father arrested for murder?

“Is he alright?” Harry asked gently.

Albus looked startled. “Not so great. The thing is, Dad, he came to see me at work and asked if you’d see him. He didn’t think you’d answer a letter, and he knows you’ve no reason to – “

“Is he hoping I’ll ask for clemency for his father’s life?” Harry said, his brow furrowing.

“He didn’t say. I suppose so. He was really apologetic, polite. Just asked me to ask you if you would see him for a couple of minutes.”

“Are you friends? I don’t remember you talking about him much.”

Albus shook his head. “No, I knew him, obviously, but what with me being a Slytherin and him a Ravenclaw, we didn’t have much interaction. We were partnered on a Potions project once is all. He was fine, but we both just already had our own friends.”

Harry nodded. “Do you have his floo address?”

“You’re going to see him?”

“You’ve lost your mother, Albus. Think how awful he must feel, knowing that in all likelihood they’ll give his father the Kiss or put him in Azkaban for the rest of his life. He’s got to get through every day knowing what’s coming. If I were him, I’d try to do anything I could too.”

“But his Dad’s admitted it! He’s a murderer!”

Harry looked at his son. “So am I,” he said quietly. “I know the circumstances are different, but I’ve still killed. Do you love me less because of it?”

Albus stared at his father. “It’s not the same – “

“I know. But whether it’s war or savagery, the people you’ve killed still had parents, wives, brothers or sisters or children. Le Strange still seemed to love Bellatrix even though she was vicious and patently as mad as a hatter. Scorpius has done nothing wrong. I’ll see him.”

He reached his hand out for the card that Albus had pulled from the back pocket of his trousers, and headed over to the fire.

“You’re going to see him now?”

“If he’s in,” Harry nodded, and bent towards the fire. He called the address and waited.

A moment later, a blond head appeared in the flames.

“Mr Potter!”
“You wanted to see me, Scorpius? Are you free? I could come through now.”

“Oh! If – “ Albus and Harry could both see how flustered Scorpius looked, as he turned round and was frantically signalling to someone.

“If I’m interrupting your evening – “ Harry began.

“No! Please! A friend was here is all – he’s just leaving. Please – do come through,” he said, regaining a poise that was so Malfoy that Harry almost choked.

He glanced back at Albus, and stepped through.

He found himself in a small sitting room. There was a comfortable sofa at an angle to the fire, and lamps in sconces on the walls. Harry noted that there were a couple of beer bottles on the table. It was odd to think that Scorpius had been spending an evening in probably much the same way as he and Albus had.

Except Scorpius hadn’t been sharing it with his father, and would never do so again.

“Thank you so much!” Scorpius gushed. He glanced around swiftly, then invited Harry to sit in the armchair facing the sofa. “Can I get you anything – a drink, a –“

“Thank you, no,” Harry said firmly. He sat forward on the seat, his arms resting along his thighs. He looked up enquiringly at Scorpius.

Scorpius was practically wringing his hands together.

“Why don’t you sit down?” Harry suggested.

Scorpius obeyed instantly, perching on the edge of the sofa. He opened his mouth and shut it again.

Harry waited. “Mr Malfoy,” he said at last.

The name seemed to galvanise the boy.

“My father would never have killed Mrs Potter!” he burst out, leaping to his feet.

Harry looked at him.

“He loved her!”

Now that did take Harry by surprise.

“Why do you say that?” he asked. “You do know that your father has confessed?” he added gently.

Scorpius nodded. “I know. He won’t discuss it when I visit. He just tells me to leave it, and he keeps apologising to me. But he looks appalling. He’s fading away.”

“He’s still in the holding cells at the Ministry?” Harry asked. “Are they mistreating him?” he frowned.

“Yes, he’s there. I don’t know what they’re doing to him! He has bruises, but he doesn’t seem to care. He just tells me to leave it alone, and he’s made his will and everything!”
Thoughts stirred in Harry’s head. “They might confiscate his money, I’m afraid,” he said. “I don’t think there is anything I could do about that, although I could ask – “

“I don’t want his money!” Scorpius practically screamed. “I can make my own living, for Merlin’s sake! I’m just saying, he’s not doing anything. He had his lawyers in to make his will, but he won’t talk to them about...about what happened. He’s not even going to allow a defence! He says pleading guilty is the least he can do! Please, Mr Potter, can’t you see? Don’t you know? He wanted to marry her! I’m sorry, I know she was your wife, but he loved her.”

“Did he tell you that he did? That he wanted to marry her?” Harry asked carefully.

“Nearly two years ago,” Scorpius nodded. “He told me that he loved her, and that he was going to wait till she was ready to marry him, however long it took. I’m sorry, I know this is awful to say to you – “

“Did you believe he loved her, Scorpius?” Harry asked. Somehow, the answer seemed very important.

“He did. He did! He was different – like he was lit up all the time. Mr Potter, he wouldn’t have killed her. Never!”

Harry wasn’t quite sure how to phrase what he had to say next. The thought had occurred to him before. If it was true, if it was true that Malfoy really had loved her, then it would explain why he was pleading guilty with no defence.

“Scorpius, I know this is hard to hear, to understand, but if he did truly love her as you think, it’s still possible that he killed her accidentally.”

“What?” Scorpius stood up, his hands brushing through the curls that were the colour of his father's and grandfather’s hair, but gave him a very different appearance.

Harry wondered whether he’d had it done for that reason.

He stared at Harry. “You knew? You knew they were together?”

“I did,” Harry agreed.

“So you know my father loved her!”

Harry shook his head. “I thought so. But your father and I had a long history – “

“You think my father would kill someone because of history?” Scorpius’ voice rose. “Do you have any idea how hard my father has worked to restore some sense of decency to the family name? Do you think he would jeopardise that by – by killing someone? No. No way!”

Harry had thought the same. He said nothing.

Scorpius began pacing.

“An accident,” he said. “An accident would explain it. They wouldn’t - I mean, they can’t give him the Kiss for an accident, can they? I mean – “

“We don’t know it was an accident,” Harry felt he had to point out, “and Ginny is still dead, whether it was or wasn’t.”

“But it’s different! Why wouldn’t he say if it was an accident? It doesn’t make sense!”
It made sense to Harry, but it was nothing that he could say to Scorpius. If it was true, Malfoy was almost doing the noble thing. He was keeping Ginny’s name clean.

Harry got up. He didn’t know what else there was to say.

Scorpius rounded on him. “You’re famous for supporting what’s right and just. You can’t let him die because he stole your wife! Not if it was an accident – “

“Look, I’m sorry – “

“Go and see him! Please! Maybe he’ll talk to you. Please!”

Harry took a pinch of floo powder. “I intend to,” he said, nodded, and disappeared into the flames.
An Offer

Harry had just poured a cup of tea the next morning when Mitty told him that Mr Malfoy was at the floo requesting permission to visit.

“Scorpius?” Surely he’d made it clear that he was going to do what the boy wanted.

“Mr Lucius Malfoy, Master Harry Sir,” Mitty said, wringing her hands in apology for having failed to make it clear.

Harry took a good drink of the hot strong tea before answering.

“I’ll come through,” he said, placing a gentle hand on Mitty’s shoulder as he passed to calm her. He was curious, but as ever, even the thought of Malfoy senior provoked an almost tangible sense of distaste in him.

He walked into the parlour – a room used as their floo receiving point, and never for family relaxation, and awaited Lucius’ entrance, standing quietly with his hands folded.

To say that the change in Lucius Malfoy shocked him was an understatement. He had not seen Malfoy in the flesh since the War Trials after the fall of Voldemort, and although his picture had been in the press following his release after his 15 year sentence was served, nothing could have prepared him for this. He did not know whether Malfoy’s appearance was due to his own incarceration or the prospect of the same for his only child.

The man paused for a moment to brush the soot from his robes; Harry had the distinct feeling that he was using the moment to gather himself. Malfoy’s hair, still long, concealed his face, but Harry realised that the fine hair was no longer blond but pure white.

The man raised his head and stood straight, his eyes going directly to his host. Harry kept his shoulders relaxed. His wand was in his sleeve, but he did not fear Malfoy. He was obviously here to ask for help for his son.

He felt the older wizard’s eyes passing over him, assessing him quickly. Saw the hand tighten against his cane.

“My Malfoy,” Harry said calmly. “Please take a seat.”

The few words said so much. Polite and formal, but also a concession to an infirmity that Malfoy would probably prefer not to have recognised. Also, it would be quite obvious that Harry was only according him civility, and not taking him into the family areas of the house.

“I am most obliged, Mr Potter, that you have been kind enough to receive me,” Lucius said quietly, as he settled himself in one of the rather firm armchairs.

Harry was surprised that there was no sarcasm in his tone. He was obviously hiding it, or perhaps he truly had learnt respect during the years since the war.

“You wish to speak to me about Draco,” Harry said, getting straight to the point.

Lucius’ eyes flashed briefly, perhaps at the lack of further inanities.

He seemed to steel himself, his hands grasping the cane in front of him.
“I - yes. Mr Potter, I do not know how I might convince you, but I cannot in any conscience not speak. I do not believe that my son would have killed your wife.”

Harry regarded his old adversary coolly.

“You do not believe me,” Lucius stated.

“I understand and appreciate that you want to support your son.”

“You think I am trying to make up for my past failures with Draco?” Lucius said sharply.

Harry settled back in his chair, and said nothing.

Lucius shifted uncomfortably. “This is not about my past failures,” he said quietly. He gripped the cane tighter. “My son loved Ginevra, Mr Potter. I know you do not want to hear that –”

“What leads you to think that?” Harry asked sharply.

“I am sorry to cause you pain – ”

“I think it is rather too late to worry about the pain your family has inflicted on mine.”

Lucius grimaced, his head bowing as if in defeat.

Harry was again surprised. “Continue. I suspect nothing you can say can worsen the current situation.”

“Very well. Draco told me so almost two years ago; he said that you were aware of their relationship but would not allow a divorce until your youngest child left Hogwarts.” He looked to Harry for confirmation.

“Draco has pleaded guilty,” Harry said, not commenting on Lucius’ statement.

It was an interview unprecedented in Harry’s life. He watched unbelieving as Lucius Malfoy struggled off the edge of the seat – not standing, but falling to his knees. He sat bolt upright in his own chair.

“Mr Potter, I beg that you will accept my life in place of Draco’s,” Malfoy said, and stiffly set his stick to the side and bowed his head to the floor.

Harry had not seen this wizarding custom since the Trials. A wizard had the right to offer his life in exchange for a member of his family. His life and all his goods were forfeit to the person to whom he offered them: the accused would be left with nothing but his (or her) life.

“You do not wait for the trial?” Harry said sharply. “You must believe your son to be guilty.”

Head still on the floor, Lucius answered. “Because of the indignity I have brought upon the family name, I don’t believe my son will get a fair trial.”

He had a point, Harry thought.

“I didn’t think you and Draco were on particularly good terms,” he commented.

“He is my son!” Lucius glanced up, his eyes fierce.

“Do sit up,” Harry said.
“I await your response – “

“You can await my response in the chair,” Harry snapped.

For a man who’d been kneeling, begging, Malfoy still had his pride. He struggled into the seat and tossed his hair back. “Thank you,” he said, his voice tight.

“I’m surprised that Draco told you about his relationship,” Harry said coldly, when Malfoy had settled. “Given that he assured me that you had never been invited inside his house, and that my children would never have to meet you.”

He saw something flicker across Malfoy’s eyes, quickly concealed. He wasn’t sure if it was hurt, humiliation, or a hint of admiration. Harry was rarely ruthless, but Lucius Malfoy brought out the worst in him. Just the sight of him took him back to too many situations when he’d been helpless and Malfoy had taunted him. He owed this man nothing.

"I don’t believe he would have done so. There were – family reasons – for discussing the matter with me,” Malfoy said haughtily.

Harry just looked at him. “If you want my help, Malfoy, you'd better explain.”

“I wish to offer myself in his place!”

“Nice and easy, that,” Harry said. “You look worn out already. You don’t look much like you’ll miss living,” he added conversationally.

Malfoy sat as if frozen.

Harry waited. He’d been rude, but frankly, he found it hard not to feel a spark of pleasure in having got under Malfoy’s skin. But then the man seemed to rally.

“You want the truth: I was merely seeking not to offend you,” he said courteously.

Harry felt his teeth go on edge.

“Really? I’ll be the judge of that.”

“As you wish,” Malfoy bowed his head slightly.

“You want to know why I am offering to exchange my life for Draco’s? Because the family name is important to me –“

Harry snorted.

Malfoy’s face tightened. “Our family tree goes back millennia. I would rather lay down my life than see it die out. Ginevra Weasley was a proven breeder. Her family are – well established.”

“You used to sneer at them,” Harry pointed out.

“I concede that they have done well for themselves,” Malfoy said superciliously. “And the family line is well-documented,” he added, daring Harry to comment.

“I can understand why an alliance with the Weasleys might help the Malfoy name,” Harry said.

Malfoy breathed in sharply. And said nothing.
He was hiding something.

Harry thought back over the conversation.

“Why would you worry about the line dying out? Draco already has an heir. You made no provision for ‘spares’ when you had him.”

“I did not produce a son who refused to further the family line!” Malfoy snapped. “Are you happy now that you have all the family’s dirty little secrets?”

“I find that highly unlikely,” Harry answered, almost automatically. What was going on here? “Scorpius refuses to bring any more Malfoys into the world?”

“You really have a taste for humiliation, Mr Potter. I had no idea. Very well, if this is your price. My grandson has unnatural interests. His father refuses to prevail upon him to marry and continue the line. Draco is, therefore, essential. And I am not.”


“As you say,” Malfoy said with distaste.

“I see.”

Harry got up and walked across the room. He could not believe Malfoy was so cold-blooded. This was not about caring for his own son, just ensuring that the Malfoy name didn’t die out.

He swung round. “You could marry again yourself.”

Malfoy’s face became even more pinched.

“Do not tell me that you’re mourning for Narcissa and can’t face it, when you expect your son to produce a string of heirs despite the fact that the woman he professed to love is dead. A woman who he’s killed, by the way.”

“As I said before, I do not believe Draco killed her. That is beside the point, however.”

Harry felt his breath taken away by the sheer gall of the man.

“The point is that, should he live, he will recover, and another woman will come along. He is young and has, fortunately, made his own wealth: my death and the transfer of the Malfoy holdings to you should not hamper his chances of finding a suitable wife. The holdings are quite considerable. I have had Gringotts prepare a list for you,” he said, putting an envelope on the table beside him.

“You think money will tempt me to spare the murderer of my wife?”

“Come, Mr Potter. We both know that you had already agreed to a divorce. The grieving husband is hardly an appropriate act.”

“I’d be obliged if you’d leave,” Harry said, standing. He could barely contain his outrage.

Malfoy apparently realised he had gone too far. He too stood, gripping his cane tightly.

“You want humiliation? I am unable to father children. Would you like to laugh in my face, oh Saviour of the Wizarding World? My condition was a punishment from the Dark Lord. I have paid for my crimes, Mr Potter. Don’t make my son pay for something he didn’t do.”
Harry was truly shocked that Malfoy had revealed so much about himself and his family. He really must be desperate.

“If your son didn’t kill Ginny, who do you think did? A random passer-by? A Death Eater going for revenge?”

Malfoy regarded Harry. He seemed to be considering the question for the first time. “I think we can discount the first,” he said at last. “The second might be one possibility.”

Harry’s look sharpened. “Is there something you’re not telling me?”

“There are new movements on the rise. I am not interested in their activities, but that does not mean that they do not exist.”

“You’ve been approached? You – you’re making this up to throw the blame off Draco! He’s admitted it.”

“When his mind has been disturbed by grief,” Malfoy said.

Harry paced.

“I’ll go see him. I’m not promising you anything, Malfoy.”

Lucius Malfoy bent his head in acquiescence. “And I am promising you my life and my fortune if my son lives. You have my oath.”
Harry sat in the office of the Head Auror, Ramsey Felton, sipping tea from a delicate cup whose handle was so small he could not get his finger through it.

“Please accept my condolences,” Mr Potter, Felton said smoothly. “I’m sorry I’ve not been able to deal with…the case…myself.”

“There’s no reason why you should have done,” Harry said. “In fact, I only called to see Auror Franklin – “

“You’re quite happy with the – the services provided?” Felton asked.

How could you be happy with people telling you your wife had been murdered and then running riot all over your home? Harry thought.

“Of course,” he answered. “In fact,” he continued, “they were so keen that they wanted to have the trial last week. I asked them to postpone so that we could have the funeral – “

“Yes, I heard. That’s all – over – is it?” Felton said delicately.

Harry nodded.

“A quiet affair, then? I didn’t see anything in the press, I don’t think?”

“Family and friends,” Harry agreed quietly. “They’re the only people that matter.”

“Her fans might be rather disappointed,” Felton suggested, leaning forward to help himself to a chocolate digestive.

“It was a funeral, not a damn quidditch match!” Harry snapped.

Felton looked at him over the rim of his glasses. “Quite, quite. Still, your wife was very well known. A very popular player,” he took a sip of his tea. “I expect fans will want to visit her grave. Show their respects, you know.”

“They’d show more respect if they left us alone,” Harry said tightly. He hadn’t thought about a grave. There was no body. He didn’t care about fans, but would the kids mind that there was no grave to go to? He hadn’t even thought of that.

“So,” Felton prompted after a moment.

“Er? Oh,” Harry said. “I wanted to ask if I might see Malfoy, actually. When it was convenient, of course.”

“You want to see the accused? Before or after the trial?”

“What? Well, before, I suppose,” Harry said. “I’m not sure when the trial has been rescheduled for – I was going to ask Auror Franklin.”

“The Wizengamot is in recess,” Felton said, with the sort of tone that implied Harry ought to know. “They won’t be sitting again for a month, and I don’t know if the schedules have been drawn up yet.”
Harry felt unaccountably relieved. Somehow, although every day had seemed like a week, everything had felt so rushed.

“Then before, if that’s alright.”

“You’ll have to hand in your wand,” Felton said ominously.

Did he think Harry planned to hex Malfoy? If so, why on earth wasn’t he stopping him visiting at all?

“Of course,” Harry said. “I only want to talk to him.”

“He has already confessed,” Felton pointed out.

Harry nodded. “I know. But I assume that means the trial will be quick. I - I need to know why,” he said quietly.

Felton looked at him, and Harry thought he could see compassion in his face. He didn’t think he deserved it, but his tongue felt locked against the roof of his mouth.

“Don’t get your hopes up, Mr Potter: I understand he hasn’t been very communicative.”

Harry nodded.

Felton strode across the room and opened the door.

“Get one of the lads to take Mr Potter down to the holding cells, please, Doris,” Harry heard, followed by a muttered conversation that he couldn’t quite pick up. Felton came back in, leaving the door open.

“One of our Aurors will take you down in a moment, Mr Potter, if you’d like to wait with Mrs Smetherwick, here. I’m sorry to rush you, but I have an appointment with – “

Harry got straight to his feet. “No, no, thank you for your time.”

They shook hands briefly and Harry settled himself in the outer office. Mrs Smetherwick looked very relieved when there was a knock at the outer door and a tall young man in very pristine Auror robes stepped in.

The Auror, who introduced himself as Filius Stubbington, shook hands with Harry. Harry was quite impressed, as they walked down to the cell, that the Auror didn’t seem to need to fill every moment with chatter, or with condolences that he couldn’t possibly mean.

At the cells, the warder seemed very flustered to see Harry.

“I think the prisoner is sleeping,” he said, eyes darting every which way.

“It’s the middle of the morning. I think you can wake him up,” Stubbington said calmly.

“I haven’t had orders – “

“Head Auror Felton approved the visit. I was asked to accompany Mr Potter.”

“That’s as well as may be,” blustered the man, “but the visiting room isn’t available. Daresay Auror Felton didn’t know about that, seeing as no-one bothers to check with us these days –“
“I’m perfectly happy to visit Malfoy in his cell,” Harry said firmly.

“Staff are on tea-break,” the warder said. “If you come back this afternoon –“

“Do your staff have a tea-break from now until after lunch?” Stubbington snapped.

“If I’m seeing Malfoy in his cell then I won’t need to put any of your guards out,” Harry reasoned. “I’m sure your security is excellent.”

The warder suddenly looked Harry over. A gleam of approval came into his eye. “You’d like a few minutes alone with him?” He glanced at his watch. “Edwards isn’t due back on duty for twenty minutes. That suit you?”

Taken aback by the about-face, Harry nodded. He slipped his wand out of its holster and held it across his palm.

“Goodness gracious, you don’t want to go in there without that!” the warder said, shocked.

Something was wrong and Harry wasn’t quite sure what. He kept his wand in his hand; the warder held out a key to Stubbington.

“Tenth door down on the right,” he said, and flipped the page on his copy of The Prophet as he sat down again.

It was only a moment before they reached the room.

Harry felt the wards even before Stubbington opened the door. The silencing spell was so strong that Harry could not even hear the sound of the lock turning.

The door opened. The man sitting curled up with his back to the wall at the far corner of the bed didn’t look up; Harry wondered for a moment if the spell operated inside the cell too, which would be a nuisance. And ridiculous, he thought, as he stepped in and heard the sound of his shoes against the stone floor.

The prisoner still didn’t move.

“Malfoy,” Harry said.

Instantly, the head was thrown back. Malfoy almost fell off the bed as he scrambled forward, then lurched across the floor and fell at Harry’s feet, head bowed.

“Potter, kill me.”

“What?”

Malfoy’s head had slumped against his knee, his whole posture that of a supplicant.

“Please,” the cracking voice whispered.

Harry could feel Malfoy’s body shaking. Stubbington had his wand pointed at Malfoy. Harry fought the urge to drop down beside the man and offer comfort.

“Come and sit down, Malfoy,” he said, voice commanding.

Harry headed to the table, but Malfoy stayed where he was.
Harry looked at him: he could not believe the man could look such a wreck: although his face was hidden, his hair was matted and dull, his clothes rumpled. He smelt.

Stubbington prodded him with his wand. “Get up and do as Mr Potter says,” he ordered.

Malfoy rose to his feet. Harry knew at once that he was hurt. He recognised like a visceral blow that the awkward way Malfoy moved was in protection of injuries.

“Look at me!” he said sharply.

Malfoy raised his face.

Harry took in the yellowing bruises to Malfoy’s eye and temple, the crusted blood at his lip.

Malfoy didn’t even flinch as Stubbington cast at him.

“He’s got three broken ribs, his right ulna is broken, severe abdominal bruising and damage to his kidneys,” Stubbington said. “It must hurt like hell to piss.”

He looked across at Harry.

“Go and get a mediwizard,” Harry said firmly.

“It doesn’t matter,” Malfoy said, one hand gripping the edge of the table.

“Of course it matters!” Harry bit out. “Did the guards do this?”

“Forget it.”

“The Aurors? Tell me, Malfoy! This is not acceptable!”

“Don’t you understand?” Malfoy snapped. “I deserved it! I killed her! I killed her,” he whispered.

Harry felt cold, frozen. He had known, of course, that Malfoy had said that he was guilty: to hear it from his own mouth was something else.

He grabbed the single chair and thrust it behind Malfoy.

“Sit.”

Malfoy glanced at him and lowered himself shakily.

Stubbington was still hovering.

“Go and get the mediwizard,” Harry said wearily. “I promise I won’t hurt him.” He thought for a moment. “Firecall St Mungo’s and get Susan Bones, if she’s there. She’s honest and trustworthy, and we were both at school with her.”

Stubbington gave Harry an assessing look and then exited.

He went up further in Harry’s estimation.

Harry took a coin from his pocket and transfigured it into a chair, then sat himself on it facing Malfoy.

“I need to know what happened,” he said quietly.
Malfy looked up. His eyes were haunted. Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen anyone look so wretched.

“I killed her,” he whispered. “I - I swear I didn’t mean to.” His Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed. “But what the hell does that matter? She’s dead, and I killed her. I loved her,” he choked.

Something in Harry’s chest loosened. He was pretty sure Malfy was telling the truth. In fact, he had thought it might have been an accident, but he hadn’t been sure. It was a relief to know that he hadn’t misjudged Malfy.

“Tell me,” Harry prompted.

Malfy shook his head. “Please. I can’t. I can’t think about it. I – oh God, Harry, she’s dead!”

Malfy wailed.

Harry grabbed him by the shoulders. “She is. Ginny’s dead, and there’s no going back. We held the Funeral Rites for her on Friday.”

A gut-wrenching sob tore through the man in front of him.

“We did the Old Rites. In the house. In the room. Molly and Arthur suggested it. I couldn’t have her ghost coming back like….like I found her.”

Malfy had his head in his hands, nodding. “Yes. Oh gods, thank you!” He glanced up. “I told them I was guilty. I am guilty. Nothing needs to come out at the trial. They don’t need to go into any detail because of the plea: I checked that. The children don’t need to know. I’m so sorry!”

Harry was silent, taking it in. “Scorpius came to see me,” he said at last.

Malfy looked bewildered. “Scorpius? Why?”

“He doesn’t believe that you would have killed her. He knows that you loved her.”

Malfy stood up shakily, holding on to the table and then the back of the chair as he took a step or two, turning his back to Harry.

“I – I need to ask you – I know it isn’t fair – I need…”

“What is it?”

“I know – God, I know I have no right – but – Scorpius. He won’t have anyone. My father….my father isn’t…fond of him. His mother…I don’t know. She’s wrapped up with her new family: one of her children is sickly, she can’t think of anything else. I – he – will you keep an eye out for him? I know there’s no reason why you should – but he’s innocent in all this! Please, Harry, he’s not responsible for any of this! All the work – I tried to make the Malfoy name okay, but now – what with my father, and me, and, and he’s….he’s….people are going to find reasons to treat him badly – ”. He wrung his hands.

Harry’s heart was moved. He was right, Scorpius would suffer. He stood up and put his hand on Malfy’s shoulder. “I will,” he said. “You needn’t worry about Scorpius, alright?”

Between them, the knowledge that Malfy would be Kissed was taken as given.

Malfy’s hand grabbed Harry’s arm. “Thank you,” he whispered.
“Sit down, please,” Harry said. “If you fall down they’ll think I hit you.”

Malfoy choked a laugh. “They’d not think the worse of you for that.”

“No,” Harry agreed. “I’m pretty sure that’s what they were expecting me to do.” He tensed up, and then continued, “Draco, I can’t not know. I need to see exactly what happened.”

Malfoy jerked. “You know – you don’t want to see that – “

“I need to,” Harry said. “I need to know exactly, not to have the nightmares and…it’s better to have facts.”

“But – “

“I know the ‘but’.”

“I’m sorry,” Malfoy said.

“That you could give her what I couldn’t? It was a relief,” Harry said quietly. “Will you allow me to look?”

Malfoy gripped his hair, his whole body tight, then raised his head and nodded.

Harry didn’t waste any time. “Legimens!”

The scenes flashed through Harry’s brain. He felt his heart pounding, but still he pushed on. He didn’t want to look, to witness what he did, but he forced himself to see it all.

He pulled out and staggered away.

“I’m sorry,” Malfoy said again, voice tight.

Harry couldn’t say anything. He turned away, shaking.

“I’ve got to go.”

He lurched out of the cell. Several doorways along, he leant against the wall, getting his breath back, trying not to be sick.

He straightened, walking back towards the warder.

“All done?” the man grinned. “Don’t worry, Sir, we’ll make sure he doesn’t complain.”

Harry punched him.
Harry Seeks Help

Harry slept badly that night. The next one, Albus was out with friends. Harry drank far too much fire whisky, which helped him get to sleep, but didn’t help at all with the dreams that had him sweating and turning in his sheets. He awoke the next morning with a foul and furred mouth and a thumping head.

After a long shower and a thorough scrub of his tongue and teeth, topped off with a breath-freshening charm, he drank two large mugs of tea, and said to Albus, who was munching his way through a bowl of cereal, “I’m heading in to work.”

“Good thing,” Albus said. “It helps. You can be normal and not have to think.”

Harry could have hugged him in that moment.

The day passed busily, with Harry going over the back-orders, and correspondence. There were several condolence letters from customers, though all had a hint of, “so when will my order be ready?” about them.

Janine fussied around, till Harry decided enough was enough.

“I’m going to finish Wedgewood’s trunk,” he announced. It was the trunk he’d been working on when the Aurors had called.

“He’s asked twice about it,” Janine nodded, looking somewhat relieved herself.

It was exhausting work. Harry sunk himself into it, thinking of nothing but the magic, the space, the need for permanency, the spells to make it expand and shrink to fit the need.

It was almost seven o’clock when he came out.

Janine was sitting flipping through a magazine.

“You needn’t have waited,” he said, surprised.

“I had time off when you were away,” she shrugged. “You kept paying me.”

“Of course I did,” Harry said. “It was hardly your fault the shop was shut. Thank you,” he added.

“There’s tea,” Janine motioned to a tray with a kneazle-shaped tea cosy, mug and milk jug. She stood up. “If it’s alright, I’ll go now. I’m meeting Stephen in that new bar down Philosopher’s Alley.”

“Have a good time,” Harry said encouragingly, pulling off the cosy and reaching for the pot. “And come in late tomorrow, if you want. I appreciate it: thanks, Janine.”

She smiled for the first time that day. “Thanks, Harry. I might save the offer for another time, though.”

Harry laughed, and she was gone.

Later, he wrote a letter to Lily, sitting at the kitchen table while he ate a sandwich. Albus was out
again. Harry was glad that his son didn’t feel that he needed to mollycoddle him.

He gave the whisky a miss, deciding instead to do some weights. The boys had asked for them first, when they’d started hitting puberty and wanted to impress the girls. Over time, they’d set up a room in Grimmauld Place with various items of exercise equipment, a sound system and DVD player to watch muggle films. Harry didn’t feel like a film, but turned on the music, losing himself in the exercise and the beat.

He showered, coming down to find Albus sitting reading a book in the sitting room. They chatted for a while before Harry headed up to bed. It was another strange thing, he thought, going to bed before your kids, but Albus was a man now, and Harry was tired.

He fell asleep almost at once, but the dreams came again. It was in the middle of one that he sat up, shocked and with his heart racing. He got up and went to the loo, then headed downstairs to make tea. He sat at the kitchen table, thinking, going over everything he had seen in Malfoy’s brain.

He was so wound up that he knew he would never get back to sleep. He went down to his workroom at the back of the house, looking through the pieces of wood he had there. Although most of his bigger pieces and his better tools were at the shop, he always kept some at home. He’d hoped, when the children were younger, that they might get involved, that he might teach them some of the woodworking skills he had learnt, but although they had all had a go, the interest had been fleeting.

He spent the next few hours planing the wood, sanding and smoothing. He watched as the darkness of night gave way to the greyness of early dawn, and then the burst of colour as the sun rose over the wall and flooded into the garden at the back of the house. He put the wood away, went and showered again, then came down to breakfast to find Albus reading The Prophet at the table.

“Coffee in the pot,” Albus said, munching through some toast. “We’re almost out of bread. Shall I get some at lunch-time?”

Harry headed into work and left Janine a note, then strolled round to the Leaky Cauldron. It was quiet at that time of the morning; Hannah was carrying out a steaming plate of sausage, eggs and bacon to an elderly wizard tucked in by the fire, and smiled welcomingly at Harry, beckoning him to go behind the bar. Harry dipped under the counter and pushed through the swing door to the kitchen. Polly, one of the Longbottom’s house elves, looked up from stirring a cauldron, and bobbed a bow at him. “Mr Potter, sir, can I gets you a coffee? Or some tea? There’s sausages –“

“No, thank you, Polly,” Harry put a gentle hand on her shoulder. “Please don’t let me disturb you. I just want to ask Hannah a favour.”

“Anything, Harry,” Hannah said, coming in and giving him a huge hug. “How are you?” She held him at arm’s length to have a good look at him.

“I’ve gone back to work,” he said. “Well, apart from today.”

“Good. Now, what can I do for you?”

“Can I use your floo? This one? In private?”

“Sure,” Hannah said, her voice surprised.
“It’s nothing illegal,” Harry assured her. “But the house has been under surveillance and I don’t feel comfortable to invade anyone else’s privacy from there.”

“No problem, Harry. Polly,” she called, “is that stew leavable? Pop upstairs, would you, and give Dotty a hand.”

“Yes, mistress,” the elf said, bowing to both the humans and popping out of sight.

“Come and have a bite with me when you’re done,” Hannah said, gave him a quick kiss on the cheek and left.

Harry swung the stew to the side and threw some floo powder into the fire.

“Villa Olorosa,” he called.

A couple of moments later a head appeared in the flames, peering through inquisitively into the kitchen.

“Harry?” The voice was startled.

“Hi Kingsley,” Harry said. “I know it’s early there – I wanted to catch you before work. Do you have a few moments?”

Kingsley looked hard at Harry. “Can you give me ten minutes? I think better when I’ve had a shave.”

Harry laughed. “I’m here in The Leaky kitchen. Just let me know when you’re ready. I’m so sorry to put you out –“

“No problem. I’ll put some fresh coffee on. See you in a moment.”

Harry pushed the cauldron over the fire and stirred the stew, then wandered around the kitchen looking at the various notices before realising that the cauldron was in the way. He scribbled a quick note for Hannah and Polly so that they’d know he wasn’t going to return through their floo; he didn’t want to hold up their business.

A couple of minutes later, the fire flared, Kingsley beckoned and Harry stepped through.

The kitchen at the other end was surprisingly cool, but the back door was open, and the windows, and the warm air of Northern Spain washed through. Harry brushed down his robes and took Kingsley’s outstretched hand.

“Good to see you, Harry, though I’m so sorry about Ginny.”

Harry nodded. Kingsley’s straightforward manner was very welcome. He’d been amazed at how many people said nothing, or even crossed the street, to avoid mentioning the enormous elephant in the room.

“Take a seat,” Kingsley said, pointing at the kitchen table. He poured two coffees, the delicious aroma of freshly ground beans filling the air, and tipped some biscotti onto a plate, bringing them over to the table. Harry took his cup, added a spoonful of sugar to the dark brew, and sipped appreciatively.

He hadn’t seen Kingsley for years. It was a surprise that he looked as if he’d hardly aged at all. His head was still bald, his ear still pierced. His robe was lightweight and open, and underneath he was
wearing a green shirt and jeans. Harry wondered if he usually bothered with a robe or had put it on because of his visit.

Kingsley didn’t push. He’d always been patient. Harry helped himself to a biscuit and nibbled it.

“Wow, these are delicious!” he said in surprise.

Kingsley laughed, and took one for himself. “The recipe came from an old witch down in the village. Not bad, if I do say so myself.”

“You made them? I’m impressed.”

“Amazing the things you find yourself doing when you aren’t fighting a war,” Kingsley said. “I expect people say the same about what you make.”

“Well, they might be surprised, I don’t know about impressed.”

“You’re being modest. You’ve built up quite a reputation.”

“Thank you,” Harry said. It was true, he had. He was proud of his pieces.

All too soon the coffee cups were empty.

“I’ve come to you under – well, not under false pretences,” Harry began.

“Oh?” Kingsley prompted.

“I’m really sorry to invade your privacy – both of you, that is, but I really need to see Professor Snape.”

Kingsley didn’t move, but it was as if his whole body had suddenly geared for action.

“I know he lives here with you,” Harry said quickly, before Kingsley could deny it. “And I wouldn’t have bothered you – or him – if it wasn’t important. Really important.” He stood up. “I need to talk to him about Draco Malfoy,” he said quietly. “If he’s willing to talk to me, please ask him to contact me.”

Harry made a move towards the fire.

At the same moment, it felt like there was a disturbance in the air. Snape was suddenly visible, sitting quietly on the bench under the window.

He looked hard at Harry. “You knew I was here,” he said.

“I – yes, I’ve known for some time – “

“I mean, Mr Potter,” Snape interrupted in his deep tones, “you knew that I was in the room.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

Snape looked at him approvingly.

“I deal with space,” Harry shrugged. “I’m usually aware of things filling it: whether it feels right.”

“How long have you known Severus was here? How did you find out?” Kingsley asked, moving up a bit as Severus came over to the table and pulled out the chair next to him.
“Um, I found out a couple of years after the war?”

Snape and Kingsley exchanged looks.

“Want to expand on that?” Kingsley said.

“Well, I was a bit paranoid after the war. At first, I was too – sort of shocked – I think, to do anything except practical stuff. I threw myself into that – rebuilding of Hogwarts, all those sorts of things that needed doing. I felt terribly guilty about you, Professor, but I tried not to think about it. I’m sorry. I tried not to think about a lot of things that just made me feel guilty, that I’d failed people. I thought I’d go mad if I thought about them too much.”

“Survivors’ guilt,” Kingsley nodded. “There were many of us suffering from that. You feel glad to be alive and guilty that you’re glad, because others are dead. You compare the value of your life with theirs. It’s hard.”

Harry nodded, relieved and surprised to hear Kingsley talk so easily of it. He had never shared his feelings about it with anyone. “It seemed so unfair that Remus and Tonks had died. I couldn’t bear to think of Teddy orphaned.”

“As you were?” Snape said.

Harry nodded again. “I had to make certain that he’d have a happy upbringing. And the Weasleys were so upset about Fred. If I’d died – stayed dead – if I could have done something to prevent their deaths – it wouldn’t really have mattered to anyone. Not for long.”

“You really do have a hero complex, don’t you?” Snape said, his old sneer still in place.

It didn’t anger Harry. There was something so familiar about a cutting Snape.

“And I love you too,” he grinned.

He saw Snape’s eyes widen for a fraction of a second, and was glad that he had surprised the man by not rising to the bait.


“Well, suddenly eighteen months had passed, and then I heard that you’d left. I was absolutely shocked. Really. You were acting Minister for Magic: you were so good at it; I was sure it was just a formality before you’d be confirmed in role.”

“You’re very kind,” Harry said.

High praise indeed,” murmured Snape.

“Yes, I understand that now, though I didn’t know at the time, so that made it seem even more
dodgy to me. So I asked around for information and got nowhere. Someone let slip that you’d moved abroad and that really got me wondering.”

“What was so odd about that?” Snape asked. “Your Muggle relatives moved to the Costa Brava, didn’t they?”

Harry raised his eyebrows at Snape knowing about that.

“They did, but only because they were terrified out of their wits by the war and the Costa Brava is like Surrey with sun,” Harry retorted.

Kingsley grinned. “Nothing wrong with a bit of sun, eh, Severus?”

Harry looked at Snape, taking in his rolled up shirt sleeves, the surprisingly olive tone of his skin, and the glow of health about him, something that he’d never thought possible for the man.

“It certainly seems to suit you both,” he agreed.

Snape looked at him sharply, perhaps checking to see whether Harry was mocking them. Apparently satisfied, he prompted, “You haven’t explained anything yet.”

“I followed an owl,” Harry said bluntly.

Both of them looked at him.

“I put Kingsley’s name on an envelope, gave it to the owl, and followed it. Nobody would give me your address, so it seemed the logical thing to try.”

Snape and Kingsley once again exchanged a look. Both their faces were dancing with amusement.

“Did you have any idea where it was going?” Snape asked.

“None at all,” Harry grinned. “But as I knew you were abroad I’d got an emergency port-key with me, just in case I found myself mid-ocean and unable to go on.”

“How long did it take you?” Kingsley asked. “You’re arse must’ve been killing you after that long on a broomstick.”

Snape snorted, and Kingsley shushed him, but Harry chuckled. “It bloody was,” he said. “Good thing that owl stopped a couple of times, is all I can say. Bad enough when your arse is agony, but even worse when you’re dying for a piss as well.”

Both men laughed, and Harry suddenly found it surprisingly comfortable sitting here with these two men. His face sobered as he remembered why he had come. Snape spotted the moment his mood changed.

“You’d better tell us why you’re here, Potter. You can explain the rest later.”

Harry nodded. “Thank you.” He took a breath and looked at Snape. “It’s about Draco Malfoy.”

Harry could not tell anything from Snape’s face.

“I don’t know what the situation is now, but I know in the past you made Narcissa Malfoy a Vow with regard to Draco.”

“Are you worried about what will happen to me if Draco is Kissed?” Snape asked, surprised.
Snape sat back on his seat. “Of course not.” His acerbic tone was bitter.

“No, it’s not that,” Harry said quickly. “It’s – I don’t think he did it.”

Both men stared at him.

Harry sat there awkwardly. He hated the things that he was going to have to reveal, but then he was going to be asking even more of Snape.

“I visited him in his cell,” Harry said. “He was beside himself. Asked me to kill him. I asked him to let me use Legilimency to see what had happened.”

“You wanted to see?” Kingsley said in astonishment. “A man you hated murdering your wife?”

Harry shook his head. “Two years ago,” he said quietly, “Malfoy came to see me. He wanted to marry Ginny.” He took a deep breath. “I knew a bit about him already – he’d owned the team Ginny plays for for several years, so I saw him now and then, if I went to games, sometimes socially. I knew that he owned The Prophet, had worked hard to make up for the past. I looked into what he was upto a lot more when he put himself in the position where he might become stepfather to my children.” He looked up at both men, who were sitting, quiet, attentive, and obviously taken aback. “Everything seemed to be for real. I couldn’t fault all the efforts that he’d made to bring respectability back to his family name. And he genuinely seemed to love Ginny. When they told me he’d been arrested at the scene, I – I was shocked. I couldn’t believe that he had done everything to just get back at me, it seemed ridiculous. Then he pleaded guilty, and I knew he hadn’t killed her on purpose.”

“I feel like we’ve missed half a dozen steps of the argument here,” Kingsley said. “Why would him pleading guilty make you doubt that he’d done it? Was he hoping you’d take pity on him?”

“He asked me to kill him!” Harry flashed. “On his knees, begging me!”

“You’d better tell us the rest, Potter,” Severus said quietly. “Do I take it you have mastered Legilimency? What did you see?”

“I’ve learnt a little bit more. Not enough. That’s why I’ve come to you,” Harry said.

Snape raised his brows. “The Ministry must have any number of Legilimens on staff, I’ve no doubt.”

“None that know how to use it with Veritaserox,” Harry said quietly.

Snape was very still, Shacklebolt silent.

“It sounds to me as if someone has been talking out of turn,” Kingsley said.

Harry shook his head. “I overheard it being discussed at the Monaco Potions Symposium.”

“Mr Potter, it is hard enough for me to believe that you have studied Legilimency. If you tell me you are also a Potions Master, I will begin to worry that you did not vanquish The Dark Lord after all.”

Harry laughed. “No worries there, he’s gone. Why, was he any good at potions? I thought he had you for that.”
“He had a sound knowledge of the essentials; more than that, even,” Snape said calmly. “Enough to make it difficult for me to substitute ingredients to alter the nature or efficacy of the potions I was asked to make.”

Harry nodded. In the years after the war, he had often thought with horror about Snape’s role. He could not imagine how the man had managed to live on the knife edge of always fearing discovery, of withstanding the onslaught of hatred of the side that he secretly worked for, and that was before you even thought of the things he must have done to remain in Voldemort’s favour, of the punishments he must have received, and the skill he must have used to extract the information that he brought back to Dumbledore. And as for what Dumbledore had asked of him at the end….That Snape could look so good was a testament to his resilience. Something that Harry envied deeply at this point.

“Well, I’m afraid my own knowledge has only extended to household and kids’ medical potions, so you can feel perfectly safe. I was there because I was asked to make a potions’ box for the annual prize,” he said.

“And you were required to deliver it yourself?” Snape raised a haughty eyebrow.

The old taunts about his fame rose up to confront him, the implication that the box had been bought because of his name only, but Harry quelled the bite of annoyance. “I hope I have built a reputation for my work, rather than because of my name,” he said quietly. “All my more specialised pieces are custom made, and I like to see where they’re going and what they’re to be used for. In the case of the prize, I asked to go along so that I could make custom adjustments to the winner’s requirements.”

Snape continued to look at him. “You wouldn’t need to attend the conference to do that. Surely the winner could come back to you afterwards?”

“True,” Harry agreed. “Let’s say that I don’t make all the possibilities known unless I approve of where my work is going.”

“You’re very cautious,” Kingsley commented, after a moment.

“I’ll never forget Moody being trapped in that trunk,” Harry said.

There was a moment’s silence.

“So you know about Veritaserox,” Snape said. “Why do you think it would be appropriate to use it on Draco Malfoy? What did you see when you used Legilimency?”

“I think his memories have been tampered with,” Harry said. “I didn’t realise what was off at first. It was only later that I realised that they weren’t real.”

“It takes a very skilled Legilimens to notice that sort of fact, unless it had been done very badly, and the sort of people who can implant false memories aren’t the sort to make a botch of it,” Snape commented.

“I understand that,” Harry said. He rubbed his hand over his chin. “Look, I know this sounds silly, but – she – Ginny – in the memory, her ring was on the wrong finger.”

“Explain,” Kingsley prompted.

“Ginny told me she always transferred her wedding ring to her other hand when she was with Malfoy.”
“I know this is intrusive to ask, Harry, but why would she tell you that? Why would she do it?”

“We were still friends,” Harry sighed. “Ginny and I. We still talked, you know, and got on alright. They wanted to marry but I asked them to wait until Lily had left school. It was probably unfair, I don’t know. It seems it now, now that they don’t have years of future together. At the time, I just didn’t want the children to have to face all the rubbish in the press, all the looks and comments, whilst they were at school. Once you’re out of that environment, it’s easier to deal with things. You’re not forced to be with people you don’t want to be with twenty-four hours a day. Lily finishes this summer. They agreed to wait, but obviously they were continuing to see each other. But they were discreet.”

“You sound remarkably accepting of the situation,” Snape said. “Were you also having an affair?”

“Me?” Harry’s surprise was evident. “No.”

“Your wife had been having a relationship with another man for more than two years and you hadn’t sought…comfort…elsewhere?” Snape raised an eyebrow.

“Look,” Harry said heatedly, then halted. “No,” he said at last.

Snape continued to stare at him.

“I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Harry snapped. “Maybe my sex-drive is almost non-existent. Maybe that’s none of your business!”

“You’re likely to be asked this sort of question if this comes to a full trial,” Kingsley said gently. “Which it will if Malfoy changes his guilty plea.”

“Yes,” Harry said, leaning forward, “but don’t you see? I know he had implanted memories, but even if they were real, he could still plead manslaughter. He hasn’t. He’s trying to be honourable, I think, to stop Ginny’s name being harmed. Maybe to protect the children.”

“I think there’s a lot you need to tell us,” Kingsley said. “I need fortification.” He got up to make some more coffee. “Harry? Severus?”

“Thanks,” Harry said.

He sat there wondering if he wanted to involve Kingsley in all this. He had come for Snape’s help, and hadn’t really thought about Kingsley being involved. Which had been really stupid of him. Kingsley was an ex-Auror and ex-Minister for Magic. More than that, he hadn’t really thought about the fact that he was Snape’s partner. Had been for years and years. There was that moving-as-a-unit thing about them that Hermione and Ron shared.

It was as if the two men at exactly the same moment became aware of his concerns, without him saying a word. Kingsley turned round suddenly, back to the counter, and even as he opened his mouth, Snape said, ‘I’d prefer Kingsley to be involved in this: an extra opinion, and one as skilled as his is, is worth having. Would you be willing to put your memories into a pensieve, rather than letting me use Legilimency on you? We have one here.”

Harry supposed it made sense. And he trusted Kingsley. It was just – it was bad enough opening himself up to the embarrassment to Snape. Though he would have to get used to that if he went ahead and tried to save Malfoy’s life. He nodded assent, and after another cup of the strong coffee, he found himself, wand pointed at his own head, retrieving the memories and wafting them down into the bowl of the pensieve.
“Ready?” Kingsley said, moments later.

“You two go in,” Harry said. “I’ll wait in your garden, if I may.”

“You’re not coming with us?” Kingsley asked, surprised.

“I can’t watch that with you,” Harry said. He took a deep breath. “You’ll have questions. I’ll do my best to answer them as best I can.” And he turned and headed out to the garden.

His brain felt too light, too heavy. He knew that the adrenaline was jacking up his system, and he forced himself to walk a little way. There were the expected herbs in the garden, but surprisingly, flowers bursting riotously everywhere, pouring in cascades down crumbling walls and bursting up from the dry soil in a vigorous clamber for the sun. In the distance, vines or olive trees, he didn’t know which was which really, followed the curves of the hills, their neatly planted lines forming patterns that jazzed his eyes.

He sniffed a purple flower dangling in front of him, concentrating on the heady scent.

The sun burned hot against his skin, the breeze warm but soothing. He wondered how the men had found such a wonderful spot.

It was a good while before he felt, rather than saw, Kingsley at the back door. He knew they must have taken a few minutes to discuss what they had seen between them.

He turned and went inside. They all sat down at the table. The atmosphere was heavy, serious.

“I’m surprised that you even noticed where your wife’s ring was, given the rest of the memory,” Snape said.

“I didn’t, until I woke up in bed and it hit me like a sledgehammer.”

“Am I to assume that you believe that the memories up until the ring changes position are real, and the ones after are false?” Snape asked.

“Uh…” Harry’s mouth opened and shut like a fish. He tried to think about the memory, but with it gone from his head….

“He needs the memory back,” Kingsley said, pulling the heavy bowl across the table.

“Well, surely you’ve thought about it independent to the memory,” Snape said. “You have looked at it in a pensieve?” he added sharply.

“N-no,” Harry admitted.

Snape drew himself up in a manner that was very familiar.

“‘You expect us – me – to help you when you haven’t even looked over the memory yourself?’”

“I thought you might be interested in helping Draco Malfoy,” Harry flashed. “In what way do you imagine it is helping me, to expose my every dark and dirty secret to you?”

“Your every dark and dirty secret?” Kingsley said curiously.

Harry flushed.

“You will explain. Then you will enter the pensieve with us. Then we will discuss it,” Snape said
“All right,” Harry said shakily. And then said nothing.

“Tell us about your relationship with your wife,” Kingsley prompted. “You said you were friends.”

“You also suggested that your sex-drive was non-existent,” Snape said. “Is that why she turned to Malfoy?”

“I said it might have been,” Harry said, “not that it was!”

“Same thing,” Snape said. “No man would suggest such a thing unless it was an issue. You couldn’t get it up and she fell into Malfoy’s waiting arms?”

Harry gripped his hands tightly together. His jaw hurt with how hard his teeth were clenched.

“Severus,” Kingsley chided. “A lot of men have problems in that department from time to time,” he said soothingly to Harry. “Was that the reason she wanted a divorce?”

“Did you seek any help?” Severus asked.

“Look,” Harry said fiercely. He took a breath. “I could have sex. Just – just not the sort she wanted.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Explain.”

“God! It was alright at first, okay? We made three kids, for Merlin’s sake! But Ginny liked – she liked – and then – “

“Potter, just spill it,” Snape said wearily.

“She liked it rough. Especially, she liked bondage. I – I couldn’t be tied up. I couldn’t tie her up.”

He breathed heavily.

“You could not submit yourself to another,” Snape commented.

“Look, I was Voldemort’s prisoner more than once. Restrained whilst my blood was taken to bring him back to life. Locked in the bloody Malfoy dungeon! I’m sorry, maybe years with a therapist might have sorted it out, but I don’t want to ever be that helpless again. I wasn’t willing to have ‘help’ to cure something that seems perfectly reasonable to me. And I’m not willing to put someone else in that position. I’m not interested in power games. I’ve had enough of that.”

Snape leant back in his chair.

“Not even to save your marriage,” he said.

“Not even for that,” Harry got out, the words choking him. His eyes flashed. “It didn’t seem unreasonable to me to expect her to understand.”

“You were angry.”

Harry felt like he might explode. “I was disappointed.”

“And angry,” Snape said again.
“God, you’re a bastard,” Harry bit out. “Yes, I expect I was. But we’re not talking about something that happened last week. We were dealing with this years and years ago.”

“And then she met Malfoy.”

“She met all sorts of fans willing to meet her needs,” Harry said, his voice emotionless. “Malfoy was the first one who meant anything to her. And I thought he cared for her too.”

Kingsley’s deep voice broke the moment’s silence. “So, Mrs Potter being handcuffed to the bed – that wouldn’t have been - unusual, shall we say?”

“I wouldn’t have thought so,” Harry said. “Not that I can say for certain, but – from what she wanted with me – I would have thought it - “

“Yes,” said Snape, cutting across his floundering. “Let’s get down to the point. She liked to be restrained, or to restrain. Did she like physical punishment? Could this have been a session that had gone wrong?”

“She was killed with Sectumsempra,” Harry said, looking straight at the creator of the spell. “I wouldn’t have called that a bit of light slap and tickle.”

Snape shifted. “That is…interesting. My spell. That you used on Malfoy. It would be logical to think he might have got his own back on you by using it. How many people knew that you had used it on him, though?”

“It’s hardly something I’m proud of,” Harry said. “If it hadn’t been for you, he would have died.”

Snape nodded his head in acknowledgement. “So, Granger and Weasley, I take it. We can discount the Headmaster, I think. Minerva. Have you mentioned it since?”

Harry shook his head. “That and looking in your pensieve are the two things I’m most ashamed of in my life,” he said.

“Would that all our mistakes were so minor,” Snape responded, shocking Harry to the core.

“Minor! You were – rightly – furious about the pensieve, and I almost killed a fellow student!”

“You’d be surprised at how many near deaths happen at Hogwarts,” Snape said. He jerked upright. “It would of course, have been recorded in the school log.”

“What’s that?” Kingsley and Harry asked together.

“There’s a magical record of all spells made at the school. It’s enormous, of course, there are thousands of spells cast every day in lessons, but if someone had come across it…”

“It sounds unlikely,” Kingsley said.

“It sounds unlikely that Draco Malfoy would kill the woman he loves, take the blame and beg Potter to kill him, but that’s what we’re looking at,” Snape said.

“Point,” Kingsley acknowledged. “Alright, I know this is difficult for you, Harry, but I think we all need to look at the memory together. I want you to look and think at what point the memory might be false, rather than real – that is, whether it’s all false, or all real, or when it changes. Look carefully for things you haven’t noticed before. If you can point anything urgent out to us, that would be good. Okay?”
“Not really,” Harry said, “but I understand needing to do it.”

“If you try and concentrate on looking for a particular clue, sometimes it can help it to seem more bearable to be there,” he said quietly. “I’ve had to look at an awful lot of unpleasant pensieve memories, and I’ve found that helps.”

Harry took a breath and nodded.

As one, they all tilted forward and tumbled into the memory.

Harry was surprised by how filmy it was, until it dropped that he was looking at his memory of Draco’s memory.

It was impossible not to look at Ginny, sleek and sumptuous and writhing on the bed, tugging on the cuffs and moaning encouragement.

His image of her kept shimmering, and suddenly the reason dawned on Harry: he was seeing her as Malfoy saw her, and then that was superimposed with his own feelings, and somehow the image seemed to shift between the two, the same image but subtly different. Harry realised with shame that the image flickered between the lust-and emotion-laden one of Malfoy, and his own less comfortable feelings.

It was hard, too, to ignore the fact that Malfoy was naked. He was fit, sweat glistening and highlighting the bunching muscles as he moved; Harry supposed he must have taken advantage of the training facilities at the Harpies’ base. Harry couldn’t remember ever seeing another man with an erection, and it was difficult not to stare, to watch as Malfoy touched himself and Ginny moaned again. He felt childishly relieved that Malfoy didn’t seem any bigger than he was, and he found the pale white pubic hair weirdly off-putting. Ginny shifted her leg and slid her foot up his thigh, until the heel of her stiletto pressed up under Malfoy’s balls. He could see the tension in Malfoy’s body, the jerk in his cock, the dribble of precome that leaked from the tip as she pressed forward just a fraction.

He could have had that.

There must be something wrong with him, because he thought it probably looked more erotic watching it being done to somebody else than being in Draco Malfoy’s place in the scene. Maybe it was that he knew he was clumsy – he’d be more likely to slip forward and have that spike impale him in the goolies. He wasn’t suave like Malfoy, who was definitely enjoying himself, but negated the threat by carefully spreading his legs, sliding the shoe forward off of Ginny’s foot. He twisted it round carefully, his balls falling into the cup of the heel, rubbing the leather over them before he threw the shoe on the floor and lifted Ginny’s foot up, taking a bite at her arch. She writhed, and Malfoy’s lips traced slowly up the inside of her leg till they reached the stocking top.

“You look so fucking amazing,” he said, voice growling with emotion. “So wanton, just waiting for me to do whatever I want with you.”

“Yes,” Ginny hissed, thrusting her hips up, spreading her legs wider in invitation.

It was horrible, thought Harry, that these should be the last sounds that he should hear coming out of his wife’s mouth. In that moment, he hated magic, hated Legilimency and pensieves and everything that made it possible for him to witness these things that he should never see. And Snape and Shacklebolt, they were there too, and that was dreadful, and Harry turned to look at them.
“Check the room,” Kingsley said. “Does everything look as it should? Do you think this is a proper memory?”

Harry felt a little calmed by Shacklebolt’s matter-of-fact approach. “It has his emotion,” he whispered. “I’m sure it’s real.”

Snape looked across at him sharply, but said nothing.

Shacklebolt began to move around the room. Harry walked about too, looking at the room and the scene on the bed. Malfoy was sitting on his haunches, and they could feel through his memory the burn in his arms as he lifted Ginny’s lower body, his face buried in her groin, feel the ache of his own desire.

Ginny’s body was strung bow-tight, then shuddered as her orgasm ripped through her. Afterwards, Malfoy lowered her gently to the bed, leaning over her to reach the bottle of champagne on the bedside table.

“That wasn’t there!” Harry stared round wildly at the other two men, trying to ignore the fact that Ginny was trying to lip Malfoy’s cock as he leaned over her. He was obviously deliberately teasing them both.

Ginny pouted as he moved away, bottle and glass in hand. Harry felt unreasonably hurt. She had never seemed that enthusiastic about sucking his prick.

“The champagne?” Snape said.

Harry nodded.

Malfoy poured a glass and reached over once again to put the bottle back on the side. This time he allowed Ginny to swallow him, sipping some of the champagne as his cock disappeared between her lips. He pulled out, and bent over her, tipping the glass up to her mouth.

“Hold it in your mouth and suck me,” he ordered.

Ginny nodded enthusiastically, her mouth already filled with the liquid.

Snape stepped up to the table and smelled the top of the bottle.

“Hmmm,” he said. “Definitely not just champagne. Myrtle, Sphinx elixir, nutmeg – a suggestibility potion has been added to this.”

“Surely they’d taste it,” Kingsley said. “Nutmeg is a pretty strong flavour.”

“The amount is infinitesimal. Just enough for the potion, and the bubbles would work well to camouflage any tingle on the tongue.”

Kingsley continued to prowl around the room. “What are you looking for?” Harry whispered. He couldn’t bring himself to speak loudly, though the room was filled with grunts and moans. Malfoy was certainly enjoying things. Harry thought he was being far too rough, ramming himself hard into Ginny, but Ginny was writhing again and then Malfoy pulled out.

“Back!” she demanded.

“Don’t you tell me what to do!” Malfoy said, sliding his hands around her throat. Even though Harry had seen this before, he still couldn’t stop himself from tensing up.
“Yes!” Ginny hissed. “Tighter!”

“I’ll give you tighter!” Malfoy said, grabbing her legs and straightening them, yanking them apart hard. “I’m going to fuck you so hard, that you’re going to feel me all through the game with the Falcons, you won’t be able to stop thinking about the next time I’m going to be inside you, you won’t –“

“Well, there we have it,” Kingsley said, folding his arms.

Harry looked across the writhing bodies at him.


“Harder!” Ginny gurgled, thrusting her hips up into the man pumping furiously into her.

Harry could not believe they were talking across this.

Malfoy pounded harder, gripped harder around her neck.

“Asphyxiation is a classic technique for enhancing orgasm,” Snape commented.

“Hurt me!” Ginny got out.

Harry could not believe that she could talk. Her eyes were practically bugging out of her head.

Malfoy reached for his wand. Harry tensed, knowing what came next.

“Sectumsempra!” he yelled, and both of them orgasmed even as the blood spurted across Ginny’s face, across her body.

Harry sank to his knees, but as he fell – “The ring! It’s changed!”

Shacklebolt was looking around. “The shadows are fractionally different. So this is the point at which the memories have been altered. It seems so clumsy.”

“It is a point at which his hold on reality would have been suspended, and with the ingestion of the potion, it is not surprising that he succumbed to the false memory,” Snape said, even as the blood continued to spurt and spread over the convulsing body of Ginny Potter.

“Watch Malfoy,” Snape said. “His behaviour here is likely to be manufactured. See if he's been injured in any way – or is there a trace of spell here? He must have been subdued at this point.”

Harry though, had crept forward, and was hunched down beside his wife. The life blood leached from her, and her eyes shifted erratically. Harry thought he caught something, and stood up quickly, bending over her.

“Potter, there is nothing you can do for her,” Snape said harshly.

“There’s something – a reflection in her eyes, or something. Is that possible? Is this all Malfoy’s memory?”

“Yes and no,” said Kingsley. “A pensieve memory will hold all sorts of things you didn’t notice at the time the event occurred. That’s what makes them so useful. Inevitably, though, they will be influenced by the person who remembered them. But when the memory is false, as this one is, you might be able to find something that the person who put it in left – if they’re clever, and they would be, to be able to do it at all, there won’t be much. No feelings wisping through. But a
reflection,” Kingsley said, coming with Severus to stare into Ginny’s eye – “that’s a gift.”

It was hideous that they were looking into Ginny’s eyes as she died. Harry was glad that she couldn’t see them. In the background, Malfoy was panicking. Harry had no idea who the person in the reflection was, so he made room for the other two men to watch Malfoy. Looking closely now, it was easy to see that the memory was strange. Whoever had implanted it had taken advantage of the panic that Malfoy must have felt, but somehow the edges of things were off, slightly jerky, as if it had been patched together: which it must have been, overlaying what had really happened with this awful death.

He wondered how Malfoy had not gone mad with this inside his head. Maybe he had, he thought. After all, Malfoy had begged him to kill him. But then, in the circumstances, that was probably quite logical.

They waited as the scene played out. Malfoy ran out of the room, and it ended.

They all withdrew from the pensieve.

“I need a drink after that,” Kingsley said, “and I expect you do too. Are you alright?” he asked Harry, as he pulled a bottle from the cupboard and poured them all a fire-whisky. “Stupid question,” he said, as Harry, hands shaking, swallowed down his drink.

Kingsley poured them all another.

“So,” he said. “There’s definitely an implanted memory. And I didn’t recognise that face. You, Severus?”

Snape shook his head.

“Would you be willing to see Malfoy now?” Harry asked the Potions Master. “I mean, he didn’t do it!”

“You cannot necessarily assume that,” Snape said slowly, “though, frankly, it would be a risky set-up to make if it was some sort of double trick.”

“Ridiculous, I would have thought,” said Shacklebolt. He took a swig. “So, the question, then, Harry, is who would want to kill your wife and implicate Draco Malfoy?”

“Apart from you, that is,” said Snape.
“Severus!” Shacklebolt thumped his friend on the arm.

Cogs were clicking in Harry’s brain.

“Ron says that there’s a new group – not the original Death Eaters – forming. I discounted it, really: I assumed that the Aurors didn’t know about Ginny’s relationship with Malfoy – the nature of it, anyway – and that her death had been an accident. That things had gone too far. That is, until I saw his memory, and then it was all wrong, and I really – when I saw him do Sectumsempra – and then it was only last night that I realised that something was wrong with the memory – I mean, I hadn’t really thought about anyone else. Why? Why would – do you think someone killed Ginny just to get at Malfoy?” Harry’s voice had risen to a screech.

“Well, that was comprehensible,” said Snape.

“Look, I – ”

“All we know,” Kingsley interrupted gently, “is that it’s more complicated than it seems.”

He turned to look at Snape.

“Will you go and see Malfoy?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Harry took a deep breath. His head was spinning with thoughts and too much alcohol drunk too quickly.

“Will you use Polyjuice?” he asked. “People think you’re dead.”

“You can’t use Polyjuice in the Ministry,” Shacklebolt told Harry.

“We did.”

Snape snorted. “Of course you did.”

“When? Why?” Kingsley demanded. “Someone going to visit a prisoner should most definitely be vetted.”

“I wasn’t,” Harry argued.

“Of course not,” murmured Snape. “But undoubtedly different standards apply for the rest of us mortals.”

“Then – ”

“There are ways to get around that, Mr Potter,” Snape said. He turned to look at Kingsley. “It might be an appropriate time for resurrection, though.”

“Really, Severus?”

Both men were silent for a moment.
“‘It would work against him,’” Kingsley said at last. “Assuming that he is innocent, that is. At a later date – “

“Why would it work against him?” Harry asked. “You’re a respected war hero – ”

The men exchanged a look.

“Perhaps we misunderstood your comprehension of the situation,” Snape said carefully. “We didn’t finish our earlier conversation. Perhaps you will be less inclined to seek my help, Mr Potter.”

“What? God, what now?” Harry groaned. “I thought I’d grown out of being thought an idiot all the time. I’m not fifteen, for Merlin’s sake!”

Kingsley was grinning. “Severus has that effect on a lot of people, don’t worry about it. Why do you think I left the Ministry?”

Harry looked between the two of them. “You do realise I’ve drunk far too much for an inquisition, don’t you?” he narked.

“Potter – ”

“You want me to say it? Because you had Snape shacked up here?”

“What exactly do you mean by ‘shacked up?’“ Snape asked.

Harry sighed. “Okay, okay. You were harbouring an ex-Death Eater, who hadn’t gone to trial, and who was apparently dead, despite being the Minister for Magic.”

The men exchanged another glance.

“And,” Harry interrupted as Snape was about to speak, “I assume, from the way you interact, that you’re a couple rather than two old codgers sharing house space because no one else will have you.”

Kingsley laughed. “Old codgers? Thanks a lot!”

“Well, you look in pretty good shape to me, but maybe that’s because I don’t think you fit the old codger possibility.”

“And it doesn’t – concern – you, two men in a relationship?”

“Why should it?” Harry said. “Hell, if people can find a bit of happiness with someone else in this world, good luck to them.”

“That is not a view generally shared in England.”

“I know. Lucius Malfoy offered me his life in exchange for Draco’s, because Draco’s son is gay.”

“He - what?”

Harry nodded. “So Draco can just forget all about Ginny and marry someone else, and beget a new Malfoy heir. I’m not sure whether he expects Draco to ditch Scorpius the minute he’s got another kid, or what.”

Snape picked up the wine bottle and shared the contents between the three glasses.
“I’m intrigued. The family name has always meant a lot to Lucius, of course. But then so has his own life.”

“He looks rather frail,” Harry said. “I don’t think he’s finding the life he’s made for himself much to his liking.”

“Good,” Snape said.

Harry chuckled.

“That could be useful,” Kingsley mused.

Harry sat up.

“What?”

“Hmmm?” Kingsley said, suddenly bland. “Just thinking.”

“Just thinking what?” Harry demanded. “No way am I going to accept Lucius’ life! I know he was a bastard but I’m not vindictive! If Draco really didn’t do it, accidentally or otherwise, then he ought to be free.”

“Still looking at the world through rose-tinted spectacles?” Snape murmured.

“I’m not suggesting otherwise,” Kingsley quickly intervened.

“Then –”

“Then first we need to see whether the false memory is false, and if it is false, whether Draco had any role in it being put there,” Snape said. “In short, I will see him and use Veritaserox as you suggested.”

“But –” Harry said, looking from Snape to Shacklebolt.

“Do not worry yourself about Kingsley,” Snape said. “He’s got a love for hatching plans and manoeuvring.”

“True,” Kingsley said, smirking. “The thing is - and I’m only just toying with ideas, here, Harry, so don’t go getting worried, like Severus says. But if he didn’t do it, we might be able to use Lucius to smoke out the ones who did.”

“Oh. Really? What are you thinking?”

“I don’t know yet, let’s move one step at a time. You can let Lucius know that you’re taking the matter seriously and have called in an expert.”

“Scorpius came to see me too,” Harry commented. “He knew all about Ginny – said his Dad loved her and would never have done it.” He shifted on his seat. “I – we – never told our children. That was my fault. When I think how Scorpius was about it – how mature – maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was wrong to make Ginny and Malfoy wait. Maybe none of this would’ve happened –”

“What ifs’ are a waste of time,” Snape said harshly. “Do you always get like this when you’re drunk? You’d better have some lunch.” And he got up, putting a saucepan of water to boil and fishing pasta from the cupboard.

“I don’t want to put you out,” Harry said, standing up. He realised instantly that his head was
buzzing far too much.

“It’s far too late for that, don’t you think?” Snape hurled over his shoulder.

“Severus!” Kingsley said in exasperation. “Sit down, Harry. Those potions’ skills come in handy for more than horrid concoctions: Severus is a king in the kitchen.”

“You’re hungry, I take it,” Snape raised an eyebrow at Kingsley, as he put courgettes and tomatoes and mushrooms onto a board, slid a pan onto the stove, splashed in some olive oil, and got to chopping.

“May I get some water?” Harry said, heading over to the sink with his glass.

“Fill a jug,” Snape said, indicating a series of them hanging along the front of the dresser.

Somehow, they were all suddenly working together, getting water, laying the table outside, peeling onions, and then they were eating the first meal Harry could remember really tasting in – well, since Ginny had died, since when food had been a fuel and something that he was knocking up to keep the kids going.

“This is delicious,” he said. “Thanks.” It didn’t seem in any way adequate for how grateful Harry felt.

Dappled sunlight filtered through the vines overhead, a warm breeze tickled his skin, and Harry felt more – calm – than he could remember. Also, sleepy. He stifled a yawn.

“Sorry,” he said sheepishly, seeing Kingsley looking at him.

“I have a potion that I must get started,” Snape said. “But there are things we need to discuss.”

“Right,” Harry said, standing. “Shall I clear this away and then head off? You can get me at –”

“We have a house elf,” Snape said. “I was going to suggest that you put your feet up in the hammock for an hour. You look like you could do with it.”

“I’m sorry, I’m not used to drinking in the day –”

“Harry,” Kingsley said, “Severus didn’t mean that offensively. An hour with your feet up in the shade, undisturbed, will do you good. I need to check in with work –”

“Oh, Merlin, I’m sorry, I didn’t think –”

“Hush,” Kingsley said, putting a firm hand on Harry’s shoulder, and turning him towards the hammock, which was swaying invitingly under the shade of two trees.

When Harry awoke, the light had changed, the shadows slipping across the landscape. He lay a moment, enjoying the sway of the hammock, the way it enclosed him. A light rug had been laid across him, and he felt snug and warm and ridiculously cared for. He didn’t want to move. It was ridiculous, to be so at ease in the house of two men whom he hadn’t seen for quarter of a century. He knew, the minute he stirred, everything would change: he would have to face the world – his life - again. He shut his eyes, breathing in the unfamiliar scents, but all his responsibilities began to nudge at him, and with a sigh, he tried to struggle up. Legs slung over both sides of the hammock for balance, he noticed a small table with a jug of fruit juice on it, condensation on the side of the
jug as a cooling charm worked its magic. Gratefully, he poured himself a glass and downed it: it was freshly squeezed orange juice, tart and delicious. He poured himself a second, extricated himself from the hammock, and then sipped it as he carried everything back into the house.

There was no-one in sight. He put the jug back into the cooling cupboard, finished the glass, washed it out at the sink, headed to the downstairs loo that he’d discovered before lunch, then went into the hallway, wondering where his hosts were.

“Hullo?” he called tentatively.

“In here.” Snape’s voice.

Harry stepped across the hallway and into what was obviously Snape’s laboratory. It was as different from the dungeons as could possibly be imagined. Sunlight flooded the room. The walls were all painted with whitewash, the worktops were steel, the floor warm umber tiles.

“Doesn’t the light damage stuff?” Harry blurted.

“A common misconception,” Snape said, stirring two cauldrons at once.

“But why were your potions’ classrooms in the dungeons?”

“History,” Snape answered. He glanced up at Harry. “They had always been there, that is all. In the past, it was thought the best way to keep ingredients. Whilst some ingredients are susceptible to light damage, appropriate storage cupboards are the simple solution. Although some damage can occur due to heat, far more are damaged by the damp air of the dungeons. All of these problems can be eradicated by correct storage. Working in good natural light, does, in fact, make potions’ making far easier, as the true colour of the potion, which can vary minutely from stage to stage, can be seen and acted upon. Do stop hovering, Potter. There is a seat to your left.”

Harry looked around and noted the stool at the work bench. He wondered if Kingsley often came in here and watched Snape at work. He pulled it out and sat down.

“Thanks for the juice. I’m sorry I fell asleep.”

“How is your head? Do you need a hangover cure?” Snape said brusquely.

“No, I’m okay, thanks,” Harry said.

Snape gave him a quick look, and seemed to accept his statement.

“Doesn’t it bother you? To be dead?” Harry asked, after a minute or two.

Snape paused a moment from chopping some unidentifiable herb.

“Are you under the impression that I’m a vampire, Mr Potter?”

“Are you under the impression that I’m still a schoolboy?” Harry returned. “Any chance you could call me Harry? Kingsley does.”

“There’s less sneer value in Harry. The syllables are too soft,” Snape answered.

Harry laughed. “Sneer away, I’m sure I’ll still get the message.”

Snape’s lips quirked.
“So, not a vampire then?” Harry said.

“Sorry to disappoint you,” Snape intoned.

“People used to wonder at school.”

“You think I was unaware of that?”

“Fair enough,” Harry said. “No one could think you were now, though. Though I suppose you don’t look any older than you did then.” He quirked his head, looking at the man.

“Wrinkles,” Snape said.

“Round your eyes? Laugh lines? Definitely not the Snape anyone knew.”

“That is perhaps why I found it so easy to leave my old self behind,” Snape said, as he added the herbs with one hand and stirred with the other. “I am not the man people knew then. Thank bloody Merlin.”

Harry said nothing, comprehending.

“I don’t know how you did it,” he said at last.

Snape snorted. “Neither do I.”

“Albus was an utter bastard,” Harry said, and Snape stiffened.

“You are talking of a man I killed. Have a little respect for him.”

“I lost it,” Harry said. “Anyway, I killed him every bit as much as you did.”

Snape put down the stirring rod and turned, leaning his back against the counter.

“You named your son after him.”

“Ahh, you knew that, did you? And after you too?”

“No one uses a second name.”

Harry laughed. “True. It was the only way I could get away with it with Ginny. I don’t know what madness comes over parents: two kids named after my own parents, for God’s sake! What was I thinking?”

Snape let out a bark of laughter, and turned back to the cauldron.

“So, what has Albus done to destroy your affectionate memories of him?”

“My children went to school,” Harry said.

“A normal event,” Snape prompted.

“I realised how young they were, how ridiculous it was of him to expect what he did of me. It got worse as they got older. When James was in his sixth year, full of getting into trouble and trying not to get girls into trouble and all the rest of it, and I looked at him and thought, this is the age when Albus made me promise to force-feed him a potion that would kill him. And in his last year, I thought, this is the age I was when Albus expected me to kill myself.”
Snape said nothing.

Harry sat there, uptight and filled once again with fury as he thought about it.

“You were shocked too; I remember from your memories,” Harry suggested, wanting some response, some comment.

“I was.”

“You don’t think he was right?” Harry snapped.

“He was a very clever man. The outcome was right in the end.”

“Bloody hell!” Harry stood up. “He was happy to let me die, to take the chance. You ended up bleeding to death in the dust. With everybody hating you, despite everything you’d done.”

“But I didn’t die, and neither did you,” Snape said.

“You think he was omniscient enough to know we’d survive?” Harry argued. “I think not. And I think it was absolute rubbish to expect any child to be the hope of the whole wizarding world. For Merlin’s sake, as if there weren’t enough adult wizards who could’ve got the job done if a bit of proper planning had gone into it, instead of waiting for a kid to grow up to do it.”

“There was a prophecy – ”

“And since when have you had half a second’s belief in Trelawney’s craft? And I saw her make a prophecy once, and frankly, weird as it was, I still don’t believe a prophecy means no one has any control over anything, that there is only one possible way of doing things.”

Snape put down the stirring rod and came over. He took Harry’s face in one hand, gripping under his chin and turning it side to side.

Harry was suddenly very conscious of the strength of those fingers, of Snape’s beaky nose looming down at him, of the tanned skin of Snape’s forearms, of the clean scent of the man. It was unnerving.

“What?” he said, through a mouth pouched by Snape’s hold on it. He felt like a talking fish.

“Somehow, you appear to have grown a brain, Harry.”

“Fuck off,” Harry said amicably, pulling away and rubbing a hand over his jaw.

Snape moved back to the cauldron, smirking.

“And I may be an idiot but I do know when someone is avoiding a question,” Harry said. “Having kids gives you a radar for that.”

“Hmm,” said Snape, adding another ingredient.

“Fine,” Harry said. “I ought to go, anyway. I’m sorry to have been a nuisance – ”

“Shut up, I’m counting,” Snape interrupted.

Harry stood, hands in his pockets. There was a noise in the background, and he turned, wand out automatically.
Snape stayed where he was.

“It’s Kingsley,” he said.

Harry stepped forward towards the door, quiet and careful. “Sure?”

“Sure,” Snape confirmed, as footsteps sounded on the tiled floor and then Kingsley appeared across the hall.

Harry pocketed his wand.

“Expecting trouble?” Kingsley asked.

“Old reactions, I guess,” Harry said. “Sorry.”

“No, it’s always good,” Kingsley clapped him on the back. “How’s it going, Severus?”

Snape was counting again, and raised one hand to indicate he couldn’t answer.

“We’ll leave you to it,” Kingsley said.

“I –” Harry didn’t know what to say. He didn’t want to interrupt Snape but didn’t want to leave without thanking him. “Thanks for being willing to help,” he said awkwardly.

“Severus will enjoy the challenge,” Kingsley said, grinning across the room as he steered Harry out. “That potion is hell to make.”

“Oh! Is he working on the Veritaserox?” Harry hadn’t realised.

“He is. And he hasn’t let anyone else see anything of it, ever, so count yourself honoured,” Kingsley said.

“I just walked in,” Harry said in embarrassment, as they arrived in the kitchen.

“The door wouldn’t have been open if Severus wanted to keep you out. Want a coffee? Tea? Or need to get back?”

“I ought to get out of your hair,” Harry said. Talk about overstaying his welcome. “What’s the next step? What do I need to do?”

“You need to ask the Ministry to allow you to bring in a specialist to use Legilimens enhanced by Veritaserox on Malfoy. As the injured party – the family of the injured party – you have the right. Invoke Law 4312 of 1927.”

“But that was long before Veritaserox was invented!”

“Yes, but the law is a non-specific law about the rights of families of victims. It applies.”

Harry nodded. “When shall I arrange it for?”

“The day after tomorrow: the Veritaserox needs to be fresh for optimum effect. Also, send Lucius Malfoy a message, as discussed. Say only that you're taking action, not what. Alright?”

Harry nodded.

“And get a good night’s sleep. Floo-call to let us know the time.”
“Who should I say is coming? Won’t they want their own people to administer it?”

“They’ll want that, but they can’t have it: there are only three specialists certified to do it. Severus will let you know.”

Harry nodded and turned to the floo.

“Harry,” Kingsley said, grabbing his arm, “how did you know it was Severus that had made Veritaserox?”

“I didn’t.”

“What?” Kingsley’s brows drew together. “You said you overheard –”

“I overheard people talking about the potion. I didn’t know that S-Severus had made it. I just knew that he’d definitely know about it, that he cared about Malfoy, and that if I needed help from a Potions’ Master, he was the only one I’d trust.”

“We’re idiots,” Kinglsey said, shaking his head.

Harry grinned.

Without thinking, Harry gave him a quick pat on the shoulder. “Thanks for everything, Kingsley. Ridiculous as this sounds, I’ve felt more – relaxed isn’t probably the right word, but more – I don’t know – real – than I have in a long time. I’m sorry to come and unsettle your life, though.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Kingsley rested his arm along Harry’s back as he turned him towards the floo. “We’re not quite at the pipe and slippers stage yet.”

Harry laughed, stepped into the floo, and was whirled back to reality.
I have visited Draco. I await a witnessed statement of your offer.

H. Potter.

Lucius Malfoy turned the letter over in his hand, as if seeking further words on the reverse. Was Potter going to take him up on his offer? Something shivered in Malfoy’s stomach.

He had offered his life.

He found himself astonished that Potter was willing to take it. He knew Potter and his son had never been friends at school. It must have infuriated him to have his wife fall into Draco’s arms. Not that he thought much of Lucius himself, of course, but still? Why free Draco?

Maybe he had been swayed by the money after all. The Potter family had a history of giving to charitable works, and he knew old James Potter, Potter’s grandfather, had been throwing it away to good causes, back in the day. Perhaps the Potters had lived on his wife’s income: certainly, she must have earned plenty, whilst Potter had opted for that menial tradesman’s job. Perhaps he had reconsidered what it would be like, trying to maintain that large house on his own, and his business premises. And he probably footed the bill for his son’s place too.

Death.

After all this time, it was strange to think of dying.

Surprisingly untroubling. His life was boring, and his body full of aches and pains. He felt thin, not just his body and his skin but his life force.

He wondered how Potter would kill him. He didn’t doubt the boy could do it: he’d read the histories, knew now what Potter had done even as a youngster, the pain he’d used against Quirrell, and the determination and skill and courage he had employed to bring about the end of the Dark Lord was really quite extraordinary. It showed a ruthlessness that so few people seemed to attribute to Potter, and yet was surely blatantly obvious. He had no doubt at all that Potter would do it: the question was, how would he do it? There would be a lot of public interest: would Potter want to despatch him quietly, or publicly make an exhibition of him?

What would he himself prefer? To go out with a bang? To be quietly done away with in some dark cell hidden away in the Ministry?

Would Draco think any better of him for doing this? Or despise him? Draco knew what he thought about Scorpius’ interests. Such a shame that he had missed his developing years: the boy would never have been allowed to indulge in such ideas had he been around. At the least, Draco should have taught the boy discretion and duty: there were wizards that had dubious interests that Lucius had known, but all of them had had the courtesy to settle into proper marriages and provide heirs.
What they did behind closed doors was naturally not a subject that anyone with refinement would consider a topic worthy of discussion.

As for Draco, despite his failure as a father to set his son on the right path, he could not but help feel rather proud that Draco had turned around the rather dire situation the family had found themselves in after the demise of the Dark Lord. When he had heard that Draco planned to marry the Weasley/Potter chit, he was really rather impressed.

"Hetty!" he called, and a house-elf winked in, bowing low.

"Master is needing something?" she asked.

"A sherry. No, I think I will have a brandy," he said. “The best we have in the cellars.”

Moments later the elf returned, and soon Malfoy was sipping the fine old liquid. He savoured it. Likely this would be one of his last to enjoy.

At Carnegie Place, an owl tapped on the window of Scorpius Malfoy’s apartment. He had barely got in from work, and unfastened the latch, giving the large tawny owl a treat in return for the post.

“Who’s sending you letters at this time of day?” a voice called out as the front door slammed.

Scorpius looked round, smiling, dropped the letter and filled the kettle.

Andy Boniface slipped his arms round him from behind and kissed his neck, looking over his shoulder at the writing on the envelope.

Scorpius leant back into the embrace, sighing in pleasure. “I don’t know the writing,” he said.

“Secret lover you haven’t told me about?” Andy guessed, his hands slipping lower and sliding along the front of Scorpius’ thighs, pulling him back against him in a sensuous move.

“Bound to be,” Scorpius agreed, rocking back against him. “I’m so unfulfilled in this relationship –”

“Better sort that out, then,” Andy said, turning him round firmly, and fastening his mouth over Scorpius’.

Several minutes passed, full of sounds of clothes rustling, shoes hitting something as they were kicked off, wet sounds of kisses, scrabbled sounds on the worktop.

“Feeling more fulfilled yet?” Andy bit out, as he eased himself into Scorpius, pushing him into the worktop. “You look fucking amazing,” he grunted. “Light’s sparkling in your hair. You look like a fairy.”

Scorpius snorted. “Am a bloody fairy,” he said, then moaned as Andy thrust hard into him. “You feel bloody enormous.”

“Am I hurting you?” Andy bit his shoulder as he slowed his movements. “Thought that oil might be a bit thin – “

Scorpius reached back and slapped what he could reach of Andy’s arse. “’S fantastic. Don’t stop.”
It was several more minutes, the air laden with heavy panting, before Scorpius breathed out, “Gonna…gonna…”

“Yeah…god…come on, Scorp, wanna see you come everywhere, wanna feel you tight around me…”

“Oh fuck, oh fu-uck, oh yesss! Oh god…..”

Moments later, Andy lay draped over Scorpius’ back, gasping, licking the sweat along the ridges of his spine. He slipped out. Scorpius felt the dribble of come down his leg.

“Uugh, you must have shot buckets,” he said, grabbing a tea towel and wiping the inside of his thigh on it.

“Look who’s talking,” Andy retorted, reaching over him to pick up the letter.

Streaks of semen were spattered across the front.

“That’ll show your mystery lover,” Andy smirked.

“Twat,” Scorpius knocked his shoulder against Andy, then pulled open the drawer, took out a knife, and slit open the letter.

Andy turned away and cast a charm over the kettle, which started steaming instantly. He scooped some coffee into the cafetiere and poured the water on, then turned to the silent Scorpius.


_Dear Scorpius,_

_I have been to visit your father. I have arranged for the Healer Susan Bones to visit him: if you have any further cause to think that he is not being well-treated let me know at once._

_Should you wish to contact me for this or any other reason, you know where to find me. I also use a Muggle mobile – the number is O1234 56X8K0._

_Harry Potter._

“What the hell does that mean?” Scorpius said furiously.

“He could see your Dad was being mistreated and he’s done something about it?”
“But what about – what about his innocence? That’s what matters! He’s not even mentioned it!”

“No,” Andy said thoughtfully. “It’s a bit of an odd letter. I’m pleased my Mum’s gone to see your Dad, though. She would have gone if you’d asked her, Scorp,” he said tentatively.

“Dad wouldn’t let me get any help.”

Andy could hear the remorse in Scorpius’ voice, and regretted having put it there. “He probably needed Potter to go in like an avenging angel and just take charge,” he suggested.

He poured them both coffee, handing the mug to Scorpius, who was standing, utterly naked, leaning back against the counter, rereading the parchment.

“You look incredible,” Andy said.

“Hmm?” Scorpius looked up. His brain seemed to realise what’d been said, and he grinned slightly. “Of course.” He took a sip of the coffee without seeming to be thinking about what he was doing. “Why would he write just to say this?” He waved the letter.

Andy came and leant beside him against the counter, looking at it again as he too drank the bitter coffee.

“Well, he’s done something for you. And he’s done something for your Dad. And he’s given you his number, which means he might be willing to do more for you.”

“But none of that’s what I wanted!”

“Maybe he can’t give you what you wanted,” Andy said gently, “and he’s just trying to be nice.”

Scorpius hung his head. “You’re always right.”

“Well, I might not be, but seriously, Scorp, your Dad’s admitted it.”

“He didn’t do it! I’m sure he didn’t!”

Andy put his arm around him.

Harry was back in his workshop, having had a busy morning. He headed out the back, where he had a small yard. There was a table and some chairs, where he and his assistant could take turns eating lunch if the weather was nice, and a couple of pot plants that Neville had given him, which were now looking awfully bedraggled, despite the fact that Neville had chosen plants that needed little water. Harry got the jug that acted as a watering can, filled it from the old pump, and gave both of them a big drink, before heading over to the woodpile.

Underneath a covered roof, but open at the sides, Harry had various woods stacked, seasoning in the open air. He could never see the pile without being taken back to the first time he had seen wood stacked like this, years ago down a country lane. He’d been meandering around the southern counties on a motorbike, enjoying the sun on his back despite the bite of the wind. It was a day in early May, and everywhere the lanes were lined with bluebells, and every copse of trees along the way sat on a carpet of blue underneath, the fresh green growth of the trees above thrusting up to a sky painted with scudding cotton wool clouds. It was absolutely magical.
He’d parked his bike and wandered through some woodland, the leggy bluebells almost up to his knees, and came out into the open to see the most astonishing view across hills and down into a valley, farms and houses dotted here and there, and he’d sat and eaten his sandwiches and felt alive and freer than he’d ever felt. Reluctantly, he’d eventually stood up, brushed off his jeans and climbed back up the hill along another track, aiming for a circular route. Reaching a road at the top, he’d walked along in what he hoped was the right direction to find his bike – not that a ‘Point-me’ spell couldn’t sort that out. There were country cottages along the lane, and grander houses behind high hedges, and a field with horses. A couple of dogs barked at him. On the right, where behind trees the land dropped away to the valley he had been enjoying, was a low building, and beside it, a couple of ramshackle-looking open sheds, with huge pieces of timber stacked in them. Harry walked across the nettles and stroked his hand over the thick plank that was lying on the top of one of the stacks. Around him was a mix of woods, some dark and rich, others with creamy centres, some with tight swirling patterns on them.

“You like wood?” a voice said, and Harry jumped, not believing that he’d dropped his guard so low that he hadn’t heard the other person. It was a young man, wearing jeans like himself, and sipping from a mug.

“I guess,” said Harry. “You don’t normally see such big pieces.” He thought of all the different woods that wands were made from, of Ollivander’s shop. He’d never seen wood like this, though.

“Want to see what we do with it?”

And that simple invitation had led to Harry seeking an apprenticeship with the company, learning everything from the basics of how to select the appropriate timber for a job, to his first ever piece (a breadboard), to making a beautiful chest of drawers. When his apprenticeship ended, Harry had stayed on, starting to create his own pieces. Initially, he had revelled in the act of making things without magic, teasing beauty from the wood with careful handling and laborious attention to detail, but as time progressed the need to escape from the impact of magic on his life had lessened, and he began to think of how to use his talents in the magical world. Most wizarding furniture was made of wood: plastic and chipboard and other ‘new-fangled’ materials had not been adopted into wizarding lifestyles. Initially, Mrs Weasley had helped him research wizarding furniture, the sort used in ordinary homes, and his newfound appreciation of the construction of elegant pieces had given him the confidence to go into wizarding shops to look at what was offered at the top end of the market, and finally, to find out more about specialist items.

Even now, he continued to make both wizarding and Muggle pieces, having built up a reputation in both worlds. He loved what he did, loved being entirely absorbed in making something, feeling what the wood would let him do and where he could coax more from it, feeling the pieces that were amenable to magic and those that were more suitable to Muggle use. He knew that most of the wizarding world thought that he must have suffered some sort of breakdown, or diminishment of his magic following his defeat of Voldemort. He quickly saw how power was status: people treated him with respect, but there wasn’t that awe that had been there after the War.

Harry was glad to let them think so. He had quietly studied charms and magical manipulation of space with Cressy Canticle, an elderly witch recommended to him by Professor Flitwick. It was a little-used branch of magic, because it actually took immense power: to make an item that would retain its adaptability over centuries, long after the spell creator was dead and gone. It was far more difficult than most people would have supposed, had they been interested to find out, which, pretty much, they weren’t.

Harry selected the timber he wanted, levitated it into his workroom, and set it on his workbench, then began to plane it.
His thoughts roamed as he worked, going over his visit to the Ministry that morning. He was ashamed, really, that he hadn’t been before to take the Head of the Aurors to task for the treatment of Malfoy. He’d taken a risk with facing down the jailor, and not taking it higher. Frankly, if they treated Malfoy so badly, despite the position he had crafted for himself in society, he dreaded to think how poorly other sods were treated, a view he’d made very clear. It had briefly looked as if his concerns were going to be brushed off. For the first time in many years, Harry felt himself pulling on his title as Vanquisher of Voldemort, slipping it on like a suit of armour. He was normally happy to potter around in the background, his fame almost second-hand as husband of a famous Quidditch player. But when Ramsey Felton had treated him merely as overwrought because of his grief, and was obviously discounting his concerns, Harry had felt anger welling within him. He had sat up ramrod straight, carefully crossed one knee over the other, straightened his cuffs, and raised an eyebrow. There was something about his quiet stillness that shut Felton up in an instant. His eyes narrowed. Harry knew he was reassessing him – he had allowed just a little of his power to cloak him, and if Felton had any sensitivity at all, he ought to be feeling it. Felton had hummed and hawed, and said he would look into it, and Harry had said good, and that he looked forward to Felton’s owl to tell him what actions he had taken.

He had followed this up with a request for his specialist to see Malfoy, to confirm the exact details of what had happened, and when Felton started to say that it was unnecessary as Malfoy had pleaded guilty, Harry had quoted Law 4312, and Felton began to realise that Potter was not a spent force after all. He nodded assent, and shook Harry’s hand with a tight smile plastered on his face as he saw Harry out of his office.

“Hi Dad,” James said, interrupting his thoughts.

Harry looked up, the smile already on his face, at seeing his son.

“James! Hi! What brings you here?” Harry looked at his watch – had he forgotten the time? But it was only just after 5.30pm. “Something up?” he asked worriedly.

“Nah, we finished a little early. I wondered if you wanted to get some supper out. Or a take-away.”

“Sure,” Harry said, surprised. “Albus is out tonight - you weren’t hoping to see him?”

“No, I knew he was going out,” James said.

Harry wondered if James wanted to talk to him in private.

“I just need to put my tools away,” he said. “Go tell Janine she should have gone by now, will you?”

Later, sitting in an Indian in Muggle London, Harry took a swig of his beer and asked, “So, what’s up, James? Anything I can help with?”

“What?” James said, around a mouthful of very hot vindaloo, “No! Nothing!”

“Okay,” Harry shrugged. “Thought you might have wanted to get me alone for a natter. Do you need to borrow any money, or anything?”

“No!” James looked at his father and said, “We just wanted to check you were alright.”

“We?”
“Albus and Lily and I. Didn’t want you to be alone too much. I mean, I know Mum was away a lot, but it’s sort of different, isn’t it?”

Harry felt tears welling in his eyes, so shocked and proud and loved did he feel. It was so unexpected, this sudden reversal of roles, of the children feeling that they needed to look after him.

“You kids are wonderful,” he said, sniffing loudly and pretending it was the heat of the food, “but I’m fine. Really. You don’t have to look after me.”

“We want to,” James said. “You’re our Dad.”

Harry smiled his thanks. His voice felt a bit too quavery to attempt to speak.

They ate a little more.

Harry remembered James’ comment from when he’d been trying to tell them about what had happened to Ginny. He wondered whether to bring it up or not. He found himself taking the plunge.

“James, I don’t mean to put you on the spot, but when I was trying to tell you about what had happened to your Mum, you asked if she’d left. Why did you say that?”

He saw James looking shifty and unsettled.

“She’s dead,” he said gently. “Nothing you can say can hurt her now.”

His son looked at him, his eyes troubled. “Doesn’t mean it can’t hurt you.”

Harry took a big breath.

“Your Mum and I were planning to divorce.”

“Oh, thank Merlin!”

It was not the answer that Harry had expected.

“Really? Why?”

“Because you were so obviously unhappy, Dad. Because…because…Mum saw other men, I think.”

Harry felt like he’d been hit with a bludger.

“Oh god, I shouldn’t have said anything!”

“No, no, it’s alright.” Harry put out a hand. “Unhappy, though? How could I have seemed unhappy? I – I had all of you, and although Gin and I planned to divorce, we got on okay – “

James swept the remains of his meal to the side of his plate.

Normally, he would have finished it, and Harry felt guilty for depriving him of the pleasure.

“Lily was looking through some old photos for a school project – the holidays before last, I think. And there was a picture of us when we were really small. You looked so different, Dad. So – so full of life. It hit both Lily and me: you look a bit like a shadow of how you were. And…and…when I was fifteen, remember, I stayed with Teddy and Andromeda? Well, Ted took me out
drinking – yeah, yeah, he was like a mother hen, no worries – but – well, we saw Mum. With another man.”

Harry opened his mouth, wondering where to start. “Lots of people have friends of the opposite sex,” he said. “I meet up sometimes with Hermione for a bite, when Ron’s not there.”

“Yeah, but if you held her hand and then kissed it, I expect she’d lay a curse on you quicker than a snake could strike,” James said.

Harry’s brain was in turmoil. “I’m so sorry you had to see that,” he said at last.

James’ eyes narrowed.

“You knew?”

Harry shook his head. “I – not specifically. There are things – it’s – I don’t know how appropriate it is to talk to you about this,” he said at last. “But most importantly,” he said quickly, “I was never unhappy. Honestly, James.”

“Well, maybe you’d just changed then,” James said. He looked at his father. “You knew Mum saw other men? We were so scared you’d find out.”

Harry wanted to bang his head on the table.

“We?” he croaked. “Is that you and Albus and Lily, or you and Teddy?”

“I didn’t tell Lily! What do you think I am? Even after we’d looked at those photos, and she’d asked me about whether I thought you were unhappy! I never said that I thought that might be why.”

“But you spoke to Albus?” Harry deduced.

“Later. Mum was making some arrangements that Albus was getting all stressed about, because he thought it should all be straightforward, but it wasn’t, and I thought Mum was probably trying to fit in seeing someone else, and I ended up telling him.”

Harry leant back against the banquette and sighed. “What did he say?”

“He wondered if you had someone too.”

“God!” Harry said. “I’ve made such a mess of things.”

“You are seeing someone? None of us has ever – “

“No!” Harry burst out. He took a long pull of his drink.

And proceeded to tell his son all about their mother’s plans to marry Malfoy.

“I need to talk to Albus and Lily too,” he said, after he’d finished and they’d drunk two more bottles of beer. “Want coffee here or at home?”

“I’ll come home with you,” James said. "Let's get Albus now.”
Back at home, sitting around the kitchen table with both James and Albus, all holding steaming mugs, Harry once again explained that Ginny and Malfoy had planned to marry.

“Then Scorpius was right,” Albus said. “His father would never have killed her. Would he?”

“Or did they have an argument?” James said. “Was it – sorry Dad – but maybe Mum wasn’t raped after all. If they’d had consensual sex, then had an argument, the evidence might have been misconstrued.”

Did Harry tell his kids absolutely everything? How could you discuss a mother’s sexual predilections with her own sons?

He suddenly felt hot under the collar. Malfoy had pleaded guilty, to save him from having this conversation. To save his children from hearing it.

If Malfoy had killed Ginny, even in the heat of the moment, perhaps he could have gone along with it. Could he? But having seen into Malfoy’s mind…the doubts were so great…did he talk to the children at this point? Wait until Snape had seen Malfoy? And at the back of his mind, a strumming beat getting slowly louder and louder, was: if Malfoy didn’t do it, who did? And why? And were they a threat to the rest of his family?

It was this last that made him decide: he had been kept in the dark enough as a child: his sons needed to know the facts, needed to know what he could tell them so that they could be on their guard. The thought of anyone harming them…and then there was Lily. She was at school, so hopefully she was safe for the moment, but there were conversations that they would have to have.

Albus spoke before he could open his mouth.

“We’re not kids anymore, Dad. I know this isn’t easy.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, rubbing a hand around the back of his neck. “It’s just – I was thrust into such a lot of danger as a kid. I always wanted everything to be safe, normal, for you.”

“You did that, Dad,” Albus said warmly. “But we are grown up now. We’ve both had sex and – “

“You have?” Harry exclaimed. “Who – when – don’t tell me! It’s none of my business!”

Both boys burst out laughing.

“Oh god,” Harry said. “I’m such a useless parent. I’m supposed to be all blasé and stuff, aren’t I? You used precautions, didn’t you? We did have that conversation, didn’t we?”

“No worries, Dad, you told us,” Albus said, and as Harry sat back, looking relieved, added, “anyway, female werewolves can’t get pregnant at full moon.”

A million thoughts crashed into each other in Harry’s head. His body stiffened in shock, and then, into the silence, James burst out laughing.

“Sorry, sorry, couldn’t hold it! Your face, Dad!”

“You bastards!” Harry grinned, and then, just like that, he’d spoken to his sons just as if they were any other men, and they were men, and there was no going back.

“I can’t believe you thought I was serious even for a minute,” Albus said, wiping tears of laughter away with his sleeve. “What sort of people do you know? Bestiality, Dad? Gross.”
“Does doing it with a werewolf count as bestiality?” James asked. “I mean, it is a person really.”

“Not in werewolf form it isn’t.” Harry said, thinking back all those years when he’d seen Lupin transform.

“Not even with Wolfsbane?”

“Well, lets put it this way,” Harry said, about to speak of the dangers and then just ending up saying, “Yuk!”

The boys snorted with laughter again.

“We used to wonder about animagi, though, at school,” James grinned. “I mean, if you and someone else were of the same species, is there any reason you shouldn’t….?”

“Thinking of trying it?” Harry asked, eyebrow raised.

He’d never mastered the animagus transformation himself. He’d wondered, at school, why it wasn’t something on the curriculum, like transfigurations, or taking one’s apparition licence. Later, he was glad that he hadn’t tried. He wondered what it would have done to him, when he’d been a horcrux, whether already being split, in a way, would have been disastrous, or whether the loss of his humanity would have allowed Voldemort more power over him, or what. Once he’d finally been himself, and no one else, he’d never wanted to lose control, to feel any less than fully himself, fully human. James and Albus, though, had been fascinated when they’d learnt that their grandfather and his friends had all been animagi, and had prevailed upon Professor McGonagall to give them lessons. They were both now registered with the Ministry: James could turn into a crow, whilst Albus was a rather beautiful cat.

“Have you found someone of the same species?” Harry asked. “That you wouldn’t mind facing when you were human?”

“Ah, no,” James grinned. “Hypothetically, though, it’s an interesting idea.”

“Perv,” Albus snorted.

“Well, for you it might not be much different,” James said condescendingly. “As a bird though, doing it in the air – “

“Well, if crows are anything like pigeons, they seem to find a nice roof or tree or power cable,” Harry said. “Maybe you’d better watch some nature programmes to see if the flying thing is possible.”

“And I don’t know about you, but it takes me some concentration to keep in form,” Albus said. “Imagine if one of you changed mid-fuck.”

“Embarrassing to be found injured on the pavement in the nude if you’d crash-landed,” James agreed.

“I was thinking more of the damage you might do to your partner – or they might do to you,” Albus said.

“Ow. Point,” James nodded.

“Anyway,” Albus said, “talking of point, we’ve got right off it. What about Malfoy, Dad?”
Harry took a deep breath. “Well, there are various possibilities. One, he did it. On purpose. The question then is, why? Two, he did it, but it was an accident. Three, he didn’t do it. The big question then is, who did?”

“So, you think he might not have done it?” Albus queried.

“I hate to think that whoever killed Mum is out there walking free and laughing.” James’ face was pinched.

“I do think he might not have done it,” Harry said quietly. “I’ve arranged for an expert to see him tomorrow. After that – “


“I saw Malfoy a few days ago. I visited an old friend yesterday. The expert is going in tomorrow: I’m not sure who it will be,” Harry said, which was in fact true, if not the whole truth.

“Blimey, when did all this come on?” James said. “You never mentioned anything.”

“It was a bit shocking, seeing Malfoy. There was something off but I didn’t realise what straight away. When I did, I knew we had to follow it up. We’ll see what comes up with the expert and take it from there.”

“The aurors aren’t looking for anyone else, though, are they?”

“Not with a confession, but at the start they’d put in all that security. If it was someone else, we don’t know if it was just Mum they wanted to hurt. It could be someone with a thing against quidditch players, but it could be someone wanting to hurt this family. So be alert, boys, please. Be careful. And keep your ears flapping.”

“What about Lily?” James asked.

“She should be safe at Hogwarts,” Harry said. “And after the expert has been in, we’ll know if there is really any cause for concern.”

“What are you going to tell her, Dad?”

“She deserves to know everything we do,” Albus pressed.


The boys too got up. Albus collected the cups and put them over by the sink.

“The old friend,” James said, hand on the door jamb. “Someone – someone from the war?”

Albus turned round sharply, waiting for Harry’s answer.

“Yes.”

James nodded.

Harry turned off the kitchen light as they left the room.
“I have an appointment to see Prisoner Draco Malfoy,” Snape said, at the Ministry reception.

“Wand,” said the girl, barely interrupting the conversation she was having with the other receptionist, a young wizard with a severe case of acne. Had the boy never heard of *Splat-that-Spot* Potion? The girl was chewing gum.

Snape handed it over. The witch placed it on some scales, and then looked at the reading.

“Olive and Veela hair, twelve and a half inches. Made by Alessandro Vecchio,” she said. “Never ‘eard of ‘im.”

“He is one of the finest wand-makers in the world,” Snape said with derision. “I do not doubt that his name has passed you by.”

The girl looked at him, bemused. Snape was amused to see her eyes flick up and down, assessing and dismissing him in one fell swoop. She was pretty, he supposed, and he suspected that most men probably flirted with her. She flicked her blond hair and chewed harder on her gum.

“Name?”

“Severus Snape.”

No hint of recognition showed on her face. Snape, who had been girding his loins for his return to the wizarding world, suppressed a snort at the sense of anticlimax that engulfed him.

“Purpose of visit?” the girl asked, pulling out a sheet and flicking the feather end of a quill across her face.

“I am the specialist employed under Law 4312 of 1927 to –“

“Okay,” the girl interrupted him. “You’re down on my list. Didn’t have the name.” She swallowed a mouthful of saliva generated by her constant chewing.

At least she didn’t have her mouth open, Snape thought with a shudder.

“Third lift on the left. Ask for the ‘olding cells.” She handed him back his wand.

“Thank you,” Snape said courteously.

The girl didn’t acknowledge him: she’d already turned to resume her chatter with the pustulous wizard.

It felt odd to Snape, to be striding, free, through the Ministry. He wondered how long it would be before he was recognised.

As it happened, it was a quiet time of day, after the morning rush. It was when he strolled up to the warders’ desk in the holding cells that things changed.

“I’ve come to see Prisoner Draco Malfoy,” Snape began, but the head of the wizard behind the desk swung up even as he started to speak.

“Professor Snape? Professor Snape! I’d recognise your voice anywhere!”
“Still haunting your dreams, is it, Walsingham?” Snape said, recalling the boy who had become the man in front of him.

He must have been two years below Malfoy's and Potter’s year: that meant he should know that –

“Haunting? Are you a ghost?” The man’s voice was frightened, but he stretched out a hand as if to see if Snape was real, before one glance at the forbidding face made him withdraw it sharply.

“Very wise,” Snape said. “In which cell might I find Mr Malfoy?”

“But…but – you’re dead!”

“Really?” Snape sneered, enjoying himself for a moment. “It must have escaped my notice.”

Snape could see the man trying to recall the past – Snape’s past.

“I need to get Head Auror Felton,” the man said at last, somewhat apologetically.

“I am surprised he is not here already,” Snape sounded aggrieved. “He is needed to witness the procedure.”

Looking somewhat relieved, and apologetic at the same time, the man sent an internal memo winging its way to Felton’s office.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” Walsingham said, not taking his eyes from Snape. “Would –would you like to sit down?”

“I am not yet so infirm,” Snape commented.

“Oh no! Of course not!”

Snape had forgotten the delights of reducing someone to babbling.

He strolled along the corridor, back and forth, apparently totally at ease.

Walsingham fidgeted at his desk, fiddling with several sheets of parchment and a large ledger. He knocked a pot of quills onto the floor, and mumbled entirely unnecessary apologies to Snape.

Snape thought about the next step. He’d seen reports about Felton in the press, so he was not surprised to see him arriving with two other Aurors in tow, leather boots stamping out a rhythm on the flagstones, capes flapping behind them.

“Head Auror Felton,” he stretched out his hand. “Thank you for agreeing to act as witness.”

He could feel Felton’s jerk response, before the man automatically took his hand and shook it.

“I wasn’t aware that you would be doing the procedure, Master Snape,” Felton said, obviously doing his best to appear unperturbed.

The two Aurors tried to strike poses of vague threat and yet disappear into the background at the same time.

“I was surprised we hadn’t had a request from England before,” Snape lied. They had deliberately omitted to pass the information on to the British Ministry that the IFAA had started approving use of Veritaserox. “You must be doing an excellent job of keeping the peace, Auror Felton.”
“Trying to keep things running smoothly, of course,” Felton said, then grasped the bull by the horns. “I’m sorry, Snape, but I’m rather surprised to see you. Your Order of Merlin was awarded posthumously, wasn’t it?”

His tone implied that Snape was at fault for not having corrected that little fact.

“I’m afraid I have very little recollection of that period,” Snape said. “It took me many months to recover from my injuries.”

“You didn’t think to inform the authorities at a later date?” Felton said, somewhat aggressively.

“For what purpose?” Snape inquired, eyebrows raised. “I had no intention of living in England. When I was well enough to practice in Potions again, of course, I registered with the appropriate authorities.”

The fact that he had first crafted an ink that made the reader forget what he had just read was neither here nor there.

“So you’ve used Veritaserox in – France?” Felton fished.

“In various European countries, and of course, Asia and the Americas,” Snape said, making Felton grind his teeth.

“I would be delighted if you would give me your card, Master Snape, for future reference,” he asked smoothly.

“I’m afraid all applications have to go through the IFAA,” Snape sidestepped. He’d backfitted Harry’s himself.

“Of course. But there may be other matters – ”

“I’m afraid authorities at the IFAA have ensured that the three of us able to use Veritaserox are under something rather like Fidelius,” Snape said coolly. Kingsley had seen to that. “Obviously, we would otherwise be open to kidnapping by – unscrupulous elements.”

“Indeed, indeed. I’m intrigued, however,” said Felton, as he started at last to walk down the corridor to Malfoy’s cell, “that Mr Potter was able to call on you. How did he know that you were authorised to administer Veritaserox?”

“He didn’t,” Snape said, with complete honesty. “Until two days ago, I had not seen Potter since the hours before Voldemort was crushed.”

And with that powerful statement, they arrived at Malfoy’s door.

“You are unaware of the procedure, I take it, Auror Felton? Mr Malfoy is also unaware that I am alive. It may take a moment or two to settle him. I would be grateful if you would remain – in the background, as it were.”

“As you wish, Master Snape. Beecham and Downing here,” he indicated the Aurors, “are here to ensure your safety.”

“Of course they are,” Snape said.

Felton’s cheeks flushed, but he said nothing.

The warder, who had trotted along behind them, stepped forward and opened the cell door.
Snape stepped back as it swung outwards.

Inside, Malfoy was standing. He had obviously heard the thumping footsteps of the Aurors. Snape noticed the look of resignation on his face, before he stepped into the light.

Draco stumbled, his hand grasping for his chair, the other going up uncertainly to his face.

“You are not seeing your past flying before your eyes, Draco,” Snape said, sweeping in. British robes did have such a lovely movement to them.

“Professor Snape?”

“Indeed. Sit down before you fall down, Draco.”

Draco went to do so, and then stopped. Shakily, he gestured to the seat. “Please,” he offered it to Snape, long held good manners rising to the surface.

Snape turned to Felton. “We will all need chairs,” he said. “Not magical ones,” he snapped, as one of the Aurors went to transfigure something from his pocket. “As little magical interference from other signatures as possible, if you please.”

Looking like a naughty schoolboy, the Auror ducked his head. “Sorry, Sir. Shall I - ?” he turned to Felton.

“Yes, yes, and be quick about it.”

In the meantime, Snape had dropped into Draco’s chair.

“Sit,” he said to his old pupil, indicating the bed.

“You’re alive,” Draco said, wonderingly.

“As you see,” Snape intoned.

Draco glanced wildly round, seeking out Felton. “How do you know this isn’t Polyjuice?”

“Draco,” Snape said, shaking his head. “Polyjuice from a dead man would produce a corpse.”

Draco passed a shaking hand over his face. “Yes, yes, of course. I’m sorry.” He looked up. “You’re alive,” he said again.

Snape’s lips curled in a small smile.

Draco’s brain was obviously on go slow. “Why – why are you here? I’m delighted to see you – to see that you’re alive, and here, and – but…”

“Mr Potter has invoked Law 4312 of 1927,” Felton said. “Do you know what that is?”

Draco shook his head.

“I am going to use Legimency on you,” Snape said. “Combined with Veritaserox. Do you know what that is?”

Draco nodded.

“Am I allowed to refuse?” he asked Felton.
“You are not,” the man said, smirking.

Draco hung his head. “I don’t want this,” he whispered. “Please, Professor.”

The Auror returned with two chairs dangling from his hands. There was a lot of clattering as they were placed in the cell.

Snape would have liked to reassure Draco, but it wasn’t possible with the Aurors looking on.

“It is uncomfortable,” he nodded, as if understanding Draco’s reluctance.

He lifted his bag to the table and opened it. He gestured to Draco to sit at the chair now placed at a right angle to him at the table, and Felton to sit on the other angle, from where he could observe the proceedings. The Aurors stood either side of the door, which had been automatically closed, locking them all in.

Snape took out two containers, which he enlarged.

“Sick buckets,” he said. “It is more than likely that one or both of us will vomit. The experience is intense and unlike anything you will have experienced before.”

Snape could feel the slight sense of amusement, of superiority, in the other three men in the room, as if it was a poor show to vomit on such weak grounds. He would wipe the smirks from their faces. He removed a wooden case, which he opened carefully.

“Veritaserox,” he said, holding up a vial, and handing it to Felton before showing it to the two Aurors as well for verification. “Please check that the IFAA seal is intact.”

“Seal intact and duly noted,” the men said, as they looked at it.

“The Antidote,” Snape said, taking a second vial around for inspection.

“Seal intact and duly noted.”

“Dreamless Sleep,” Snape said, producing a third vial.

“What’s that for?” Felton asked.

“The Veritaserox stirs up unwelcome and unpleasant memories,” Snape said.

“Surely the bastard deserves to suffer any dreams that result from his own actions?” Beecham snapped.

Snape raised an eyebrow. “The potion is not to ease the prisoner’s suffering,” Snape said. “In the case of The State of Argentina versus Hector Ramirez, the case had to be dropped after Ramirez lost his mind following the procedure. He is still in a mental facility, I believe. After his case, the IFAA ruled that Veritaserox could only be administered by the three specialists who I mentioned to you.”

“Bugger probably deserved it, and avoided the Kiss, or whatever they do over there,” the Auror said scathingly.

“On the contrary,” Snape said mildly, digging in his bag. “Ramirez was found to be totally innocent. He had implanted memories. Nevertheless, the horror of witnessing the truth was too much for him to cope with. The State have had to pay out damages to his family in excess of a million galleons, I believe.”
Without another word, Snape withdrew a rectangular box and opened the lid. He withdrew a syringe, lifting it so that the needle caught the light.

“What the fuck?” Dowling breathed.

Snape could feel the tension rise by a dozen notches.

“The potion has to be administered intravenously,” he said, inserting the needle in through the lid of the vial, and withdrawing the plunger, drawing the purple liquid into the syringe. The reaction was not unexpected. Unlike Muggles, wizards were not accustomed to needles. Almost every potion could be absorbed through the stomach, skin, or by inhaling. Wizards had an almost pathological fear of needles.

“Why?” Felton said, sitting up straight with a hand over his mouth.

_Hoho_, Snape thought, he wasn’t even going to like watching the needle going into someone else!

“Because of the likelihood of the subject vomiting, intravenous administration is the only way that we can guarantee that the potion is effective and active, sufficient for our legal purposes,” Snape said.

“But how do you know that it is working?” Felton asked.

“The standard test agreed by the IFAA,” Snape said.

He saw Felton fidget, and held back a smirk. “You _are_ authorised to use _Imperius_?” he asked.

Felton sat upright. “I am, in approved cases, of course,” Felton said.

Snape could feel the men behind bristling. They probably didn’t know that.

“The standard test is to put the subject under _Imperius_, tell him a secret – obviously something innocuous, but the subject is to think that it is a secret, then _Obliviate_ him.”

“Then what?”

“Do it, and you will see.”

Severus walked, syringe held aloft in his hand, to the other side of the cell, and turned his back.

“Put up a ward so that I do not hear you,” he added.

He could feel Felton gearing up to do the spell. Despite being Unforgivables, Aurors had authority to use both _Imperius_ and _Avada Kedavra_ in certain situations. _Crucio_, however, was banned. Snape was interested that Felton had agreed to do it without consulting references to check that the situation allowed the use.

He felt the whisper of magic of the warding, and the power that was generated by the _Imperius_ being cast. There was a moment or two, then the soft sibilance of the wash of the _Obliviate_. At last, he felt the wards lifting and turned round.

Draco was still at the table, looking a little befuddled.

It didn’t surprise him that Felton was a poor caster: mind magic of any form was a subtle art, although as Head Auror he should have been better at it.
“Auror,” Snape said, looking at Beecham, “make Mr Malfoy reveal his secret.”

“What secret?” Draco said nervously, as the Auror stepped towards him, a glint of pleasure in his eye.

Snape wished he had chosen the other man.

“*The* secret, Malfoy,” the Auror said threateningly. “The one you’re keeping from us. Tell me it.”

“What secret? That I’m to be given *Dreamless Sleep*? That’s not a secret and I don’t want it anyway!” Draco said, turning from one person to another, his face apprehensive.

“Malfoy, you *will* tell me the secret, or I will bring in your son. He’s a perverted little tosser, isn’t he? I’d enjoy the chance -

Draco leapt up, and the Auror leant into his face. “Now that’s more like it. Worried about what I’ll do to your sweet little boy? I bet he might even enjoy what I do to him. Don’t tell me it, Malfoy, I’m feeling rather… enthusiastic… about what I might do to the little shit.”

Sweat leapt out on Draco’s brow. His fists were clenched, his hands shaking. “Scorpius has nothing to do with this! Don’t you dare touch my son!”

“I will do what I need to get the information I need. You will tell me, Malfoy.”

“Fuck off!” Draco was shaking.

“Perhaps you’ll enjoy watching me… interrogating… your son. Perhaps he learnt his perversion from you.”

“I’m in here for murdering *a woman!*” Draco shouted.

“Ah. Perhaps you’re disgusted by your son as well. Maybe you’d like to see him scream. Is that why you’re refusing to tell me?” Beecham turned to the other Auror. “Dowling, go and fetch the boy.”

“No!” Malfoy bellowed. “I’ll tell you.” He was shaking. “Felton said that, that – that I would be released if I paid 100,000 galleons into his account,” he shouted.

The Auror turned to his boss.

Felton shook his head. “Wishful thinking, Malfoy. He hasn’t a clue, has he?”

Dowling moved. Draco whipped round, coming to fall at Snape’s feet. “Professor! Please! Please don’t let them hurt Scorpius! He hasn’t done anything =- ”

“Scorpius is safe,” Snape said, bending over the man.

“Promise me! Promise me to keep him safe,” Draco begged.

Snape looked down at him. “Stand up, Draco.”

“Please, I beg you,” Draco said, grabbing his robe.

Beecham stepped forward.

“I promise,” Snape said. “Now stand up.”
The breath whooshed out of Malfoy.

Shakily, he stood.

“Sit, and bare your arm.”

Still shaking, Malfoy did so.

Wasting no time, Snape injected the potion into his vein. He heard one of the Aurors muttering in horror.

He sat down, held up a hand when Felton would have spoken, and looked pointedly at his pocket watch.

When two minutes had passed, he said, “Draco, what was the secret that Auror Felton told you?”

“His favourite dinner is cottage pie,” Draco said, his eyes glassy.

“Merlin’s teeth!” Felton gasped.

“It worked, Sir?”

Felton nodded. “Yes. Through Imperius and Obliviate. Incredible!”

“And now,” Snape said, “I will see what his memories can tell us. Do not disturb either of us for any purpose at all,” Snape said. “If he retches, hold the bucket. Do not speak.”

All three nodded, staring in awe.

“Draco, look at me,” Snape said. “I am going to enter your mind. Do not fight it, it will only be more painful, and you cannot keep me out.”

Draco nodded slowly.

And Snape went in.

He withdrew an indeterminate time later. Draco wavered, one hand gripping the desk, looked around wildly, and threw up.

The vomit splashed all over Beecham’s shoes. Snape did not think it was entirely coincidental.

As the man’s rage and disgust rose, Snape sneered, “Slow reaction time, Auror? I told you to expect vomiting.”

The Auror growled, but cast a spell to clean up the mess, rather than a hex. Draco staggered over to the lavatory in the corner of the cell, and retched again. Severus stood up shakily himself, walked over to the basin and poured water into the mug there. He sipped some himself, and then refilled it and handed it to Draco. Draco rinsed and spat, and then drank a little down.

“Professor,” he began urgently.

“Do not speak of it yet, Draco,” Snape said. “You need to rest, and to dwell on what you saw. I will visit you tomorrow for the follow-up appointment,” he added.
Draco nodded. He moved to the bed, and lowered himself onto the edge, hiding his face in his hands.

“What happens now?” Felton asked.

Snape took two vials from his case. “This,” he said.

He extracted a long skein of memory from his head, and as it floated lightly in the air from the tip of his wand, cast a spell at it with a simple flick. The skein duplicated itself, each section sliding into the vials Snape held ready. He then took another vial from the case, and poured a tiny blob on the end of each stopper, before casting a further spell.

“This is the Ministry copy,” he said, handing one to Felton, and putting the other into the case. “To be kept in safe storage, unopened, until the trial.”

“Ah yes,” Felton said. “That was another matter I meant to mention to you, Malfoy. The trial is set for the day after tomorrow.”

Snape and Malfoy both looked at him.

“How is Mr Malfoy expected to have time to discuss matters with his lawyer?” Snape asked.

“Mr Malfoy has declined to see a lawyer,” Felton said superciliously.

“And if he should wish to change his mind?”

“I won’t,” Draco said, quietly, from the bed.

As the men turned to look at him, he added, “I won’t change my plea either.”

Snape stared hard at Malfoy. “As I said, you should not speak of anything until the effects have worn off. To set the trial for two days time is entirely inappropriate, Felton.”

“It’s alright,” Malfoy said.

“Draco – ”

“Professor,” Malfoy said, suddenly standing up. He seemed to wrap himself in the haughtiness that had often characterized his father. “I said, it’s alright.”

Snape looked at him.

Malfoy seemed to be pulling himself together in a big way. “Head Auror Felton,” he said firmly, “may I ask for writing materials? I would like to write to my son. For after the trial,” he said deliberately.

No man would refuse a father the chance to write a last letter to his child, surely?

“I’ll have them sent along,” Felton agreed.

Snape’s brain was whirling as he repacked his case. Which, given that he was already suffering from a splitting headache, only served to make him feel extremely grouchy.

“If you have any letters you wish me to deliver for you, I will collect them when I call tomorrow,” Snape said. When Draco looked blank, he sneered, “Some people feel a desire to apologise for their actions, for instance. Particularly those who have admitted their guilt.”
Beecham snorted behind him. “You’ve turned soft, Professor, if you expect apologies from the likes of Malfoy. He just wants a clean end, rather than lurking in Azkaban for the rest of his days.”

Snape turned a sharp eye on him, but held on to his temper. “You may be right, of course. Personally, I don’t see anything clean about the Dementor’s Kiss. The family are left knowing that there is a gibbering wreck left mouldering in Azkaban.” He saw Draco flinch. “Of course, you’re correct, the guilty person doesn’t have to worry. Not that we know of, anyway. It has always seemed more a punishment of the family than the culprit, to me.”

He could see Dowling shiver, thinking about it. Draco was as white as a sheet.

“I thought execution was the sentence for murder nowadays?” he whispered.

“I am not so familiar with the system in England any more,” Snape said. “The Wizengamot will decide, no doubt,” he added, his voice unconcerned. He picked up his case. “Well, gentlemen, shall we go? I have documentation to complete and a head fit to split.”

The men laughed, and they left the cell. At the warder’s desk, Snape handed over the *Dreamless Sleep* potion, with strict instructions on the necessity of administering it if the subject was to be fit to stand trial.

As they headed for the lifts, he turned to Beecham. “You were extremely effective at getting under Malfoy’s skin,” he commented.

“Thanks,” Beecham preened.

“How did you come to know so much about his son?”

“Oh, my boy was at school with him. Said he made no effort to hide his perversion.”

“Really? Boys kissing in the corridors? Times have changed.”

“Merlin’s balls, don’t make me vomit!” Beecham mimed doing just that.

“I’m not sure I understand you, then. What happened?”

“Kept taking this boy back to his room. When his year-mates objected, he went to the Headmaster. Said all sixth-formers had the right to privacy in their own chambers, and demanded to know what had changed to alter that.”

“He is perfectly correct,” Snape commented. “But I fail to understand why this was an issue. As you may know, I was a Head of House for many years. The older students have gone and locked themselves into each other’s chambers since Hogwarts began, I expect. Those canoodling with the fairer sex were far less of a worry than boys, who were usually hatching plans for stupid pranks.”

“Ah, well, there you have it!” Beecham said.

They had reached the bank of lifts. Felton and Dowling, ahead of them, had already pressed the button to summon it.

Beecham leant in towards Snape in a confidential manner. Snape inclined his head towards him. “They weren’t hatching pranks! ‘Canoodling’ as you call it; that’s what they were up to!”

Snape stood upright. “It sounds like a tale a pupil has made up,” he said derisively. “If they had locked their door, how would anyone know what they were up to?”
“Set up a monitoring spell, they did,” Beecham said proudly.

Snape looked at him, and bent forward, as if sharing an amusing confidence. “You wouldn’t have had anything to do with teaching them how to do that, of course,” he said knowingly.

Beecham chuckled. “Me? No,” he said, in a tone which implied exactly the opposite.

“I don’t know the new headmaster. What did he do?”

Beecham’s face turned sour. “Can you believe it? He upheld Malfoy’s point. Said the sixth formers, especially in the final year, were all of legal age, and the school made the assumption that it was appropriate to treat them as reasonable, law-abiding adults. That spells were in place to stop students harming others within the castle, and that no further action was needed. Disgusted, I was. Nearly took my boy out.”

“You don’t agree that the pupils ought to have the same legal rights as they would have in the wider world?”

“I don’t want my boy anywhere near fags!”

Snape stepped into the lift, which had now arrived.

Interestingly, Felton was busy looking anywhere but at them, ignoring the conversation as publicly as he could, whilst Dowling was hanging his head, hands in his robe pockets.

Intriguing, Snape thought.

“What time is the trial, Auror Felton?” Snape asked, changing the subject.

“Hmmm? Oh, yes, you’ll need to be there, I expect? 11.30am.”

“I will rearrange my commitments,” Snape said, pointing out the inconvenience of the lack of notice.

The lift clanged to a stop, and they exited. Felton extended his hand. “Glad to see Veritaserox in use. I’m sure we’ll be calling on you a great deal in future, Master Snape.”

Snape shook it, saying nothing. Dowling extended his rather warily. Snape shook it too, looking sharply at the man. Beecham stretched his out, smiling widely at Snape. Snape pulled the man towards him and whispered in his ear, keeping hold of his hand. “Watch yourself. You never know where they are.”

Beecham nodded vigorously, looking pleased at being singled out.

Snape looked forward to enlightening him at some future point.
Harry’s floo flared, and Severus Snape stepped through.  
He shook his robe, the soot disappearing with a spell.  
“Tea, Potter.” he demanded.  
“Come through,” Harry said, leading the way to the kitchen. “How did it go?” He put the kettle on. He was pretty sure that Severus would be a man to prefer the water boiled properly, rather than by magic.  
“Get Kingsley here and I will tell you all. Do you have a pensieve, or should he bring one? And I presume your floo is sealed to strangers?”  
“Yes, no and yes,” Harry said. “Why?”  
“I suspect you will be bombarded with calls otherwise. And owls.”  
“I’ll get Kingsley. And the pensieve. Do you need a pain potion? Or – of course, you probably have some -”  
“Why do you ask that?”  
“I know I’m not much good at it, but Legilimency always gives me a really shitty headache. You look a bit – pinched. Careful how you move. I wondered if you had one.”  
Snape was surprised that Potter had noticed. And it was a brave man who offered a standard potion to a Potions Master.  
“You are correct, but I have a potion with me. It works best with tea.”  
“Coming up in a moment,” Harry said.  
Harry strode back into the other room; shortly after, he returned with Shacklebolt, and the pensieve that used to belong to Dumbledore. The kettle was just beginning to boil. Harry went and fiddled with the teapot and cups. He turned round to see Shacklebolt standing behind Snape, his hand lightly on his shoulder. Snape’s hand reached up and their fingers slipped together for a moment, before Kingsley pulled out the chair next to his lover and sat down.  
He reached across and poured out the tea that Harry had set on the table. “Severus is always parched afterwards,” he said, as he handed the man the mug. He pulled some chocolate from his pocket and set it down in front of Snape.  
“I’ve got some,” Snape said.  
“Ah well. Thought I’d bring it in case you forgot,” Kingsley said easily.  
Harry had taken over the teapot and poured two more cups, then sat back, drinking it. Snape took the potion, sipped the tea and nibbled at the chocolate.  
Harry found himself impatient, now that they were here, to know what Snape had found out. Manners won out, however.
“Do you need to eat? Can I make you a meal?” he asked.

“Severus is likely to feel sick for a while,” Kingsley said, as Snape shook his head with the stiff, limited movement of someone holding back pain.

“I’m sorry,” said Harry.

Snape looked sharply at him.

“I didn’t think about the adverse affects on you.”

“Apart from the effects of a lengthy Legilimency session, you didn’t think I would have any response to witnessing a murder?” Snape said.

Harry’s mouth opened and shut. “I’m sorry,” he said again, “I really didn’t think about that side of it. I know that’s appalling of me.” He hesitated. “May I ask what you saw?”

“I made two copies,” Snape said. “One has gone into evidence at the Ministry.” He pulled a vial out of his pocket and put it on the table next to the pensieve. “This is the other. I’d like Kingsley to look at it as well. I’d like to finish my tea first.”

“Is – was I right?” Harry asked. “Was it a false memory?”

“You were right,” Snape acknowledged.

A few minutes later, they all took the plunge.

It was horrid going back into the bedroom again, witnessing it all again, and yet at first, it felt unreal to Harry, like a film that didn’t involve him. He was horrified to find that he could watch dispassionately, seeing Malfoy kissing up Ginny’s leg. He felt the outsider, looking in on the intimacy of two lovers.

Then, suddenly, there was a moment when what Harry had seen previously shifted.

Fifteen minutes later, they exited.

There was silence.

“More tea, I think,” Harry said, moving to the kettle. His hands were shaking.

Kingsley walked over and put his hands over Harry’s, removing the kettle from his grasp. “Go find the firewhisky,” he said gently.

Harry nodded dumbly, and strode out of the room. His shoulder hit the door-frame.

“Shock,” Kingsley said, filling the kettle himself and setting it to boil.

“Yes,” Snape agreed.

Kingsley came and sat at the table. “You okay?” He reached a hand across, just touching Snape’s fingers for a moment, withdrawing it as Harry came back in with the bottle.
Harry’s eyebrows drew together. “Don’t do that because of me,” he said sharply.

“What?” Snape looked up.

“Stop holding hands. Ron and Hermione keep pulling apart when I walk into the room, as if I can’t want anyone else to be happy because I’m alone. They still do it even though they know Ginny and I were planning to divorce. It’s ridiculous.”

“I’m not really the hand-holding type,” Snape said drily.

“Doesn’t it bother you that we’re men?” Kingsley asked.

“What, because two men don’t deserve happiness? I don’t understand people,” Harry said. “I’ve been lonely for a long time. I’ve got the children, of course, so not lonely-lonely. But I look at people who’re happy together and it’s nice. Frankly, at this point, I could feel squishy just seeing Mrs Figg and her cats.”

“Squishy?” Kingsley was laughing.

“Well,” Harry gave a little grin. He’d picked up some glasses for the whisky and slid them onto the table, reaching for the bottle to pour them all some. “Mushy and jealous at the same time, I guess.”

“Potter, if you feel jealous of Mrs Figg and her cats, you need to get laid,” Snape said.

“Severus!” Kingsley’s look of shock turned to a glare in moments.

“What?” Snape said. “I’m sorry, but it is a fact that Potter is not likely to have been having sexual relations since his wife died. Even I would think that it would appear to be inappropriate behaviour to seek someone out at this time. Nevertheless, the plain fact of the matter is that he is likely to be feeling sexually frustrated, which being the heterosexual that he is, he probably terms in romantic feelings of needing to be touched and cuddled.”

“You’re a bastard, you know that?” Kingsley said. He turned to Harry. “I can’t apologise for him, he’d hex me, but I’m sorry.” He turned to Snape again. “And as you well know, I don’t mind a cuddle myself, and neither did you, when I last looked, which was this morning, so cut the condescending heterosexual crap.”

“God, I didn’t mean to turn a touching moment into an argument,” Harry said, looking from one to the other.

“Living with Snape is a constant argument,” Kingsley said, pouring the tea.

“You like me telling the truth,” Snape shrugged. “You just don’t like the embarrassment it causes.”

It was impossible not to grin. Harry chuckled. It tried to turn into a laugh. It was surprising how much it relieved the tension.

“Well,” said Snape, as Harry was wiping tears from his eyes with the back of his hand, “they say laughter is the next best stress relief, after sex.”

Harry giggled again. Kingsley was chuckling too, and Snape smirking. Harry wondered if he had deliberately done it to break the tension.

“Right,” Kingsley said at last, when they had finished both their tea and firewhisky. “Comments?”
“He’s innocent,” Harry said at once.

Kingsley nodded. “Did you recognise any of the attackers? I know they had masks on, but anything about their posture, or gait? Did anything seem familiar?”

Harry bit back his automatic negative response and reviewed the scene in his mind. Three attackers, who had burst into the room, stunning and petrifying Malfoy before throwing him to the side. And then proceeded to beat Ginny viciously, before all three of them stood over her and threw *Sectumsempra* at her. They all stood there, calmly waiting whilst she screamed, till she had bled to death. Then one of them memory-charmed Malfoy. The look on Ginny’s face when she realised that she was bound and helpless and unable to reach her wand was unbearable. And as for the look on Malfoy’s face when he snapped back to consciousness seconds after the attackers left the room….poor bastard.

He forced himself to think of the attackers: there had been a lot of movement: none of it, though, pressed any memory buttons. “Nothing familiar,” he shook his head. “They all knew *Sectumsempra*, though: how is that? I thought you’d kept that one to yourself, Snape? And the one who memory-charmed Malfoy – I didn’t know that spell he used. He must have been good, though. Does Malfoy know what really happened now that you’ve rifled through his brain?”

“He does,” Snape said. “As for *Sectumsempra*, the use of my spell has puzzled me considerably since you first mentioned it. It was obviously a deliberate, premeditated choice. What were they trying to say? To whom? And as for the memory-charm, it would need a wizard who had studied the art to know and wield it so effectively. This combination must narrow down the field of possible suspects.”

Kinglsey nodded. “Let’s state the obvious too: do we agree that all the attackers were men?”

Harry had assumed they were. Now he thought again of those three robed forms. Could any of them have been a woman? “I think they were all men. One was a little shorter, but then, I’m short.”

“I tend to agree, but we need to keep an open mind on that one. Severus, what do you think?”

“I agree, probably wizards, but we need to be cautious about that assumption.”

“But,” Harry said, his hands raking his hair, “I mean, who? Who would want to kill Ginny? Why?”

“That is the question,” Snape said. “*And* want to set Draco Malfoy up at the same time. Otherwise, they could have killed her in the street.”

“They obviously knew enough about her life to know that she and Malfoy were involved,” Kingsley said. “How many people knew, do you think, Harry?”

“They were discreet,” Harry said. “There was never anything in the papers.”

“Malfoy owns *The Prophet*, of course,” Snape noted, “so that’s one major scandal-rag dealt with.”

“Yeah, and the *Quibbler* wouldn’t, I don’t think, not without coming to us first, anyway, and Luna never came to me. But there’s still *Witch Weekly*, and all the *quidditch* magazines – it would have been big news for them, a club owner with a player.”

“So, it wasn’t public knowledge. And whoever found out, wasn’t interested in the money they could have made selling the story.”

“Let’s see if we can narrow this down,” Snape said. “Did you tell anyone, Potter? Anyone at all?”
“No.”

“Are you sure?” Kingsley asked. “Not in all this time? It’s a long time to keep a secret.”

“Not when you were drunk?” Snape said. “You didn’t even confide in Granger?”

Harry shook his head.

“Why not?” Snape asked.

Harry looked up, eyes snapping. “She’s married to Ron!”

“You don’t think she can keep a secret?” Shacklebolt suggested.

“I’m sure she can,” Harry said aggressively, “but it wouldn’t have been fair to ask her to keep something like that from Ron, would it?”

“And you didn’t discuss it with the children?”

“No!”

“Stop getting flustered,” Snape said coolly.

“This is my life!” Harry snapped.

“I know,” Kingsley said, reaching out a hand to touch Harry’s in a brief gesture.

He was a very touchy-feely person, Harry thought. He wondered wistfully what it would be like to live with someone like that.

“Sorry,” he said. “I know you’re only trying to help.”

Shacklebolt breathed in deeply. “We are.”

There was a pause.

“Is there a big ‘but’ hanging in the air?” Harry asked, looking from one to the other.

“It’s not so much a but, as that I think there’s a bigger picture,” Kingsley said. “Look, it’s about time I told you I’m not exactly a layman sitting here giving you my five sickles worth.”

Harry looked at him. “What does that mean? I’ve been laying my life out here, Kingsley. Tell me you’re not still an Auror or a…a …reporter or someone who’s going to use this against me.”

“Do you want to find out the truth, Harry? About what happened to Ginny?”

“Yes, but I’d also like some truth from you. I assumed I was talking to a friend.”

“You are. And when you came to us, I was just Severus’ sidekick, because you were really after him. But now I can see that something is going on, that one, I need to be involved with, and two, I hope I can help you with.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly. “You’d better tell me, then.”

“When I left the Ministry, and went to live out in Spain, I really turned my back on what was happening in Britain. I’d come to love Severus,” he said, looking across at the still man sitting opposite him, “and there was no way I could acknowledge that and remain as Minister for Magic.
The post-war clean-up was more or less set up, so I was happy to leave it.”

“Really?” Harry said. He glanced at Snape. “But you gave everything up – ”

Kingsley shook his head. “I’d learnt what was important. Severus has been the best thing that has ever happened to me. I’d been a closeted queer for years – there’s no way I could have kept my post as an Auror if it had become known, which meant my liaisons were few and far between and mostly in the Muggle world. Which meant even when I was able to be open about being gay, I had to hide the fact that I was a wizard. As Minister, there was just no way I could be out, and of course, there was hardly any time to be with Severus either. I have no regrets at all. “

Harry looked at Snape, at the contentment on his face.

“You don’t have any trouble in Spain? Being together?” Harry clarified, his finger waving between the two of them.

“Nope, it’s not an issue there at all. The wizarding community is very laid back. I think it’s all the sun and sangria,” Kingsley gave a wry smile.

“So something has changed?” Harry prompted. “Recently?”

“Well, not really recently. I was perfectly happy with the olive grove and the vineyard, and doing a bit of charms teaching at the university in Madrid, but then I was approached by the European Wizarding Alliance and asked to set up a task force. It was intriguing, and maybe necessary, and we all like to feel we have expertise that people need. I agreed to a two-year contract. That was three years ago.”

“What does the task force do?” Harry asked.

“Essentially, trying to keep the peace between the member nations, and prevent the rise of wacky factions. Lets just say that some of the other members of the Alliance regard Voldemort and the Death Eater movement as a wacky faction. That’s the sort of thing we’re trying to nip in the bud.”

“That sounds a little worrying, actually,” Harry said.

“Yeah, it is, of course, to think of all these nutters and then the less nutty and a hell of a lot more worrying types – “

“No, I mean the ‘nip it in the bud’ idea. It sounds like you might be trying to take away free speech.”

Snape and Shacklebolt stared at him. A gleam came into Snape’s eye. “Well. You have grown up,” he commented.

He sounded almost approving.

“Come on! I’m heading for a half century here! I might not be the brightest button in the box but I am occasionally capable of stringing two thoughts together.”

The two men grinned, and then Kingsley turned serious. “It’s a good point. We’re not trying to take away free speech, or even free thought. Merlin knows, I know what oppression is. But violence is another matter, and groups wanting to take away the rights of others too. We watch and monitor before we jump in. Believe me, most of the cases we look at come to nothing at all.”

Harry looked steadily at Kingsley. Over the past decade, when his children being at school had
made him reassess his own time at Hogwarts, and the fight against Voldemort, he could not believe how naïve he had been, how he had just done what was expected of him – and most of it because Dumbledore expected it, and he had liked and respected the man.

Well, he liked and respected Kingsley, but he was not going to be a walkover again. On the other hand, Kingsley hadn’t asked for anything yet.

“Okay. So you think you need to be involved. You think Ginny was killed by one of your nutter groups?”

“One of the more worrying ones,” Kingsley said. “I’ve seen those masks before, but we’ve never had a report of them being used in Britain. This is important.”

“Who are they? What do you know about them? What other things have they been doing? And why would they murder Ginny?”

“And frame Draco, rather than taking responsibility,” Snape added. “It’s hardly promoting their cause if no-one knows their involvement. The Death Eaters always flaunted their crimes.”

“They’d appeared just before I’d been called in. Their trademark, unlike the Death Eaters, as you say, Severus, is to do what they do quietly and without any pomp. It’s been incredibly hard to find out their motives – it’s more a matter of building a picture based on what they’ve done. This is another piece in the puzzle –”.

Harry’s brows drew together: Ginny’s death was not some minor link –

“I don’t mean that in any disrespectful way, Harry. But what they’ve done here is really important. It’s the first time they’ve struck in England, as far as we know. It’s the first time that we’ve come across memory-charming, but the skill with which that was used suggests that it certainly isn’t the first time they’ve done it, and that means that what we know about them is an even smaller picture than we thought before. They could be responsible for lots of crimes that we thought we had the culprit for. We don’t know who the primary target was here –”

“Ginny is dead!” Harry snapped.

“Yes, but Draco Malfoy is as good as, and with his reputation and empire ruined to boot. If it was an attack against him, it’s far more effective than merely killing him.”

Harry took a shuddering breath.

“Before you lay any blame on Malfoy, despite knowing he is innocent –” Snape began.

“If Ginny was killed just as a pawn to get at him –” Harry bit out.

“She could just as easily have been killed as a pawn to get at you,” Snape said uncompromisingly.

“I’m not anyone anymore,” Harry shook his head. “I’ve worked hard not to be anyone.”

“Well, you’re a fool,” Snape said. “You will always be the Vanquisher of Voldemort, however much you try to hide away.”

Harry passed his hand shakily across his face.

Kingsley again reached out and touched his arm. “If that is the case, you did all you could to tie down the risks. Ginny knew when she married you who you were. But let’s not forget, that she was
major figure in her own right. She may well have been the prime target. We can be pretty sure, though, from the fact that the killers wore those masks, that it wasn’t motivated by team rivalry.”

“Team rivalry! God!” Harry exclaimed.

“It’s been known to happen. Ginny Potter was a world famous player. There have been incidents in the past where players have been injured by other teams, or even by players in the second team, hoping to get promoted. Not to mention The Kingston Kites – you’ve heard of them, of course.”

Harry shook his head, looking bewildered.

“The whole team were killed off by a fan of the team they defeated in the World Cup.”

“My god, you’re kidding? When did that happen?”

“1742, so not exactly recent. But motivation doesn’t change much. It’s one of the examples you cover in Auror training: sometimes there’s a simple explanation, rather than a complex one.”

“But not for Ginny, from the look of it. Malfoy’s confession shut down any chance of a decent investigation at the time, didn’t it? I suppose they would have looked into all these possibilities? It’ll be hard for them to get it going after the time delay,” Harry said. “Not that that’s Malfoy’s fault. Poor bastard, thinking all this time that he’d done it. He must feel like a weight’s been taken off his shoulders. What?” Harry said, looking at Snape who was shifting in his chair.

“He was obviously still in shock, of course, but Malfoy said that he wasn’t going to change his plea.”

“What?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Kingsley said.

Harry stood up shakily. He strode across the kitchen, over to the window, and then back. “I think the pillock is trying to be noble.”

“By dying for something he didn’t do?” Kingsley asked.

Harry sat down heavily. “If the case is investigated, what he and Ginny were doing in the bedroom will come to light. If he pleads guilty, it won’t.”

“He’s more worried about his reputation than his life?” Shacklebolt queried.

“No. Ginny’s.”

“I think you may be right, Potter,” Snape agreed.

It was at that moment that an owl rapped sharply on the window with its beak.
Harry liked having a decent kitchen table. Sitting round the table always, somehow, meant family to him. It had always been a place of lively discussions, the children arguing, jokes being told, and comfort.

So it was a bit odd seeing Lily sitting there, staring, at Severus Snape. Harry was cooking some dinner. He’d sent a quick owl order out to the butchers and greengrocers, and was knocking up a spaghetti Bolognese. He could have ordered take-away, but he’d needed something to do. So there was Snape, standing at the worktop chopping onions, and Kingsley opening a bottle of red wine, and Lily, just sitting, watching.

He heard the clatter of floo, and then the quick step that he recognised as Al’s. Lily leapt out of her chair and shot out of the door. He heard the floo flare again, the retreat of the footsteps, and then the whispered mumblings of the kids talking together.

Snape glanced across at Harry. “Sure you don’t want us to go?”

“No, I think it will be easier if they see you,” Harry said, “and Kingsley, and realise how serious this is.”

“She’ll be telling them we’re here, then,” Kingsley said, sniffling the wine.

“Probably best,” Harry agreed.

The next moment the three of them were framed in the doorway. Harry turned to look at them, proud and anxious at the same time.

“The old friends you mentioned,” James said, his eyes meeting his father’s.

“Exactly,” Harry agreed. “Let me introduce you.” Kingsley had stepped forward, and Harry said, “Kingsley, these are my sons, James and Albus. Boys, Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

Shacklebolt shook hands with each in turn.

“And this,” Harry said, turning to the man who remained at the worktop with a wicked knife in his hand, “may come as a surprise. Professor Snape, may I introduce James and Albus.”

The boys headed across the room, but were stopped in their tracks when Snape said, “I’ll not shake your hands.”

James looked startled.

Snape indicated the chopping board. “I stink of onions.”

“Could be worse,” Harry said. “It could have been bubotuber pus.”

“In your Bolognese? Maybe we’ll eat at home, Kingsley,” Snape said.

Harry laughed. “I just always associated you with potions’ ingredients.”


Harry laughed again.
His children glanced at each other, curious at the interaction.

Albus stepped forward. “I’m pleased to meet you, Professor. I’m named after you.”

“You’re father always was prone to bouts of stupidity,” Snape said, which made Albus grin.

“Only bouts? I’ll take that as a compliment, then,” Harry threw back.

“Is there anything we can do to help?” Albus asked, looking at the progress of the meal. “Are we having garlic bread with it?”

“We are if you want to make some,” Harry said equably. “There’s a French stick in the bread bin you can use.”

Albus strolled across the kitchen and got the loaf. James looked round and fetched the glasses for the wine Shacklebolt had opened, then sat down at the table opposite the man. “Can I pour you a glass, Mr Shacklebolt?” he asked politely.

“Please,” he smiled at the young man.

“Good lord, Potter, either your children are the best behaved youngsters that I’ve ever encountered, or the least curious people on the planet.” Snape handed Harry the board with the onions on.

“Oh, we’re curious enough,” Albus answered. “But no doubt you’ll tell us in your own time. Otherwise Dad wouldn’t have asked us to come.”

“And if you don’t say now, we’ll get it out of Dad later,” Lily said, getting up and getting a jug of pumpkin juice to add to the table.

“Really?” Snape looked at Potter. “Can’t keep a secret from the kids?”

“I think he’s proved that’s not the case,” James said, taking a sip of the wine.

“What do you mean? I can always get Dad to spill stuff.” Lily was indignant.

“I suspect, only stuff he doesn’t mind spilling,” James argued.

“Speak for yourself,” Lily snorted, leaning back in her chair and folding her arms.

“He didn’t tell any of us about Mum and Malfoy,” James said, “so get off your high horse, Lils.”

“Good point,” Albus chipped in. He was busy squeezing garlic through a press into a bowl of butter.

“Humff.” Lily was silent for a moment.

Harry stirred in the mushrooms Snape passed him, and the tomatoes he’d been chopping himself. James had poured wine for his father and Snape and took the glasses over.

“Thank you,” Snape nodded. “Anything else, Potter?”

“No, sit down and make yourself comfortable,” Harry shook his head. “I’m nearly there with this.” He poured in half a bottle of red wine that stood beside him, and added some stock that was steaming in a jug. “I’ll give it ten minutes and then put the pasta on. Lils, grate some cheese and put it in a bowl, would you?”
Lily got up and fetched the cheese and grater. Harry handed her a bowl from the dresser.

“So,” she said.

“Here it comes,” James groaned.

What?”

“It’s like watching your brain work,” he grinned.

Albus was smiling too as he popped the garlic bread into the oven. “Alright if we have this as a starter, Dad? I’m starving.”

“Nothing new there, then,” Lily teased.

“Yeah, yeah. What outstanding statement were you about to come out with?”

“Hey! I bet you were thinking the same thing.”

“Well, we’ll never know till you actually tell us,” Albus prompted.

“I just wanted to know,” Lily said, putting her elbow into grating the cheese, “what other secrets you’ve been keeping from us, Dad.”

“Grown ups don’t have to tell you everything, you know,” Harry replied, coming to sit down himself.

“We’re grown up,” Lily protested.

“So are Ron and Hermione, but I don’t tell them everything either,” Harry said.

“Really?” James and Snape spoke in unison.

“Really, you cheeky sods! And by the way, they’ll be here in a minute.” Harry went over to the drawer in the dresser, counting out knives and forks and spoons, then passing them to James to pass along. He looked up. “There are…secrets…that I want to talk to you all about, and I wouldn’t if you weren’t adults too. And I’ll need you to behave like adults,” Harry said seriously.

“About Mum?”

“Yes. Draco Malfoy’s trial is in two days. But we’ll eat first, and then talk.”

The floo sounded in the other room.

“If you’re looking for reactions, Snape, this should be interesting,” Harry said.

Snape sat down and picked up his wine glass.

“Just look like we’re having a normal family mealtime,” Lily leant forward, looking round the table, whispering conspiratorially.

The boys’ eyes were twinkling and Harry too couldn’t help but be amused. He noted that James and Al both shifted their chairs to get a good look at the door.

“So, are you still working in Potions, Professor?” Lily asked, turning to engage Snape, at the same moment that Kingsley too opened up a conversational gambit with James: “Harry says you work
for a travel agency. There was no such thing when we were young, was there, Severus? Tell me what you do. What age are most of your clients?"

“Well fuck me, it’s true!” Ron said from the doorway. “Merlin’s bollocks! And – Minister Shacklebolt? Bloody hell!”

“Wonderful language, Ron, thanks for that,” Harry said.

“Oh, no?” Ron shrugged. “Sorry, all.”

Hermione slid into the room. “I think Ron means it’s lovely to see you,” she said, giving her husband a look and heading over to Snape. “This is an unexpected pleasure, Sir,” she added, extending her hand.

Snape rose elegantly from his seat and shook it. “Miss Granger. Or I presume it’s Mrs Weasley?”

“Oh yes, who else would have put up with me?” she chuckled.

Snape raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Ron was already shaking hands with Kingsley, who was insisting Ron use his first name. Kingsley turned to Hermione and gave her a hug.

Ron shook hands with Snape. “You certainly caused chaos today! The Ministry’s being humming with rumours! Some people saying that you’d been seen, and others telling them they were idiots. I was so looking forward to telling Harry all about it!”

“I’m sorry to spoil your fun,” Snape responded.

Ron grinned. “It’ll be even better tomorrow. There’ll be rumours that you’re a vampire, or something. You’re not, are you?”

“Sorry to disappoint you yet again.”

“No lost the snark, anyway,” Ron grinned. “No need to worry that you’re poyjuiced: no one snarks like you do.”

“I’m not sure whether to be offended or complimented,” Snape said.

“No bloomin’ idea myself,” Ron agreed. “James, what does a man have to do to get a drink around here? Are you in charge of that bottle, or what? Do Hermione first, though, before she throttles me.”

And within moments, they were all sat around the table, drinking and chatting. Snape exchanged a glance with Shacklebolt. Maybe resurrection wasn’t so hard after all.

They had had some cake made by their house elf, Mitty, and a box of chocolates that a well-wisher had obscurely sent after Ginny’s death, for dessert. James got up to make coffee.

Albus and Lily cleared the plates and put them in the sink, setting the washing spells to work. Albus flicked another spell over it as he sat down. Harry smiled at him in thanks as he realised that he’d cast a silencing spell over the cleaning operation so that the clatter would not disrupt them.
“Right,” he said. “Now for the difficult bit.” He took a breath.

All eyes were on him.

As I think you all know, I went to see Malfoy.”

“Because Scorpius asked you to?” Albus asked.

Harry shook his head. “Because I needed to see him. I wanted to find out what exactly had happened to Mum.”

“And?” Ron prompted.

“Well, I came away a bit shocked, to be honest. Malfoy let me use *Legimency* on him – “

“Really?” Hermione said.

Harry nodded. “To cut a long story short, he didn’t do it.”

“He could have made a fake memory to make you think that,” Ron said, after a moment.

“He wouldn’t have pleaded guilty if that was the case,” Hermione argued.

“He wouldn’t have pleaded guilty if he knew he was innocent,” Ron countered.

“Actually,” Harry said, “he’s intending to. He thought he was guilty. Now he knows he’s innocent, but he’s not changing his plea.”

“I feel like you’re missing out a whole lot of steps, here, Dad,” James said. “Can you back up a bit?”


“Well, there’s the pot calling the kettle,” Harry said indignantly.

“No-one was ever confused – “

“Yes, yes,” Kingsley interrupted, “lets not start a slanging match on suitability for teaching, shall we?”

Harry grinned. “Okay,” he said, getting serious again. “I thought there was something dodgy about Malfoy’s memory, but I couldn’t pin it down at first. When I realised that it was really off, I went to Professor Snape for help.”

“And you knew just where to find him?” Ron questioned.

“Ah,” Harry said, knowing Ron was going to give him hell later, “more or less. Anyway, Snape – sorry Prof – I mean, Master Snape – went to see Draco –“

“Because of your past ties?” Hermione asked, delicately.

“Because Snape legilimized him with *Veritaserox,*” Harry cut across Snape, who was about to answer.

“Really?” Hermione was almost bouncing in her seat.
“That’s the first time it’s been used in Britain,” Ron said. “Wow.” He turned to Harry. “You knew the Professor would know how to use it?”

“Actually, I thought he could point me to someone who could,” Harry admitted. He wasn’t sure whether he was allowed to say that Snape had invented it.

“But I thought there was hardly anyone in the world allowed to use it,” Hermione’s brow was furrowed. “They’re registered. Pardon me, Sir, but won’t it negate the validity of the results that you aren’t one of the authorised users?”

Snape and Shacklebolt were smiling.

“What are we missing?” Lily said. “Hold on – we did a project on patenting last term. Unusually, the inventor’s name has been withheld – ”

“Did you invent it, Sir?” Albus interrupted.

“I was about to ask that!” Lily gave Albus a mock glare.

“I did,” Snape answered simply.

“I’ve been wondering who the inventor was!” Hermione exclaimed. “No wonder I couldn’t fix on anyone.”

“Being considered dead does tend to rule one out,” Snape agreed, with a twisted smile.

“So, what did you find?” James asked, getting straight to the point.

“Malfoy had been implanted with a false memory. In fact, three masked attackers killed your mother,” Snape said calmly.

“Death Eaters?” Ron asked, face grim.

“No. Not in their old incarnation, anyway,” Snape said.

“Thank Merlin,” Ron breathed.

They all looked at him.

“If it was a Death Eater, it would have been my fault,” Ron explained. “It’s my job to keep my eye on them.”

“It’s no-one’s fault but the perpetrators,” Kingsley said firmly.

“Do you have any idea who they were?” Hermione asked.

“Personally? No,” Snape shook his head.

“There’s a big ‘but’ there,” Hermione deduced.

“I’ve seen the memory,” Shacklebolt said, and when they all turned to look at him, went on, “Harry and I both did earlier when Severus got back. I’ve seen the type of mask they were wearing before, in Europe.”

“Are you working on that international team?” Ron asked.
“You’ve heard of it?”

“Yes, but we haven’t had anything to do with it,” Ron said.

“You will now,” Kingsley said heavily.

Ron nodded. “God, it’ll be good to work with someone who knows what he’s doing,” he said, his hand brushing back his hair.

“That’s a comment to talk about later,” Kingsley raised his eyebrows.


“You do,” Harry agreed, realising what Ron meant. “Even if he was guilty.”

“Come on,” Ron remonstrated, “you can’t blame me for punching him when he’d admitted killing my sister!”

“You think it’s right that he had broken ribs and could barely stand upright, do you?” Harry demanded.

“What?” Hermione stared.

“I never did any such thing!” Ron glared.

“No, maybe not, but the guards felt just as entitled to work him over,” Harry said.

“Shit!” Ron exclaimed. He spread his hands. “I had no idea, I swear – ”

“So is he still pleading guilty because he’s scared of what will happen if he’s freed?” James wondered. “There’s obviously these masked gits who’ve got it in for him, he must be wondering whether any odd Auror will hex him in a dark alley…”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Harry said. He sat back for a moment, then pulled a parchment from his pockets and spread it out on the table. “I don’t think he’d leave Scorpius for that. He’s doing it to protect Ginny’s name. To protect us,” he said quietly. “He sent me this this afternoon.” Harry read out the letter.

Potter,

Firstly, I wanted to thank you from the bottom of my heart for sending Professor Snape. I don’t know if you knew that my memory was not right, but I cannot think of another reason why you might have requested the use of Veritaserox.

To know that I did not kill Gin is the greatest relief. The horror that has burdened the days since she died – my self-loathing – I can lay aside. I can only feel guilty that I did not prevent those men from doing what they did.

I can go to my death with my conscience much eased, and I thank you.
I will, of course, keep my promise to keep the relationship I had with Ginevra a secret. I will not be changing my plea, so rest assured that the world will not know anything that could be harmful to Gin’s memory, or could in any way distress your children.

My only reservations about this course of action are that my son will be left alone in the world, and will continue to think his father a murderer. Scorpius is an astonishing man, and I know is capable of looking after himself and making his own way in the world. Nevertheless, Potter, I need to ask you to keep the promise you made to me in the cell to keep an eye on him, and to help him if he needs it.

I know that my guilty plea will mean that the Ministry will shut the case, and the killers will be free. I have faith, however, in your tenacity, and I am sure that you will do all in your power to seek out the perpetrators and bring them to whatever form of justice you feel to be appropriate.

I made you a promise to take care of Ginny, and I failed her and I failed you, and I failed your children.

I cannot forgive myself.

Draco Malfoy

“I don’t understand,” Lily said. “You’ve already told me – told us – that Mum and Malfoy were planning on marrying. Doesn’t he know that we know? I mean, I know there will be comments when it gets out, but he can’t just let himself be killed, or Kissed, or whatever, for that!”

Harry gritted his teeth. Again, he wished he hadn’t been so inadequate: if he had been able to meet Ginny’s needs, maybe none of this would have happened.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Look,” he said. His hand rubbed over his chin. He felt hot and flushed. “Look, kids, you know, when we first heard, when I was trying to prepare you…”

“When you said they thought Mum had been raped?” Albus picked up the line of thought.

Harry nodded.

“But she wasn’t, I presume – oh sweet Merlin, those men didn’t - ?”

“No!” Harry said explosively. “No, not that,” he added more calmly. “Look, I have to be blunt here, alright? The whole memory isn’t wrong – “

“So Mum and Malfoy are having sex in it?” Albus asked.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“And that would have to be shown to the Wizengamot for Malfoy to be freed,” James deduced.

“It would,” Shacklebolt said, “though you could ask for a closed session. Then the press would not be able to view it, and comment.”
“So, all the Wizengamot watching Mum shagging,” James said.

“Yeah,” Harry rubbed his neck. The words were tight in his throat. “Look,” he ground out, “this is hard to say.”

“What Potter is trying to get out,” Snape said, “is that adults often play bedroom games. To cut your father’s squirming short, your mother was handcuffed to the bed. Wearing stockings and stilettos. To free Malfoy, this would have to be shown. And although the Wizengamot might show the memory in closed session, you can bet that the story will be all over the papers the next day. And you will have to face the fallout.”

“You’re a bastard, Snape,” Ron said. “Still.”

“He’s said exactly what I was trying to say,” Harry defended Snape. “How was I supposed to find words to say that to the kids?”

“Do we have to see it, Dad?” James asked.

“You will if you attend the case,” Shacklebolt said. “You don’t have to attend, of course.”

“And watch Mum being murdered?” James said.

Harry, glancing at Shacklebolt, nodded.

“So Malfoy is willing to die, for something he didn’t do, to protect us?” Lily asked slowly.

Harry nodded.

“No wonder Mum liked him,” she said.

They all turned to stare at her.

“What? Mum must have found him special to want to have a relationship with him when she already had Dad,” she argued. “When she had so much to lose. There had to be something extraordinary about him.”

“That’s a very good point, Lily,” Hermione agreed. “But I can’t balance that with leaving Scorpius. Not for something he didn’t do.”

“Without meaning any offence, Mrs Weasley,” Shacklebolt said, “it may be that you don’t fully understand the power of a wizarding promise.”

Hermione’s head whipped round to look at Harry. “Did he make an Unbreakable Vow to you, then?”

“No, of course not!” Harry said.

“It doesn’t need to be fixed with a spell,” Kingsley said. “In old families, to break a promise would be regarded as showing the most appalling lack of moral fibre. Many of the families that served Voldemort could not renege, not only because of the Dark Mark, but because of the promise that they had made to serve him. Severus’ upbringing as a half-blood probably made it easier to withdraw from his clutches,” he glanced at Severus for confirmation, “but I don’t doubt there were others who had long since stopped believing in his ideology. Malfoy is between a rock and a hard place: he may want to stay alive because of Scorpius, but to go back on his promise would be seen as giving a very poor example to his son.”
“We have to do it for him, then,” Lily said. “Don’t we?”

Harry felt huge relief. “We do. We have to ask for the memory to be seen. I needed to know I had your backup on this,” he looked around the table, “because you’re all going to suffer because of it.”

“Mum and Dad will be devastated,” Ron said, his face grim.

“I know,” Harry said gently. “I don’t think they should come to court. I’ll need you to explain to them, Ron.”

“Bloody hell.”

Hermione put a hand on her husband’s arm. “Your parents are surprisingly blasé about sex, sometimes, Ron. And I think if you make clear that it means that Scorpius won’t be left alone and that the real killers will be found – ”

“Well, my brothers will go for the latter bit,” Ron said, then added, “I’m glad Dad doesn’t go into the Ministry any more.”

“Are we all agreed, then?” Harry looked around the table.

“What would you do if we said no?” James asked.

“I’d be terribly distressed that your pride meant more than a man’s life,” Harry answered.

“You’d do it anyway, wouldn’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Harry said. “I’d try to persuade you to my view – ”

“Good,” James said.

“Good that I’d try to persuade you?” Harry queried.

“Good that you'd choose to do the right thing, regardless of the cost,” James said. “I think I’ve just met the Vanquisher of Voldemort at last.”

He stood up and held out his hand: “Pleased to meet you.”
Lucius Malfoy Is Surprised

When Lucius Malfoy received the letter from Potter asking him to call on him at his earliest convenience, he was not surprised.

He still had contacts at the Ministry, and others that he paid to keep him informed. He had to admit, however, to a slight sense of shock at hearing that Severus Snape was not only alive, but had visited his son and administered Veritaserox.

And he also knew that his son had not changed his plea, but had seen his lawyer to settle his affairs.

That Draco was guilty was also rather shocking.

Now he would find out if Potter would accept his offer, or if he wanted to punish his son. If he allowed Draco to die, he would have the satisfaction of seeing his wife’s killer finished, and also know that the whole Malfoy line would die out, and that Lucius himself would have to live to see it so.

He did not think Potter would be swayed by money, although he had made his agitated solicitor go over everything and draw up a second list including every last knut of his estate. He could throw himself on Potter’s mercy, and perhaps tempt him with the thought of all the charitable uses to which he could put such a considerable sum.

He stepped through the floo at the appointed time, dressed in his best robes, to find Potter waiting for him, which was a courtesy that he was well aware that Potter could have withheld.

“Mr Malfoy, please take a seat.”

There was something about Potter that was different from the last time he saw him, Malfoy thought. More resolve? More determination? He seemed to stand taller, straighter, though he was still a small man. Perhaps it was that the cloak of power that enveloped him was more obvious. He did as he was told, and waited.

“You are aware, no doubt, that your son’s trial is tomorrow.”

“Indeed,” Lucius inclined his head. “I have also heard that you have resurrected the dead and sent Severus Snape to visit my son.”

Harry snorted. “Hardly a resurrection.”

“Maybe not in fact, and yet you brought back a man who has chosen to remain hidden all these years. It is not an inconsiderable achievement.”

“Maybe Master Snape felt a kindness for your son.”

Lucius shook his head. “He came at your request, and yours alone, I believe.”

Harry sat down opposite the older Malfoy. “You know the results of his investigations? You know that he used Veritaserox, and that the memories he has extracted will be accepted in every court in the wizarding world as the true nature of events?”

Lucius inclined his head. “I know that my son has not changed his plea,” he said heavily.
“Are you still of the same mind?” Harry asked, after a moment.

“To offer my life and wealth in exchange for his? I am.”

Malfoy found the way Potter just sat looking at him rather disturbing. He withdrew an envelope from his robe.

“I realise that my life has little meaning to you. The letter I gave you previously, with the list of my holdings, was a draft, and I have had a firmer document drawn up, which gives, I assure you, a full and complete picture of what I can offer you in exchange for Draco’s life. Also enclosed is the document you requested confirming my offer of my life and wealth.”

Potter once again surprised him, by not only accepting the documents, but by opening them and perusing them. Was he interested in the money after all? Eventually, Potter sat back and laid the paperwork on a side table, and resumed looking at Malfoy. Lucius found himself feeling like a five year old trying not to fidget at dinner with his parents. At last, Potter sat forward.

“Malfoy, I’m going to be honest with you.”

“Yes?” It was years since Lucius had felt butterflies in his stomach. He was not prepared for Potter’s next words.

“Your son did not kill my wife.”

Lucius wondered if he was going to faint. The last time he had felt his head buzzing like this was from hunger in Azkaban.

“I don’t think I understand you, Mr Potter.”

“Your son has not changed his guilty plea. He has written to me to confirm that he will not change it. If I allow the case to proceed, he will be put to death. No-one but I and Master Snape will know that Draco did not kill Ginny. I thought you deserved to know that your son did not kill her.”

Lucius had regained control of himself, though his mind was still whirling.

“Are you able to tell me why my son would admit guilt to a crime he knows he didn’t commit?” He tried hard to keep the demand out of his voice, but judging from Potter’s slightly raised eyebrow, he hadn’t succeeded. “Forgive me,” he said shakily, “it seems quite incomprehensible that he should do so.”

“When he first admitted the crime, he thought that he had done it: a false memory had been implanted.”

Lucius’ brows drew together. “That is extremely difficult magic – ”

“I am aware of that. When I visited your son after your initial request, he allowed me to use Legilimency on him. I didn’t notice anything was other than it seemed, at first, but on going over the memory later, I realised that something wasn’t right. That is why I asked Master Snape for his expertise.”

“And you found that my son did not kill Mrs Potter.”

“Yes,” Harry said, and sat back.

Lucius sat forward, knees apart, both hands resting atop his cane. “Mr Potter, please tell me why
my son is not changing his plea. Have you refused to allow the evidence to be shown?”

“I haven’t discussed that with Draco.” Harry took a small breath. “Your son made me a promise. He’s keeping it.”

Lucius sat very still. He licked his lips, which felt dry.

“Mitty!” Potter called, and an elf appeared instantly.

“Yes, Master Harry, what can Mitty be doing for you?” she bobbed.

“A jug of water and two glasses, please.”

Once again, Lucius was conscious that Potter was acting with something approaching kindness: he was not offering hospitality, as such, but he was aware of Lucius’ need, and yet asked for two glasses so as not to rub it in his face.

“Thank you,” he got out, and drank the water that appeared moments later. He felt devastated and proud at the same time. Honour and pride were matters of key import to him, in view of which, how could he think ill of his son for upholding a promise? And yet, that promise would lead to either his son’s death or his own.

“Might I ask the nature of the promise?” he inquired, after a moment.

“I don’t wish to discuss it, no,” Harry said, with finality.

Lucius inclined his head.

“Our fate rests entirely in your hands, it seems,” he said.

“Yes,” Harry agreed bluntly.

“I am a little surprised,” Lucius ventured to suggest, hoping this wasn’t going to make things worse – but how much worse could they get? – “that your innate sense of fair play is willing to allow a man to die for something he hasn’t done.”

“It will cost my family dearly to show that memory,” Harry said uncompromisingly, “and your son does not wish it shown either.”

“But the real killer will go unpunished.”

“You think so? You forget what I am capable of,” Harry said.

Potter looked utterly implacable. Lucius realised that in front of him was the man who had hunted down Voldemort’s Horcruxes whilst still a teenager, slowly and methodically doing everything he needed to seek out and destroy those cursed items to enable him to kill the monster that the Dark Lord had become. He had no doubt, looking at him, that whoever had killed his wife would be found and subjected to whatever justice Potter wished to dispense.

“Then I fall upon your mercy. Please accept me in place of my son,” Malfoy again went to his knees, his head on the ground.

“I accept your offer.”

Lucius felt his heart skip a beat, a momentary hollow nothingness in his chest.
He was to die.

Slowly, he raised himself. He was still kneeling. Potter laid a hand on his head. It felt strangely intimate.

“These are my terms,” Potter said. “I accept your offer by private arrangement: if I can ensure that your son is freed, do you accept that your life and wealth are forfeit to me?”

“I do,” Malfoy said, and felt the oath take hold.

Potter slipped a hand under his elbow and helped him to his feet.

“I can’t promise that I will succeed,” he said, “in which case, the contract between us is null and void. You will take no further action, and wait to hear from me, Mr Malfoy.”

“Of course.”

“You will not take your own life, is that understood? I will be in contact with you as soon as possible. May I have your word on that?”

Lucius found himself acquiescing.

The next moment, Potter had seen him to the floo, and he was whirling back home to face the last hours of his life.
And So To Court....

“No! No!” Draco was shouting from the chair on the floor of the Wizengamot.

“My client is entitled to ask for the memories to be shown,” Hermione said, avoiding looking at Malfoy.

“Potter! Don’t do this!” Draco begged.

“Mr Malfoy, if you cannot be silent, I will have to spell you so,” Argus Anglehurst, the officiating Judge, said. He turned to Harry.

“Mr Potter, in deference to your contribution to the wizarding world, this court has, firstly, delayed this trial, and then been convened during the Spring recess. The accused has pleaded guilty to the crime. Do you think justice will best be served by delaying the matter any further?”

Harry and Hermione exchanged a confused glance.

“Sir,” Harry addressed the judge, “I did ask for the initial trial to be delayed, although I had no idea that I’d been given special treatment in being allowed to bury my wife.” He turned to look around at the members of the Wizengamot. He knew many of the faces; every witch and wizard over forty with a clean record was automatically a member, and there was a rotating commitment of service. Harry had sat on those benches for several trials himself. “Thank you all for your consideration,” he said, and saw several members nod sympathetically in acknowledgement. “However,” he went on, “I didn’t ask for the recess to be interrupted. Last week, I was told that it would be at least a month until the trial; two days ago, I was told – and not directly by the Ministry – that it was taking place today.”

There were interested mumblings around the galleries.

Harry wondered who was so keen to dispose of Malfoy that they had pulled the members away from their holidays?

“There has obviously been some miscommunication going on,” Anglehurst harrumphed. He turned to the court scribe: “Whetstone, make a note to look into it.”

“Yes, Sir,” the scribe nodded, scribbling on a separate parchment to the court record.

Hermione stood up again. “If it please the court, Mr Potter would like to ask the Wizengamot to consider the evidence obtained using Veritaserox and Legilimency ‘in camera’.”

Harry felt the pressure of all the faces turned towards him.

“That is a very serious request,” Anglehurst said, peering severely at Hermione over his spectacles. “On what grounds?”

“On the grounds that the contents would be upsetting to his children, one of whom is still in school.”

“Is the child not yet of legal age?”

“She is only seventeen, Sir—”

“Then she cannot be granted the privileges of a minor,” Anglehurst said. “A fact of which I am
sure you are aware, Mrs Weasley,” he rebuked her. “Do you have any other grounds?”

“The content of the memories, whilst providing important evidence on the murder of Ginny Weasley, does, by its nature, show material that might be damaging to the reputation of the innocent.”

“Indeed? And you are making a judgement on who is innocent or guilty before this trial has even begun? That, Madam, is for this court to decide.”

Harry could see Hermione kicking herself in the tightening of her lips. He glanced around the court again. The Prosecutor, Orton Harcourt, who had already introduced the case against Malfoy, was now sporting an amused smile at the rebuke to Hermione. Aurors Franklin and Hencliffe sat, stony faced, waiting to give evidence if required. Up in the public gallery, he could see Albus and James, Ron, Bill, Charlie and Percy.
The last twenty four hours had been a whirlwind of trying to arrange things. It had been an immense relief when Lily had volunteered to spend the day with her grandparents.

“I know it will make it easier for you to ask for the memories to be shown in private,” she said. Harry was thankful for her swift intelligence. “And Gran likes talking to me. And to be honest,” she admitted, reluctantly, “if they show Mum being murdered, I don’t think I want to see them, if they do end up being shown to the court. I’m sorry to be such a wimp.”

Harry had hugged her tight. “Not a wimp at all, love, how can you think that? No-one should have to see what’s in those memories. No one should have to see another person being killed, and no-one should have the right to intrude on the private part between your Mum and Malfoy; but if it’s the only way to get him justice, we have to do it. I can’t tell you how grateful I am that you’re going to stay with Gran and Grandpa, either.”

To his surprise, George too had said he’d stay with his parents. “Dad’ll need me,” he said, hands in his robe pockets. “I know you’ll do what’s right, and try to make the fallout as limited at possible. I’m going to do one or two things at the Burrow to stop any Howlers or unpleasant stuff reaching Mum and Dad. It will blow over, in the end.”

Harry was perhaps, equally surprised to find Bill in court. He wondered how Bill had felt when he’d heard that his sister had intending marrying the man who’d let Fenrir Greyback into the school all those years ago. Although Bill looked incredibly strong and fit, he had undeniably aged faster than his brothers and sisters, with grey already in his hair, and lines on his face. With the scarring, it gave him a very distinguished, masculine appearance, but it was well known that werewolves did not live as long as humans, and although he hadn’t developed the full-blown condition, Bill had obviously suffered consequences from the attack. Bill knew, since the family meeting the previous night, that Harry had evidence that exonerated Malfoy, and was planning on using it. That Harry was concerned that it would negatively affect Ginny’s reputation, and was still determined to go ahead.

Harry’d really like to see into that man’s brain.

Further along the gallery, Harry could see Scorpius, and sitting next to him, upright and stiff, was his grandfather.

The rest of the seats were taken up with the press, and with as many as could fit of the horde who had been queueing overnight outside the Ministry to witness the trial.

Harry cursed the fact that the teleconverter had been invented. It was one of the results of the increasing influence of Muggle-born wizards, a projection system that allowed the contents of a
pensieve to be viewed outside of the bowl, so that any number of people could witness the memories. It was prohibitively expensive, but Harry knew (because the Prophet had run several scandalous articles on it) that some users shared memories of sexual encounters, not only with their partners but with others as well. In fact, there was a club that was supposed to specialise in it. Harry had never seen a teleconverter in action though. At the trials after the War, the Wizengamot had selected three wizards from among themselves to view any memories that had been brought to the court as evidence, but it had been ten years since the new technology had allowed the whole courtroom to see everything. The Prophet loved it, and according to Hermione, who spent a lot of time in court, given that she had become a lawyer working in both the Wizarding and Muggle worlds, the gallery was always full of gawpers hoping to see something appalling.

Harry hoped that the boys wouldn’t be too horrified – they’d agreed in principle, but witnessing one’s mother’s death, and what went before, wasn’t something that one could imagine, really.

Harry was drawn back from his musings by Hermione pinching his thigh. Anglehurst was addressing him.

“…any comments that you would like to make before the memories are shown? I understand that these memories were obtained with the use of Veritaserox? As I believe that this is the first time that Veritaserox has been used in England, please could you explain, for the record, what it is and why it was used?”

“Thank you, Sir,” Harry said, standing up. “I visited Malfoy in the cells at the Ministry, because –

“I’m sorry, did you say you visited the defendant in the cells?”

“I did,” Harry nodded.

“Despite knowing that he had pleaded guilty to the murder of your wife?”

This was going to take longer than Harry thought.

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“Why would that be, Mr Potter?”

“Because I found it hard to believe that he had killed Ginny, and I wanted to find out what had happened.”

Harry could feel the excitement his words had provoked. It would only get worse.

Harcourt stood, and at a nod from the Judge, asked, “And why would you be surprised that the defendant had killed your wife? You have a history of enmity, don’t you?”

Harry could not believe schoolboy matters were still biting him in the arse all these years on.

“Malfoy and I weren’t friends when we were at Hogwarts,” Harry said, tamping down his temper. “But school was a long time ago. Malfoy is a major shareholder in the Harpies, for whom my wife played. They got on well.” Harry took a deep breath. “In fact, they got on so well that Malfoy and Ginny wished to get married.”

The court erupted.

“Order! Order!” Anglehurst pounded his gavel, and eventually everyone simmered down.
They just wanted to hear more, Harry thought.

“Are you telling the court, Mr Potter, that your wife and Mr Malfoy were in a relationship?” Anglehurst asked, his face mirroring his astonishment.

Harry looked over to Malfoy, bound in the chair in the centre. He had his head bowed. Harry had to grit his teeth. He was going to do this.

“Yes, Sir.”

The Judge nodded again to Harcourt, who was obviously wanting to take this further.

“Mr Potter, had you forbidden them from seeing each other?”

“No!” Harry exclaimed.

Everyone in the room was sitting forward avidly. The trial had become not just about famous names, but turned into a juicy scandal.

“No,” Harry repeated, “but I had asked them to be discreet until all the children had left school.”

Harcourt had a horrible, smug face, Harry decided. He looked positively gleeful as he said, “Forgive me, Mr Potter, but are you telling me that you allowed – allowed – your wife to cuckold you with another man?”

Harry could see the whip of the Quick Quotes Quills flying across the parchment in the gallery. He glanced up at James and Albus, and was relieved to see Albus give him a quick thumbs up.

“They would have preferred it if Ginny and I had divorced at once, so that they could marry straight away, but they agreed to my request to keep the relationship secret,” Harry explained.

“So you approved of them – carrying on – behind your back?”

There were titters in the auditorium.

Harry’s jaw tightened. “I was grateful to them for acting discreetly,” he bit out.

“I see,” said Anglehurst, leaning back in his seat. His fingers stroked his beard for several moments, before he leant forward again. “This court is not here to enable you to extract revenge, Mr Potter. Mr Malfoy has pleaded guilty: the court do not need to witness Mrs Potter’s death, nor Mr Malfoy committing the deed, to enable them to pass sentence, and I am a little surprised that you should want to humiliate them both when I see that your sons are present in the court – “

“Humiliation!” Harry snapped. “You can’t think I want to show what is in those memories?”

“Then do not,” Mr Potter,” Anglehurst said severely. “And you will moderate your tone or leave this court.”

Hermione quickly stepped in. “Your Honour, Mr Potter meant no offence. He has no desire to cause humiliation to Mr Malfoy or to his wife’s memory, and in particular, to cause distress to his children. It is only because of his highest regard for the truth, and his unfailing honesty and compassion – “

“We do not need a recitation of Mr Potter’s noble qualities, Mrs Weasley. Get to the point.”

“Yes Sir. The fact is, that despite the embarrassment that the evidence will cause, and the hurt to
his family, Mr Potter feels that the memories must be seen in order for justice to be served.”

“The Wizengamot will decide on what is just and right, Mrs Weasley. It is not for relatives to call for harder sentencing – “

“He’s bloody innocent!” Harry bellowed, his chair falling with a clatter behind him as he leapt to his feet.

There was a moment of stillness, of utter silence, as if everyone in the room had held their breath at the same time.

And then all hell broke loose.

Anglehurst began pounding his gavel once again.

“Order! Order! I will have order!”

The room came to heel.

Harry glanced up at the gallery again. His boys were looking at him approvingly, and he gave them a small smile. As he turned back, his eye was caught by Scorpius, who was sat forward, leaning on the balcony rail. The hope in his face was almost painful to see.

“Mr Potter!” Anglehurst barked.

Harry swivelled back at once.

“One more – just one more word out of place, and I will banish you from this court.”

“My sincere apologies,” Harry said, with a slight bow.

“Yes,” Anglehurst said. He motioned the Prosecutor towards him, and they conferred briefly.

The court waited expectantly.

“I think it’s high time we saw the Veritaserox evidence,” Anglehurst said firmly as Harcourt returned to his seat. “Perhaps we can get to a very brief explanation?”

Hermione stood up once again.

“Might I call on the creator of the potion, who administered it, in this instance, to do that, Your Honour?”

“I suspect that would save a great deal of time,” Anglehurst sighed.

There was a murmur of disappointment in the room.

Hoping for more of his revelations, Harry thought bitterly.

“Then may I call Potion Master Severus Snape,” Hermione said clearly.

The court thought all their holidays had come at once.

Harry couldn’t remember Snape ever looking so magnificent. He strode into court wearing a severe but beautifully cut robe; the snap of the skirt took Harry straight back to Hogwarts. Then, however, Snape had been gaunt and pale; now, with his skin glowing, and his hair, cut short and
streaked with grey, he looked not only distinguished, but as if he had grown into the person he should be.

He strode across the floor to stand at a podium that had appeared at one side. He didn’t look at Draco, or around the court, but turned his attention directly to Anglehurst.

“Potions Master Snape,” Anglehurst addressed him. “I thought your name on my papers must have been an error.”

“No indeed,” Snape said. “You have questions for me?”

And with that, he dismissed any chance of discussion as to his apparent death.

Harry’s lips twitched.

Snape gave a brief explanation of the nature of Veritaserox.

“And Mr Potter asked you to administer it to Mr Malfoy?” Anglehurst asked.

“Yes.”

“Excuse me,” a middle aged witch of the Wizengamot asked, “but why did Mr Potter ask you to give it to Mr Malfoy?”

“A good question, Madam Bellamy,” Anglehurst commented. “Are you able to answer, Master Snape?”

“Mr Potter doubted the accuracy of the memories he witnessed when he performed Legilimency on Mr Malfoy. He thought it appropriate to call in an expert,” Snape said succinctly.

Harcourt had stood up, but Anglehurst asked first, “Mr Potter? You performed Legilimency on the defendant?”

Harry too rose. “When I visited him in his cell. With his permission, of course,” he said quickly, as he could see Anglehurst’s brows twitching.

“Is that correct, Mr Malfoy?” he asked.

Draco sat forward. Ever since Snape had come in, he had been sitting upright, his head turned towards his old Head of House.

“It is, Sir,” he said quietly.

“Very strange,” Anglehurst muttered. “Well, I think it’s time we got on with it. If you would be so good as to do whatever it is that needs to be done, Master Snape.”

“If the court could furnish me with the vial,” Snape prompted.

“Oh! Yes, of course. Is it here?” Anglehurst asked, looking as if he suddenly expected it to appear in front of him.

The scribe stood up and turned to the Judge, whispering something. Another attendant was called over, then hurried out of the court.

“Whilst we’re waiting for the vial,” Anglehurst said in a long-suffering tone, “perhaps you’d tell us what to expect, Master Snape. For some reason, we appear to be the last country to be using
Snape ignored the inquiry in his voice on the last point. “Of course. When the vial arrives,” he paused, causing a smile to simmer around the Wizengamot, “I will first check that the seal that I set on it has not been broken. Two copies only of the memory exist,” he explained, anticipating the question on the Judge’s lips. “One I have reviewed with my client, Mr Potter. If all is in order with the vial that has been in the Ministry’s keeping, I will pour the contents into the teleconverter. Everyone will be able to see the evidence. I am able to stop the machine at any point if you have questions, but I do suggest that you restrain yourselves,” he glanced around the room. “It is much easier to get a cohesive view if you allow it to play through until the end.” He paused, looked at Harry, and then said, “I would be negligent if I didn’t inform the court that that the material you are about to see is highly disturbing. If you suffer from any nervous or medical conditions that would react badly to shock, may I suggest that you ask the permission of Judge Anglehurst to be excused at this point.”

There was a lot of excited whispering.

“Master Snape is very wise,” Anglehurst spoke loudly. “Does anyone wish to leave the court?”

The silence that fell over the room was broken by the sound of the door crashing back. The embarrassed usher came rushing forward with the vial, which he presented to the Judge. Anglehurst looked at it, then handed it back to the usher to give to Snape.

Harry braced himself as Snape poured the contents into a funnel in the top of the machine.

Everyone leant forward to watch.

At first, Harry was surprised. The quality of the transmission reminded him of Princess Leia being projected from R2D2 in the Star Wars film that he had seen many years ago with Josh, one of his fellow apprentices at the workshop, when they had spent a whole weekend watching every one of the Star Wars films, sitting on the sofa in his cottage living room with beer and crisps and pizza. It made him feel much more distanced from it that when he had gone into Malfoy’s mind, or when they had viewed it in the pensieve. However, the reality of it pulled him in as shocked gasps rose from the viewers. Harry found himself looking at the memory through the eyes of strangers, and gritted his teeth as he realised that seventy or more people were watching Malfoy make love to his wife. He glanced up at the gallery, at James and Albus; in theory, he knew that they would be better prepared, by witnessing the memories, to cope with the fallout once this hit the papers, but seeing them here, watching - he was horrified.

It was wrong. He didn’t like what Malfoy and Ginny were doing: he’d had too many years of shame and guilt that he hadn’t been able to do this, to give Ginny what she wanted. But seeing it now, all he could think of was that it was intimate. There was more than passion and need going on: he could see the connection, the closeness between the two. And it felt a terrible violation that they should be watching that.

But it was necessary. He could not allow a man to die for something he didn’t do. And Ginny had loved Malfoy.

“Watch this carefully,” Snape said. “This is the point at which a false memory had been implanted in Mr Malfoy, to make him believe that he had killed Mrs Potter.”

There were gasps in the court.

Then sudden silence as the three masked figures entered the scene. Not a sound was made through
the following minutes, except the scritch of the Quick Quotes Quills and the scribe’s note-taking.

When the memory had finished, the sound of weeping could be heard. Looking round, Harry could see several witches wiping their eyes or noses, handkerchiefs fluttering in shaking hands. Many of the wizards were looking down, trying to hide their reactions. Harcourt stood up, his face furious.

“I think this might be an appropriate time to take a break,” Anglehurst said. “The court will reconvene in an hour.”

Harry watched as Malfoy was released from the chair. A guard offered him a cup of water.

When he had been brought in, the same guard had roughly thrust him into the chair.

The tide was turning.

Outside, Harry made his way through the milling throng to find his sons. People parted to let him through, avoiding eye contact.

He spotted James and Albus, and the next moment was enclosed in the arms of his sons.

He could hear the flash of cameras, but he didn’t care.

“Are you alright?” he asked them. He pulled back to look at them.

Both boys were pale.

“Yeah, fine,” James said.

Albus shrugged.

Harry knew that they were not.

“I’m sorry,” Harry whispered, “sorry to put you through this.”

Albus immediately looked contrite. “You had to do it, Dad, we know that. Poor sod, to be made to think you’d done that.”

Harry saw Snape standing quietly beside the door to the court. Further along the corridor, Scorpius was standing with his head bent towards the young chap who had been sitting next to him. Lucius Malfoy exited down the stairs from the gallery, saw Scorpius, and deliberately turned away.

“Let’s go to the canteen,” Harry said. He strode across to Snape. “I’m desperate for a cup of tea. Care to join us?”

“A most sensible idea,” Snape said approvingly.

“Uncle Ron is waving at us,” Albus nudged Harry from behind. Hermione had gone to speak to Ron, who was standing with his brothers. Ron was waving at them to join them.

“We’re heading for a bite,” Ron said, “though frankly, I haven’t much stomach for it. Let’s go to the staff canteen on Level 4: it’s quieter there.”

“Can we go in there?” James asked.

“Nobody’s going to stop us,” Ron said firmly.
“We’ll catch you later,” Bill said. “We could do with a bit of air,” and he and Charlie set off with loping strides.

“They’re upset,” Harry said bluntly.

Ron rubbed the back of his neck. “Yeah. I know we talked about this last night, but I don’t think they expected to see what they did see. And Bill has history with Malfoy, of course. He didn’t think it mattered, but…”

“Come on,” Hermione took Harry’s arm, “let’s go get some tea. I think it’s going to be a long day.”
When they returned to the court, it was obvious that the Wizengamot hadn’t just been taking a tea break.

“There are a number of questions raised by what we have seen,” Anglehurst announced. “Master Snape, this record is a true and accurate account of events?”

“It is,” Snape said.

“And Veritaserox is accepted in courts across Europe?”

“And in the Americas and Asia,” Snape responded.

“I would like to question the witness, your honour,” Harcourt asked.

“Go ahead, Mr Harcourt,” Anglehurst nodded.

“Master Snape, is it not possible that your previous relationship with the defendant might have influenced your results?”

Breaths were held around the court.

Snape made no indication that the question had in any way perturbed him. “It is a fact that Draco Malfoy was a pupil at Hogwarts School and that, for a period, not only was I his Headmaster, but that for six years, I was Head of his House. It is also a known fact that I made an Unbreakable Vow with relation to the defendant. However, until I was called by Mr Potter to assess the veracity of the memories of Mr Malfoy, I had not seen, or heard from, or had any contact of any nature with him, since May 2nd, 1998.”

Everyone knew the date of the Battle of Hogwarts.

“That doesn’t exactly answer my question, Master Snape.”

“I have no duty or debt towards the defendant,” Snape confirmed. “Moreover, the court might like to know that there are only three wizards who are approved by the International Council of Courts to administer the potion and use Legilimency on defendants or witnesses, of which I am one. Furthermore, as the creator of Veritaserox, I am the only Potion Master who has the formula, and therefore the only one who makes it.” He looked around the court as his credentials sunk in, before adding, “I confirm that the court has seen a true record of the events in question.”

“Thank you, Master Snape,” Anglehurst said. “The Wizengamot would like you now to administer Veritaserum to the defendant.”

Snape graced the Judge with a supercilious look.

“I am here as the specialist employed by Mr Potter. I do not carry Veritaserum around as a matter of course, and I would not administer such a potion made by another hand. Moreover, the point of my presence here is that Mr Malfoy had been implanted with a false memory of the events of that night. Under the influence of Veritaserum, should there be other false memories, he would answer as he believed such memories to be true.”

“But you’ve now found the true memories,” Anglehurst quizzed him.
Snape sighed. "In relation to the events that you saw in the memory," he agreed. "But if you intend to question Mr Malfoy on other matters, we cannot be certain that the masked perpetrators have not altered any other memories, prior to the events depicted, if, as appears to be the case, Mr Malfoy was being set up for a crime he did not commit. Therefore, I would have to advise that any further evidence, even that gained under Veritaserum, would have to be regarded as unsafe."

“So, you’re saying that it would be useless to question Mr Malfoy?”

“I am saying that the court could not be sure that his evidence was the truth, even if Mr Malfoy believed it to be so.”

Anglehurst conferred with the witch and wizard on either side of him, and once again called Harcourt over. Eventually, just as the impatience of the people in the courtroom began to make itself known, Harcourt returned to his seat, and Anglehust spoke: “The court has something of a dilemma, in that case. Whilst it appears clear that Mr Malfoy did not murder Mrs Potter, it is also clear that he was involved in violent activity towards her, and we cannot be certain, given that she was handcuffed, presumably by Mr Malfoy, that he was not complicit with the attackers.”

No, Harry thought. No. He was so stupid. He had just thought that they would see the memories and let Malfoy go. How could he have been such an idiot?

Anglehurst was rubbing his head. “Mr Malfoy must remain in custody pending further - ”

Harry stood up.

Hermione had reached out to grab his leg to yank him back down, but Harry said, “I’m sorry to interrupt, Your Honour. My purpose in requesting that this memory be shown, despite how difficult it was for us as a family, was because it proved Malfoy innocent of the crime for which he was charged. I can’t see that there is any evidence that Malfoy was complicit with the men who killed Ginny, and surely a man is innocent until proven guilty?”

“Mr Potter,” Harcourt cut in, “Mr Malfoy had violent sex with your wife, a memory that must be true as it was produced under Veritaserox.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, but that doesn’t make him complicit with the men who killed her.”

“I’m sure the court appreciates that the evidence must have been very painful for you to witness. You perhaps failed to notice, Sir, that your wife was handcuffed to the bed, in a position where she could not escape or reach her wand to defend herself. That Mr Malfoy put her in that position?”

Harry looked down.

“Mr Potter?” Anglehurst prompted. “Did you not notice? I think the evidence was quite clear - ”

“I think it was quite clear that Ginny was enjoying the situation,” Harry bit out.

Tittering broke out around the court.

“As those were the memories of Mr Malfoy, surely that was his interpretation of events. He was certainly enjoying himself,” Harcourt sneered, to more sniggering.

Harry’s fists were clenched. He hadn’t expected to have to say this. Surely it had been perfectly obvious? “Ginny liked that,” he said, biting his lip. He raised his head.

Malfoy, still in the chair, was looking down.
Harry felt very lonely.

“Perhaps you could clarify that comment, Mr Potter?”

“How can I be more explicit?” Harry snapped. “People like all sorts of things in bed. Ginny liked things a little…rough. She liked to use handcuffs.”

The court hummed with excitement. Harry felt sickened by their interest.

“Mrs Potter liked to handcuff you to the bed?” one witch of the Wizengamot asked.

There were outright giggles.

“My wife is dead!” Harry bellowed. “It’s none of your damn business what we did in bed.”

“I am sorry to cause you distress, Mr Potter,” Anglehurst intervened, “but Madam Jenkins is perfectly entitled to ask any question she desires. And in this case, it is entirely relevant, if you are making the argument that the behaviour we saw was not unusual for Mrs Potter. Therefore, perhaps you will be good enough to answer the question?”

Harry shook his head.

“You’ve got to answer, Harry,” Hermione hissed at him from his side.

“Mr Potter, the Wizengamot asks again, did you and Mrs Potter indulge in violent sexual practices?” Anglehurst prompted impatiently.

“I refuse to answer. I am astonished that the Wizengamot will not accept the evidence of their own eyes, nor my view, that Ginny was willing in the scene we have witnessed here. She and Malfoy were in a relationship. They met each other’s needs. They loved each other. I cannot understand why the court would need to know what Ginny and I did back in the day when we still had a sexual relationship.”

“Leaving aside for a moment the fact that you are currently in contempt of court by refusing to answer,” Anglehurst said, looking at Harry severely over the rims of his glasses, “perhaps you would be willing to tell us when you last had sexual relations with your wife.”

Harry’s brows drew together. “The sexual side of our relationship ended long before Ginny was involved with Malfoy. There’s no issue of him breaking up our marriage – “

The hush that fell on the court was disturbing.

“Mr Potter, I repeat, when did you last have intercourse with your wife?”

Harry looked to Hermione. “What the hell is going on?” he whispered fiercely. “How can they ask that? Why on earth does that matter?”

“I think we’ve got Muggleborn-itis,” she whispered back. “I haven’t got a clue. Best just answer.”

Harry stood up tall. “The last time I made love with my wife,” he said, “was on Ginny’s birthday. Nine years ago.”

The noise was astonishing.

How could people care so much about his love life? Harry looked up at the balcony. Ron was hanging his head. Bill and Charlie had stood up and had turned away. Only Percy sat there, staring
down at him.

Eventually, Anglehurst banged his gavel again, until order was restored.

“Everyone except the Wizengamot may leave the court,” he said. “Be available to return on the hour.”

Harry stood there a moment, wondering what was going on. The guards were unstrapping Malfoy, but Malfoy still didn’t look at him. Up in the balcony, the viewers were already heading to the door.

Anglehurst made a noise, and Harry looked at him. “That includes you, Mr Potter, Mrs Weasley,” he said pointedly. “Prosecutor Harcourt, please stay.”

“Sir,” Harcourt bowed his head in consent.

“Yes, of course,” Hermione said, picking up her papers.

They headed to the exit.

“What’s happening now?” Harry asked Hermione. “I’ve done something wrong again, haven’t I?”

“I don’t understand it either,” Hermione shook her head as they went through the doors.

And then something wet hit Harry in the face. He reeled back, reaching for his wand even as he wiped his eyes clear. Hermione’s hand on his arm stayed him.

An old witch stood there, in front of him, and spat again.

Harry wiped the spittle from his cheek, looking the woman up and down. He did not recognise her.

“Why did you do that?” he asked. “I don’t know you, do I?”

“You deserve it!” she hissed. “Think you’re this great hero and then treat your wife like that?” and she turned away and stormed off.

“Okay, we need Ron,” Hermione said.

But Ron’s reaction was bizarre too.

“We’ll go to my office,” he said bluntly, not looking at Harry.

Albus and James had appeared, making their way along the corridor, and Snape had just come out of the door behind them. Harry flicked his head to suggest they followed.

“I’m not talking about what you’ve done in front of your kids!” Ron grunted.

“Ron, they’ve just seen their mother murdered in our own house. Not to mention having sex. This can’t be worse than that, surely?”

Ron’s face was so grim that Harry suddenly felt angry. “I haven’t a clue what I’m supposed to have done now,” he snapped, “but you obviously do. Everyone’s staring at us and I’m not leaving my kids facing this bunch of ravening lions. Come on, Ron.”

With a shrug, which annoyed and troubled Harry in equal measure, Ron turned away. They all followed him. People stared or turned their backs.
“Do you know what this is all about?” he asked Snape, who had fallen into step beside him.

“I have suspicions,” Snape said. “Let us wait to hear what Weasley has to say.”

Harry glanced round at the boys, and was surprised to see them whispering together, frowning. Did they know what was up?

Within minutes they had ridden the elevator to Ron’s office. He shut the door firmly on the Aurors outside at their desks, who had all glanced up with interest as they arrived.

“Order some tea, Ron,” Hermione said firmly.

Ron stuck his head out the door. “Ed. Can you get us tea and cakes? There’s six of us. Pretty damn quick, please. And Jemima? Would you mind asking Dalrymple at Court 7 to let us know as soon as the court is recalled?”

Harry watched as the Aurors jumped up to do as they were asked. He hadn’t seen Ron in boss-mode much, so it was interesting to see the combination of authority and informality.

Ron came back inside and threw himself down at his desk.

“So what have I done to deserve an old hag spitting in my face and you looking at me like I’m a blast-ended skrewt?” Harry asked, leaning against the filing cabinet with his arms folded across his chest.

Hermione and Snape had both taken chairs, and James and Albus were in the process of transfiguring ones for themselves. James snorted at his father’s words.

“Right, you really want me to go ahead and say this in front of the kids?” Ron asked aggressively.

“They’re men,” Harry said. “I suspect, from your attitude, that they’re going to have to cope with worse from other people. Spill it, Ron.”

Ron sat forward, leaning his elbows on the table. “Alright. Let’s say, first, that if we were alone, I’d deck you first and talk after.”

“Okay,” Harry said slowly. “We’ll take that as a given.”

“Honestly,” Hermione muttered. “How old are you both?”

“We agreed that you had to show this stuff,” Ron said. “I didn’t realise how awful it would be. And it makes Ginny look…” he tailed off, glancing at the boys and then away again.

“Human?” Hermione suggested.

Ron’s eyebrows drew together. “I don’t want to say slutty, but – ”

“Because she was wearing stockings and enjoying herself?” Hermione spoke again, her tone getting annoyed. “As if you don’t like that!”

“Too much information, Mione!” Harry interrupted what was fast looking to be a marital spat.

Hermione flashed a small smile at him. “Well,” she said. “It’s a bit insulting if it’s alright for his wife but not for his sister.”

“Alright, point,” Ron said, ears as red as his hair. “What I was trying to get at was that Ginny’s
reputation has been ruined, whilst you were trying to pretend you were all goody goody.”

“What?” Harry said.

“It was all about Ginny having an affair with Malfoy.”

“She was having an affair with Malfoy,” Harry said in exasperation. “I didn’t blame her for that.”

“Exactly.”

“What?”

“Oh, come on,” Ron said. “You forced her into it if you’d refused to have sex with her. And it’s not like you haven’t been getting your oats either.”

“WHAT?”

“I’ve seen you use wandless magic just to stir the dinner when you can’t be bothered to get up from reading the paper,” Ron said, as if that explained everything.

“I feel like I’ve fallen into an alternative universe,” Harry said. “What the bloody hell are you going on about, Ron? What has magic got to do with anything?”

Snape gave a slight cough. They all turned to look at him.

“Do you know what he’s talking about?” Harry demanded.

“I believe Mr Weasley is referring to the old belief that regular sexual congress was essential to maintain a wizard’s magic,” Snape said. “Or a witch’s, of course.”

“Oh come on, everyone knows that!” Ron exploded. “You have to have been having some to be able to do wandless without a blink.”

“I’ve never had much trouble with wandless,” Harry shrugged. He turned to the boys. “Have you heard about sex and magic being connected?”

“People muttered about it at school,” Albus answered, “but I assumed it was just an excuse to get laid. “

“As if anyone needs an excuse for that!” James muttered, sniggering.

“Come on, they teach it in the Personal Magic class! Or they did in our day. You must remember, Harry! I’m sure the girls must have been told too in their sessions, Mione, surely?” Ron argued.

“I’ve never heard of it before,” Hermione shook her head.

“Maybe I was wrong about the lessons, but we certainly practice it, don’t we?” Ron smirked at Hermione.

“What?” Hermione’s brow furrowed.

“You know,” Ron blushed.

“I don’t,” Hermione insisted.

Harry was cringing, but Hermione had now really taken the hump, and Ron had to dig himself out
of the hole he was in.

“When I say, ‘Let’s whip up some magic tonight,’” Ron whispered fiercely, leaning across the table, “you always seem pretty keen on the idea.”

“That could be because I thought you meant romance, Ron. Are you telling me you instigated sex just to ‘fire up your magic’?”

“You’re misunderstanding me - ”.

“I don’t think so,” Hermione replied.

“Delighted as we all are to hear the details of your marital escapades,” Snape interrupted the heavy atmosphere, “Mr Weasley is correct that it is a commonly held belief.”

Ron looked triumphant, until Snape continued. “The slightest application of intelligence, would, however, throw doubt on it. If you cast your minds back to your schooldays, I do not believe that there was a single teacher at Hogwarts who was married, and although some might have been leading amorous lives outside of wedded bliss,” he cast a glance at the Weasleys, for whom bliss seemed unlikely to happen for some time, “I suspect the vast majority were not. Which is one reason why such nonsense was unlikely to be taught at that time.”

Harry’s brain whizzed over thoughts of Filch, Professors McGonagall and Dumbledore and Flitwick and Trelawney, and felt himself in shuddering agreement with Snape. He wondered if Snape was getting any then – and pulled his mind away quickly.

“Well, teachers don’t have to be particularly strong, do they?” Ron said, without seeming to notice the size 12 he’d just stuck into his mouth.

“Hello? Dumbledore?” Harry waved at him. “Not that I don’t think all the others must use much more magic than the average witch or wizard going about their lives. I mean, they’re using it all the time; and they must always have some in reserve for dealing with emergencies.”

“And let us not forget the Dark Lord,” Snape said.

Again, all eyes turned to him. “I concede,” he said, after a moment, “that Bellatrix LeStrange might have been willing, but if you think that the rest of the Death Eaters were laying their arses out for his attention, think again.”

“Oh my god,” Harry mimed a finger down the throat. “Did you have to put Voldemort and sex in the same sentence? You’ve just burnt my brain.”

“Was he ugly?” Albus asked, interested.

“Inhuman,” Harry replied honestly. “If you can imagine having sex with – no, I can’t even think about that. Uuurgh.”

The mood had lightened a little.

“Well,” Ron said defensively, “it might not be true about the sex, but everyone thinks that.”

“I’m sure Gin didn’t,” Harry said. “She never mentioned anything of the sort. Ever.” And she would have, he thought.

“Do your brothers think the same?” Hermione asked.
“Definitely. I’m sure Mum’s mentioned it: she would have talked to Gin too.”

“Well, I wouldn’t be in the least bit surprised if that was another thing that your parents decided her ears were too sweet and innocent to hear,” Hermione contradicted. “You know they treated her differently,” she hastened on, as Ron went to speak. “I expect they just saw that she was married to Harry and having kids and her magic seemed fine, and they just never brought it up.”

That was all too likely, Harry thought.

“So loads of people are going to think you’re a ..a…philanderer, Dad?” James asked, after a moment.

“Looks like it,” Harry agreed.

“Well, does that matter?” Albus queried. “I mean, I know it’s not nice for you, but it draws the attention from Mum, and makes people more likely to believe Malfoy was having a real relationship with her, which should help people believe that he didn’t do it, which should help him get free, which is what this is all about, isn’t it?”

Harry just got up and hugged his son. “You’re absolutely right,” he chuckled.

“But people will be horrid, Harry,” Hermione said fiercely.

He looked across at his old friend. “Well, I’ve been through that before and survived, haven’t I?”

“You really haven’t been bonk – you know, having se - a relationship - with someone?” Ron asked.

“Only if you count my right hand,” Harry said.

“Harry!” Hermione remonstrated, but she was laughing.

A memo flew through the door.

“The court’s been recalled,” Ron said, getting up. “And not even time for cake.”

Hermione stood up, slinging her bag over her shoulder. “Well, don’t expect any after later, either, Ronald. I think a little abstinence will test whether your theory is correct, don’t you?” And she headed to the door with her nose in the air.

“Oh shit,” Ron breathed, looking rather desperately at his wife’s receding back.
“I can’t shake your hand,” Malfoy said, standing in front of him. “I know I ought to, but ….”

Harry nodded. He could understand Malfoy’s mixed feelings.

The trial, once the Wizengamot had been reconvened, had been over in minutes. Malfoy had been found Not Guilty, although Harry was shocked that despite the evidence, there were a handful of the Wizengamot who had still raised their hands to vote against him.

The court was emptying fast: Harry knew that the minute that they were out of the doors, the cameras would be flashing and the questions coming.

Hermione was packing away her papers, studiously giving them a sense of privacy, which was interrupted when Auror Franklin came up.

“Are you going home, Mr Malfoy? I thought you might need to know that your wards were dismantled by our department when we searched your house. Although there are basic wards in place, given the interest the case is likely to generate….” She glanced towards the door. Every time it swung open as someone left, the noise from the excited throng waiting outside swept in.

“You searched my house? In my absence?” Malfoy’s brows snapped together. “I pleaded guilty.”

“Routine, Sir,” Franklin said, her face blank.

“Really?” Hermione’s drawl expressed her disbelief. “I’ll look into that.”

A roar of noise burst in once again.

“Damn,” Malfoy muttered. “It’ll be hell resetting them if they’re under bombardment at the same time.”

“Do you want to come to Grimmauld Place?” Harry asked, his mouth offering before his brain thought it out. “Give it a few hours and they’ll start looking for you elsewhere, then I can come back with you and give you a hand.”

Malfoy was looking at him as if he had two heads.

Then Harry remembered that the last time Malfoy had been at the house had been the day of Ginny’s murder. “It’s – I didn’t mean – I - that is, it’s all cleaned up,” he said, awkwardly. “I only meant it was somewhere where they couldn’t get at you for a few hours.”

“You just can’t stop yourself dashing to the rescue of damsels in distress, can you?” Malfoy said, his lips twisted.

Harry’s instant reaction of annoyance was allayed when Draco quickly added, “I didn’t mean to be rude. You’re too generous for your own good, Harry. I owe you so much already –”

“Rubbish,” Harry said. “So, do you want to come?”

“Tea and sympathy? We make an odd couple.”

Harry barked a laugh, and Malfoy’s face quirked just a hint, before lengthening. “I really need to see Scorpius,” he said, looking up to the gallery to see if his son had left it yet.
“Bring him too,” Harry offered. “There’ll be a few of us, I expect, but you can have the parlour to yourselves, if you want.”

He turned round, suddenly aware of Snape lurking. “Are you coming too, Severus?” he asked, and then saw Malfoy’s eyes widen as he heard Harry use Snape’s first name. But then Malfoy had called him Harry. The world was turning upside down.

“There’s a lot to discuss,” he said.

“Yes,” Snape nodded.

Harry had a sudden embarrassed thought. “Oh god, I haven’t even asked about your fee, or anything. And now is not the time and place,” he went on, realising it was the last thing he should have said in front of Malfoy. “Sorry,” he added, not quite sure which of them he was apologising to.

“I should be meeting that,” Draco said.

“No! I didn’t mean to mention it!”

“It would be entirely inappropriate for you to do so, Draco,” Snape said. He looked at Harry. “We will discuss that later. Shall we go?”

Auror Franklin had been lurking nearby, and stepped forward again. “If you’ll allow it, Gentlemen, Madam, Auror protection might be advisable.”

“At home?” Harry queried.

“I meant to get to the floos.”

“Very well,” Draco said, “but I need to get my son.”

“My boys too,” Harry added.

“And I need to catch Ron,” Hermione said. “I don’t know if he’s going home or straight to the office.”

It took nearly half an hour to get to the floos in the atrium through the pushing, shoving, shouting crowds.

“Holy shit,” James exclaimed, brushing himself down as he landed back in Grimmauld Place.

“In the kitchen,” Hermione’s voice called. “I’ve got the kettle on.”

Somehow, hearing her disembodied voice made James feel his mother’s absence like a sharp blow. He’d never again hear his Mum calling out to welcome him home.

Scorpius Malfoy came through the floo behind him, followed a moment later by his father.

James had rather resented the fact that his Dad had invited them back, but now, he was suddenly glad that the house would be busy.
The floo whooshed again and the Malfoys stepped aside, but it wasn’t his father, but Lily who stepped through. Draco Malfoy stretched out his hand to steady her.

It was weird to think that these two men might have become part of their family, might have spent Yule with them, that Draco Malfoy would have been his step-father. He didn’t know what he thought about it. And following on that uncertainty, he supposed it was possible that his father might remarry some day: probable, in fact. That would be strange too. But his father must have been so lonely, amidst the veils and screens of his false marriage, whatever he said. He determined that he would accept whoever it was his father brought to share their lives – not that it would be difficult, now that they were all going their own ways, but family was a link, of that there was no doubt. It had meant so much to his father: there was no way he was going to let him down.

Scorpius was introducing Lily to his father, and she was saying that she was glad that he had been released, and the floo whooshed again and Albus stepped through, and seeing them both in control of the Malfoys, he strode along to the kitchen to help his aunt.

“Have you got milk in?” Hermione asked, looking anxiously in their cool cupboard.

“Mitty!” James called.

The elf popped up instantly. James thought she looked rather bedraggled. Were they working her too hard, with Mum gone?

He gentled his tone. “Have we more milk, Mitty? And could you get out the rest of that lovely cake you made? The chocolate one we had last night?”

“Mitty is getting them right away, Master James,” Mitty said, bowing and blushing at the praise. “And I has been making a sultana cake while you is all out, and sausage rolls, and other things. Shall Mitty get them?”

“Sounds brilliant!” James said.

Mitty bobbed a curtsey, looking pleased, and disappeared.

Harry walked into the kitchen, his arm around Lily. “Ron sent Lily back,” he said to Hermione. “He’s talking to Molly and Arthur with the others. Want to stay here or head over to the Burrow?”

“I’d rather stay here, I think,” Hermione said.

Harry snorted. “Coward.”


They were sitting in the family room, sprawled on the sofas, when there was a tap at the door.

Earlier, Harry had shown the two Malfoy men into the library, realising that the family would still need access to the floo in the parlour. Draco Malfoy had still been wearing prison robes, and Harry had offered him some of his own. He’d been surprised when Draco had brushed the suggestion away. Malfoy had always seemed so prissy, and he wondered if the change had come from his imprisonment, or had happened long before.
The door opened and Draco peered in. “Potter? I’m sorry to disturb you all –” he began.

Harry stood up and came over. “Are you ready to go home?” he asked. “You’re both welcome to stay here –”

“Thank you, but if you’re free, I would prefer to go home,” Draco said.

“You’re resetting Draco’s wards?” Snape asked, coming to stand beside him, and at Harry’s nod, continued, “Would you like another hand?”

“You alright, kids, if I shoot off for a while?” Harry turned and asked.

James stood up. “I wanted to head back to the flat anyway. I need to make a couple of floo calls to work, and sort out some stuff.”

Harry nodded. He had gone over James’ wards himself as soon as James had returned to his flat after Ginny’s death.

“I’d better do some homework then,” Lily said with a sigh.

“What are you working on?” Hermione perked up at once.

“Oh god, not homework! Can I help, Dad?” Albus offered, coming over.

Harry looked to Malfoy. It was his home after all.

“I’d be honoured,” he said, with a slight bow.

They walked along the corridor to the parlour. Harry realised that like himself, Scorpius had thrown off his robes, though Scorpius was still wearing the smart jacket of an elegant suit, whereas Harry was in his shirt-sleeves. He was just about to remind him to collect his robes from the library when he realised that Draco was wearing it. Something deep inside him was very moved.

They floo-ed through to Malfoy’s London home. Harry had never been there. He assumed Ginny had been very familiar with it – in fact, though he hadn’t mentioned it to anyone, he’d been shocked that Ginny and Malfoy had been having an assignation in Grimmauld Place. He’d never banned Malfoy from the house, but he’d never expected that they would have sex in his home. He had felt betrayed.

“Merlin’s balls, they’ve hardly put anything in place!” Draco exclaimed, testing.

Harry allowed his senses to feel out. He had to agree, the wards were next to useless. “They’ve already been breeched,” he commented.

Malfoy looked at him sharply. “Not human,” he said quickly.

“Post owls, then, I expect,” Snape said.

They all clattered down the stairs behind Draco to the entrance hall, where a mountain of post was heaped up, and several owls who had been perching on the banisters came swooping towards Draco.

As if alerted to the presence of people inside, there were several bangs on the door, and voices shouting.

“Let’s get to work,” Snape said firmly. “What wards do you usually have, Draco?”
There was some discussion, and Harry outlined the additional wards he had placed at Grimmauld Place, his shop and James’ flat. They set to. Albus had never worked on wards before, so Harry was pleased that he should have the experience. With five of them working, it shouldn’t be too draining.

They were all done in less than an hour.

“That was a lot less strenuous than I expected,” Scorpius said.

“You’ve worked wards before?” Albus asked.

“Only on my flat, and with Dad’s help,” he said. “It seemed a lot harder, though, even though the property is tiny compared to this.”

“It’s you, isn’t it?” Draco looked at Harry. “I had no idea you were so strong. You could have done it all on your own.”

“I’m used to working with space,” Harry shrugged. “Anyway, they’re much better for having more than one person, and especially the owner.”

Draco eyed him speculatively.

Harry hated anyone talking about his power. It wasn’t something he understood, really. How could one know how much power other wizards had? He just knew what he could do. End of story. He looked over at Scorpius. “Have you updated your wards recently, Scorpius? Do you think it would be a good idea to just give them an upgrade? While there’s a few of us to lend a hand?”

“Do you think that’s necessary?” he asked, brows furrowed.

“They might think your father is at your flat, if they’ve been unable to find him elsewhere,” Snape suggested.

“Shit! I never even thought of that! Shit!”

“Problem?” Albus asked.

“Andy,” Scorpius said, looking at his father.

“Apparate straight over, and open the floo to us,” Draco said, firmly.

Scorpius was gone in a crack.

Harry followed.

“Where the hell has he gone?” Draco exclaimed.

“Who knows, with Potter?” Snape said, striding to the fireplace. “The address, Draco?”

Within moments, they were all assembled in the tiny sitting room in Carnegie Place. Scorpius was trying to hold Andy, who was gesticulating wildly. There were shouts outside, and Howlers, which had obviously collected under the owl chute, awaiting the arrival of their addressee, were now flying across the room and hurling abuse at Scorpius.

Draco had just assessed all this when Harry flung out a hand, said “May I?” to Scorpius, and incinerated the lot.
The smell of burning filled the air for a moment, and then, Harry gave another little movement of his wrist and they all disappeared.

“Neat!” Albus said. “I thought for sure they’d burn the rug! How did you do that, Dad?”

“Practice,” Harry answered.

“When have you had Howlers?” Albus queried, hands on hips.

“In my mis-spent youth?”

Snape choked.

The young man who had been sitting next to Scorpius in the court stepped forward, and held out his hand. “You must be Harry Potter,” he said, easily. “I’m Andy Boniface. You were at school with my Mum – Susan Bones. And I’m afraid I don’t know you, Sir?” he held out his hand to Snape, after letting Harry’s go.

“Severus Snape. Your mother was one of my better students.”

“I asked her to visit Draco,” Harry said. “Small world.”

Andy grinned. “Did you really have a lot of Howlers?”

“You wouldn’t believe.”

Snape, meanwhile, had moved over to the window and cast a transparency spell on the curtains, which had been drawn closed. Harry walked over to him.

“There’s maybe a dozen people,” Snape said.

“What’s that they’re shouting?” Harry asked, trying to make words out amongst the noise.

“They’re horrid,” Andy said. “As if it’s anything to do with you, Scorp! I tried reasoning with them, and then telling them you weren’t here, but they won’t listen!”


“I’m so sorry,” Scorpius was saying again to Andy.

“So am I,” Draco added. “Thank you for supporting my son. This can’t have been easy.”

“I don’t mind,” Andy said, throwing up his arms again, “except they’re mindless, shit-for-brains wankers!”

Albus snorted a laugh. Even Snape’s lips were twisting up.

“Albus? Hi! Sorry! We’ve never had so many people in the flat. Haven’t seen you for ages. You alright?” Andy said, and then paused, and added, “Bloody hell, I’ve got shit-for-brains too. What am I thinking? I’m so sorry about your Mum.” He turned to Harry, going red. “And sorry – about Mrs Potter, I mean.”

Albus shrugged awkwardly. “Thanks.”

Harry knew just how he felt. It was always difficult to know how to respond.
Everyone moved to join the two men at the window.

“I’ve been trying to ignore them,” Andy said. “I thought if I hexed them it would only make more trouble. But the neighbours are going to use this against us if it goes on much longer.” He cast an anxious look at Scorpius.

“It’s hardly your fault,” Harry commented. “Have you got nasty neighbours, then?”

“It’s hard for them to accept two wizards living together.”


“The neighbours know this is a one-bedroom flat,” Andy explained.

“You didn’t think to opt for a two bedroom one to allay suspicions?” Snape asked.

Scorpius snorted. “It probably would have been sensible to, but we don’t need two bedrooms, we liked the flat, and I expect I was being pig-headed about it.”

“The answer in a nutshell,” Draco murmured. “That last part, that is.”

“Oi!” Scorpius said. “Why pay for a bigger place? No one wants to stay over with two gay wizards anyway: they’re all scared it’s catching.” His voice had turned a trifle bitter.

“It is a nice flat,” Albus said, glancing round, trying to relieve the tension.

“Thanks,” Andy said.

“So, what do you think about these people?”

“I could go out and talk to them,” Harry said. “It’s ridiculous that they’re still blaming your father, and ridiculous that they should be taking that out on you.”

“You’d be wasting your breath,” Snape said. “You can’t reason with ‘mindless, shit-for-brains wankers’.”

Everyone snorted with laughter at those words repeated in Snape’s cultured bass.

“What do you suggest?” Draco asked.

Severus cast. There didn’t seem to be any change, but then after a minute or two, the shouting stopped and there was some whispering. Then it started up again, but half-heartedly. Harry could see the perpetrators wrapping their arms around themselves, and slapping their arms against their thighs.

“Nothing like a simple freezing spell over the area to make them decide to go home,” Snape said.

“How long will that last, though?” Scorpius said gloomily. “They’ll be back in the morning.”

“It should last for a few days. By then, they might have got bored with the idea or actually decided that despite them wishing otherwise, your father is actually innocent.”

“Thanks,” said Scorpius, as the group outside huddled together to talk again, before finally staring up at the windows and then heading off.

“Wow. It worked!” Andy said.
“Magic. Isn’t it wonderful?” Snape said drolly.

Harry had been having a feel of the wards. As it was Andy’s flat as well as Scorpius’, he said what he thought needed doing to improve matters, and asked if they wished for help.

“Can you just feel what’s there?” Andy asked, interested.

“I think most wizards can – it’s just experience,” Harry said. “Don’t you think so?” He looked to Draco and Snape.

They both nodded. There were three young men here who needed to learn, Harry thought, so he went ahead and explained to them what he looked for, what he did, what he felt. Soon, they were all standing there, closing their eyes and feeling out.

Draco sat down.

“You look exhausted,” Snape said quietly. “Can I get you anything?”

“I think I just realised that I’m free,” Draco answered, his head back on the chair and his eyes shut. “Or I could be in the underworld, where a Potter look-alike will teach endlessly on every subject until I want to rip every remaining hair out of my head.”

Snape chuckled.

“He’s surprisingly good at it,” Malfoy commented.

“Thanks,” Harry perched on the arm of the settee. “I’m sorry, Draco. I should have realised you’d be tired. Would you like us to set the wards without you?”

Draco heaved himself to his feet. “Don’t be silly, Potter, this is my son we’re talking about. Let’s do it.”

They set the wards. Harry was careful to take as much weight as he could, though he could feel that Scorpius and Andy were strong.

When they’d finished, though, it wasn’t only Draco who wavered on his feet, but Albus too.

“Sit,” Harry said. “All of you. Snape, you can help.”

The two wizards went into the little kitchen. Harry made tea and hunted out the sugar bowl, whilst Snape looked in the coolbox and rustled up something in a saucepan.

Shortly after, they returned to the sitting room, handing round plates of scrambled eggs on toast, steaming mugs of tea, and bottles of Muggle beer that Harry had found.

“I’ve used up all your eggs and most of your bread,” Severus said.

“No worries,” Andy took his plate. “This smells great.”

“I raided your herbs and also used a little cheese.”

“Tastes fantastic too,” Scorpius said, forking in a mouthful.

“It’s delicious,” Draco agreed. “Thank you.”

“And I found your beer stash. Good choice,” Harry grinned, raising the bottle in salute. “What?” he
said, at the faces watching him as he swallowed. “It’s a good energy drink, high sugar content, and all that crap. And slides down a treat.”

There were smiles, and as the others finished their tea and meals, all the other bottles got opened too.

“Is ward-setting usually tiring?” Albus asked, taking a swig.

Harry could tell he was worried. He wasn’t sure what to say. He didn’t usually have any problem with it.

“It uses a lot of magic, and concentration,” Snape spoke instead. “Also, most wizards are not used to working together on projects. And doing two wardings in one day is extremely unusual.”

Draco had regained a little colour in his face, Harry thought, watching him twirl his bottle idly between his fingers. Not that he had much anyway, but he looked less…deathly…than he had. It was weird to think that if they hadn’t taken the action this morning, Malfoy probably would be dead at this moment, lying on a cold slab somewhere, or worse, some horrible limp body left huddled and drooling by the Dementors. He looked at Scorpius, and didn’t know how Malfoy could have put him through that. Sometimes you had to swallow your pride to live and fight another day.

He stood up, and started clearing dishes. “We’ll do that!” Scorpius leapt up.

“Alright, thanks,” Harry said equably. “I really ought to be getting home. I left Lily with Hermione hours ago. They’re both probably mad at me,” he grimaced.

“Na,” Albus said, standing too. “She’ll be glad to have had a quiet time to get her homework done. What with the NEWTS this year,” he added.

“They should give her some dispensation,” Snape suggested. “Although there is still plenty of time before the exams.”

Harry nodded. He felt guilty that he hadn’t really thought enough about how all this time off, not to mention the shock and upset of losing her mother, was affecting Lily’s studies.

“You’re not responsible for everything, Potter,” Malfoy said.

Harry looked at him in surprise.

“You should know by now that you can’t control everything. And Ginny always said Lily was very bright: you got through tough times: give her some credit for doing the same.”

It was a strange speech. ‘Tough times,’ was an interesting way to describe his teenage years and the life-threatening events he had regularly faced, and it was even weirder to think that Malfoy was actually crediting that his schooldays had not been a whirl of fun and laughter. But he actually felt touched that Malfoy was thinking so well of his daughter, that Ginny had talked about her.

He nodded.

Snape stood too. “Draco, are you staying here – on the sofa, for lack of the aforementioned spare bedroom – or shall I see you to your home?”

“Home,” Draco said, stirring himself.
“Would you like me to come and stay with you?” Scorpius asked.

“And leave Andy with all the clearing up? After all he’s gone through already? Have a heart, Scorpius,” he smiled.

“Honestly, Mr Malfoy, I don’t mind – “ Andy began.

“Of course you do, and quite right too,” Draco said, getting to his feet with a hint of his old elegance. “I just want to have a shower, and sleep, and I’m not so senile that I can’t manage those alone. It would be good to see you both soon, though,” he added, and Scorpius came up and hugged him, and then, to Harry’s surprise, came and shook his hand.

“Thank you again, Sir,” he said.

Harry was aware of Draco watching them.

“Your son asked me to come and visit you,” he explained.

“Interfering?” Draco raised his eyebrow at his son.

“Yes,” Scorpius said. “Now, go home to bed. Goodnight, Master Snape.”

“Goodnight, Scorpius, Andy,” Snape said.

Draco had gone into the floo, and Snape turned, powder in his hand, as he was about to step in. “You know, if you did have a second bedroom, you’d find not only your father staying, but friends too. We certainly did.” And with that, he threw the powder into the flames and was gone.
The Burrow

The next morning, Harry had braved up and gone to the Burrow. Molly had offered him breakfast, but Harry soon realised that, rather than it being an olive branch, it was an avoidance technique. She clattered around the kitchen, mostly with her back to him, and when he offered to help, she asked him to go and find some chives in the garden, which as far as Harry knew, had never been part of any breakfast he’d ever eaten there before.

He took his time.

The rejection hurt.

That was unfair of him, he thought. He hadn’t been kicked out. What more could he have expected?

But he had always felt part of the family, and now he didn’t.

He heard the back door and turned round. George was coming down the path towards him.

“Give it time,” George said, clapping a hand on his back.

“I shouldn’t have come.” Harry’s agitated fingers crushed the herbs that he had picked.

“Don’t be daft.” George bumped against him, shoulder to shoulder. “They would have been really hurt if you’d stayed away. But it’s a lot to take on board, you know? That your daughter who you’d stuck on a pedestal, brilliant career, brilliant mother, brilliant wife, all that crap, was human after all. It’s knocked the stuffing out of them, made them doubt their judgement. And Mum won’t even have the chance to shout at her and tell her she’s throwing her life away. And on top of that, they know that you’ve been coming round, acting as if you were still part of the family, when you knew that you’d be leaving.”

“I always felt like I was part of this family,” Harry remonstrated, “long before I even went out with Ginny. And I suppose I hoped I’d still be part, especially with the kids. It’s not like they won’t still be their grandparents or anything.”

“I know,” George said, “but it’s just hard for them. Give them time. Keep coming over. Don’t give up on them.”

Harry nodded, and they turned and set off down the path.

“They’ve lost a son and a daughter now,” George said quietly. “It’s more than any parent should have to bear. Don’t let them fear that they’ll lose you or the children.”

“Thank you, George,” Harry said, a quick hand on his arm before they went in.

“Well, that’s the parents. You’re on your own with the rest of the family,” George grinned.

Harry groaned.

In the kitchen, Bill had just wheeled Arthur in, dressed and ready for the day.

“Ginny!”

There was a moment of silence. Harry could see friendliness, followed by agitation on Arthur’s
face. Arthur had trouble finding the right words, and often, a linked word to the one he was seeking came out; he would call his sons by each other’s names, or sometimes he would call one of them ‘Edward’, his brother’s name. Normally, the family laughed, but this time…

Harry went over and squatted beside his chair.

“Morning, Arthur. How are you today?”

“Breakfast’s up,” Molly said, in an over-cheerful voice.

“Oh dear,” Arthur said, and Harry leant forward and gave him a quick hug. Arthur patted his back with his good hand.

Harry felt a huge sense of relief that at least one of his parents-in-law was talking to him.

Percy appeared too, and they all sat down, eating in silence.

“This is delicious, Molly,” Harry said.

“Tear some chives onto your scrambled eggs, they’ll taste even better,” she replied. “Put the rest in the middle of the table if you picked enough.”

Well, Snape had put herbs in the scrambled egg last night, but they’d gone in at the cooking stage. And god knows what shape his system would be in with scrambled eggs for two meals in a row. Nevertheless, Harry shredded a couple of the battered looking leaves, and then deposited the rest on the edge of the bread board.

“Well, they look enticing,” Bill commented.

George snorted. “Who eats chives for breakfast? What were you thinking, Mum? We’ll stink of onion all day.”

“Sorry,” Harry said: they were looking mangled to death.

“Yeah, I reckon you are,” Bill said, after a moment.

Harry squirmed. “I couldn’t let him die,” he said quietly.

And there they were, at the conversation.

“You ruined our Gin’s reputation,” Molly sniffed.

“She loved him,” Harry said. “What would she have thought of us if we’d let him die for something he didn’t do?”


“You sound like an owl, dear,” Molly said, cutting up her sausage, making Harry choke on his toast. “Who what?”


Harry sat up straight. “That’s the question, Arthur. And the worst thing about Malfoy thinking that he’d done it and pleading guilty, is that the ones that did do it have had time to get away.”

Arthur’s question really seemed to break the barrier between Harry and the Weasleys.
“The Aurors will be following it up, won’t they?” Percy queried. “I mean, they’ve got to!”

“Well, I damn well hope they’ll try, but it isn’t going to be easy,” Harry said. He thought. “Not for them, and not for us. I suppose they’ll be round asking us questions, to see if there’s any way Gin knew them.”

“Do you think she did, Harry?” Molly look horrified.

“I don’t know. I didn’t recognise them. And I can’t think that anyone that knew Ginny would treat her like that,” he said, suddenly finding his voice cracking.

There was a moment’s silence. Harry hoped he wouldn’t cry. He hated the bursts of emotion that just grabbed hold of him out of nowhere, uncontrollable and embarrassing.

“I don’t know why Ron can’t be involved,” Molly shook her head. “He’s good at his job. You’d think someone wants the culprits to get away with it.”

“Perhaps they do,” Bill said slowly.

“I’ve been wondering something along the same lines,” Harry agreed. “Which means we can’t trust the Ministry.”

“Well,” said George, leaning back in his chair. “Dark deeds, masked figures, corruption in the Ministry: is it time to resurrect the Order of the Phoenix?”

“George! Don’t joke!” Molly exclaimed. “Your sister’s dead!”

“I’m not joking, Mum,” he said seriously. “Something’s up. There are whispers everywhere. Antagonism to Muggleborns again. The Ministry haven’t done anything to improve matters, and I’m beginning to wonder if that’s deliberate.”

“But Hermione hasn’t had any problems!” Molly said. “Look how well she’s done!”

“Look what she hasn’t achieved yet,” George answered. “She could be Minister for Magic by now: she’s seriously able. But people are scared of her.”


“Come on!” George argued. “Have you ever known anyone so good at knowing absolutely everything? She has the whole Muggle and Wizarding thing, she’s a lawyer, she’s a war hero, she’s a mother, she’s analytical, what can’t she do?”

“Cook?” Molly said.

“Molly!” Harry burst out laughing.

“Well, dear, it’s true and you know it. She could run the country, I’ve no doubt, but if she hadn’t agreed to have a house-elf – paid or not – that family would starve. Ron still comes here three times a week to top up.”

“He doesn’t!” Harry was still chuckling.

“Does,” Arthur joined in.

“Mind you,” Molly said, “I’m not complaining. I expect we’d never see him otherwise.”
“You’re terrible, Mum,” George was grinning.

“Well, Hermione is wonderful, I’m not arguing on that. But she isn’t a homemaker.”

“I always thought you used more spells than anyone I knew,” Harry said, but to his surprise, instead of taking the compliment, Molly seemed to withdraw into herself.

“Well,” she said after a moment, “we need to see what Ron has to say about what the Auror department are doing. Shall we have an Order meeting here tonight?”

“Blimey, there’s no messing about with you, Mum, is there?” George looked at his mother with awe.

“Ginny’s dead and three wicked people killed her,” Molly said. “Who’s next?”

That evening, a strangely friendly gathering met in the kitchen of the Burrow.

Harry has spoken to Kingsley, and liaised back with Molly: it was too soon to call up the Order, but instead, a collection of those interested in finding out who Ginny’s murderers were had come, which was a starting point to focus on. Which meant that all the Weasleys were there, including Charlie, looking rugged and glowing with health, Hermione and Angelina, Neville, Teddy Lupin, James and Albus, Severus Snape and Kingsley Shacklebolt, and, accompanied by Harry, a rather apprehensive Draco Malfoy.

Once again, despite his speech difficulties, it was Arthur who broke the crashing silence that followed their arrival.

“Well, that’s water under the bridge now. We’re all here for the same thing, aren’t we? We want to find out who killed our Gin? And why? Ron, can you tell us anything?”

There were a couple of spare seats, one between Bill and Kingsley and one between Angelina and Percy. Harry took the one next to Bill: he didn’t know how Bill felt about Malfoy, and it wasn’t the time to put it to the test.

“Well, it’s obviously not my team and they’re pretty keen to tell me to mind my own business,” Ron said. “But I know a couple of the Aurors quite well so there’s no problem with finding out
stuff. Basically, they don’t have any leads, which I’m pretty sure we knew anyway, and they’re going over the memory to try and pick up clues.” He looked from Harry to Snape to Shacklebolt. “You’ve done that already. Is there anything you can tell us?”

“I’d better explain,” Kingsley said, in his deep voice, “that I’ve been working on a European task force looking into new threats.”

“That explains a lot,” Charlie interrupted. “I couldn’t believe you’d just given it all up.”

There had been lots of astonishment and welcome when Shacklebolt and Snape had arrived.

“Well, I did ‘give it all up’ – for better things – for a while,” Kingsley contradicted. “But then, I was asked to help, and here we are. The bad news is, that I’ve seen the masks the murderers were wearing before, in Europe. On one occasion, a French Minister was assassinated.”

“So what do you think is going on, Mr Shacklebolt?” Angelina asked. “And why would this group kill Ginny? She wasn’t a political figure. Are other sports’ players likely to be targeted?”

“Angelina writes a column for *Quidditch Heroes* magazine,” Molly pointed out. “She knows everything about everybody in the quidditch world.”

“Thanks Molly,” Shacklebolt smiled. “Actually, I have a subscription to *Quidditch Heroes*: good article on Monty Perkins last week, and I hope you’ll call me Kingsley so that I can call you Angelina, because saying ‘Mrs Weasley’ around this table is going to be plain confusing.”

“What a good idea – is everyone happy with first names?” Hermione asked, amidst the chuckling that ensued. “Master Snape? Malfoy?”

“Fine.”

“Of course.”

“Excellent,” Shacklebolt said. “One ground rule sorted. Now, as for sports’ players – the answer is, we don’t know. I don’t think it’s likely, but we really don’t know who is going to be targeted, because we don’t know the motivation of the killers. If we can just get inside what their planning is, their purpose, if we can capture one man, or woman, we can begin to understand. Draco, you can be the most help here: did you recognise anything, anything at all – their way of speaking, a movement – in the perpetrators?”

“Two Aurors came round today to ask me the same thing,” he said.

“Really?” Ron’s eyebrows drew together. “No-one mentioned that. It makes sense, of course. Who were they?”

“Wilkinson and Freeman. I hadn’t seen them before.”

“I’ve seen them around. Were you happy with the way they questioned you?”

“What can I say to that? They didn’t beat me up or anything.” Malfoy realised what he had said and looked at Ron. “I –”

“Fair comment,” Ron shrugged. He had already apologised to Malfoy.

“So, did their questions prompt anything helpful?” Kingsley asked.

Malfoy shook his head. “I didn’t recognise them. Not their voices or anything. They spoke English,
they were all men, one was shorter than the other two.”

“Were they white? Black? Asian? Could you tell the skin tone?” Charlie asked. “Sorry if it’s a silly question, I wasn’t able to get to court, so I haven’t seen the memories.”

“It’s a good question,” Kingsley said. “Draco?”

“It’s hard to be sure. They wore gloves as well as masks, so it was only the skin around the eyes that I could see. I think they were all white; maybe not as white as me.”

“No one is as white as you, Draco,” Hermione said. “What? It’s true!”

“It is,” Harry agreed, smiling. “So, do you think my sort of colour, or Ron’s, or Sn -Severus’? We’re all white but different shades.” He put his fingers around his eyes as if he had a mask on.

Draco looked at him as if he was an idiot. “Seriously, P - Harry,” he said in exasperation, “you can’t really think I can guess from you doing that?” He looked round the table. “I’m really sorry, I just don’t know. I – I guess I was too shocked, and – “. And he stopped.

“You’ve thought of something?” Kingsley prompted.

“I was just about to say, I was petrified – literally, by spell – and they had their backs to me mostly, and then I remembered the one who did the memory stuff to me. He held my face. Strong grip. He had bags under his eyes – puffy. And his breath…” He paused. “It smelt of …aniseed.”

“Excellent, Draco! Memory extraction is excellent at visual impressions, and sound, and yet not so effective at relaying sensations such as, as you say, the strength of a grip, or odours. The aniseed in particular is very helpful, I would think. Severus?”

“It could be that he was just partial to aniseed sweets, but there are a number of potions that use pimpinella anisum. It is used in remedies for coughs and flatulence, both of which problems I think you may have noticed.”

Albus snorted. Harry caught his eye and shared a smirk with him.

“However,” Snape continued, after a quelling glance around the table, “it is also an ingredient in Felix Felicis.”

“You think the man needed Dutch courage?” Hermione looked thoughtful. “Draco, did he seem less involved than the others? Apart from doing the memory work? Do you think he could have been forced into it? Because he was the only one who could do the memory stuff?”

All those who had seen the memories thought back over them. “It could be,” Draco said slowly.

“We’ll need to review the memories again,” Shacklebolt said. “Just focus on that chap. In fact, we need to view the memories several times, concentrating on one at a time, to build up a profile as best we can of each.” His brows drew together. “If he was brought in just to do the memory work, perhaps by force or blackmail, and it’s failed…”

“You think they might kill him?” Bill suggested.

“It’s a possibility. Ron, can you keep your eyes open for any unexplained deaths in wizards fitting the description, scant as it is?”

“I could keep my eye open at St. Mungo’s,” Teddy offered. “I’m a trainee nurse,” he explained.
"I’m friendly with a couple of the girls in reception, or I could wander down to the mortuary, start chatting to the people there. Then if any DOAs come in I could see if they might be our chap."

"Are you sure, Ted?" Harry asked. "I don’t want you getting into trouble."

"I chat to loads of people. Nobody will think it’s odd," he shrugged. "I can always go in disguise, if need be. Haven’t really used my natural talents for anything serious before."

"You would have been very welcome in the Auror programme with your skills," Kingsley suggested. "Your Mum was a great asset."

Teddy nodded. "So I’ve heard, but I wanted to be more than someone who’s useful just because he can change the way he looks."

"Fair enough," Kingsley smiled. "Any information you can gather will be very helpful."

"Susan Boniface would help too, if we needed it, I should think," Draco said quietly.

"Who’s that?" Charlie asked.

"Susan Bones before she married," Ron said. "We went to school with her."

"It’s probably better to keep things close to home for the moment," Kingsley suggested.

"She’s also my son’s lover’s mother," Draco said.

Harry was impressed with the way he just came out with it: no embarrassment. He watched the Weasley’s reactions: they didn’t know Snape and Shacklebolt were together, and he wondered how widespread the homophobia that was endemic in Wizarding Britain actually went. The Weasleys had a son who had some werewolf tendencies, and a daughter-in-law who was Veela. Teddy’s father had been a werewolf. Surely these people couldn’t be prejudiced against others who were just a little bit different? But Molly had her head down, her cheeks red, and Bill looked awkward. Harry’s heart sank.

"Then it would be great if you’d ask her," Kingsley said, firmly. "Would your son and his partner be willing to help?" he went on, drawing an audible gasp from Molly.

Kingsley ignored it. "What we need," he said, "is people across a broad spectrum keeping their eyes and ears open. I’m worried about this group. I’m sorry your daughter is dead, Mr and Mrs Weasley, but I don’t think she’s going to be the last."

"Blood," Arthur said.

They all looked at him.

"People will die, do you mean?" Kingsley asked. "They will."

But Arthur was shaking his head. "Blood," he said again. "Oh bugger," he sighed. He got terribly frustrated, knowing what he wanted to say but unable to find the right words. He used his good hand to point at his family around the room, then at Angelina and Kingsley. "Blood," he said again. "Clean," he said, then shook his head, looking horrified.

"Do you mean Ginny was a pureblood, Dad?" Percy asked.

Arthur nodded vigorously. "Phew!" he said, making them laugh, though somewhat uneasily.
“You’re asking why she was killed if she was a pureblood?” Snape asked. “If blood purity is supposed to be important to this new group?”

Arthur continued to nod, relieved.

“It’s a good point,” Kingsley said. “And I don’t have any answers. Yet.”
The next day, after further discussions with Kingsley and Snape, and a night thinking on it, Harry sent an owl to Lucius Malfoy, and an hour later was sitting in Malfoy’s drawing room.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been in touch earlier,” Harry said, sipping the Earl Grey tea that had arrived at his elbow on a neat tray. Harry wondered if Malfoy was too shaky to pour it himself. And if it was a rebuke for his own lack of the usual niceties.

“I have no complaints about an extra few hours in this world, Mr Potter. Though I would very much appreciate it if you would allow me the opportunity to visit my son before I die. I will, of course, not mention the agreement.”

“Are you satisfied that I have fulfilled my side of the bargain?” Harry asked, not answering Malfoy’s request.

“My son is alive. And proved innocent too,” Malfoy said. “You have fulfilled your side of the bargain, and more, Mr Potter,” he inclined his head.

“Good, we’re agreed on that, then,” Harry said.

He sipped his tea.

“Are you deliberately trying to prolong my discomfiture?” Malfoy asked imperiously.

Harry put down his cup. “The thing is, Mr Malfoy, I’m not the vengeful sort.”

Harry could see the infinitesimal tightening of Malfoy’s hands.

“However, we made a bargain. We’ve agreed that I have fulfilled my part. Now, I’m going to make a suggestion.”

“A suggestion? What have you in mind?” Malfoy suddenly drew in a sharp breath, and raised his chin. “If you wish me to be your house-elf, your slave, and humiliate me publicly, I prefer death, thank you very much.”

“My house-elf?” Harry choked. “I can’t imagine anyone less suited to it! And, surprising as it may seem to you, I’ve no desire to humiliate another human being. On top of that, I’m absolutely positive that I couldn’t stand to have you in my house for an hour, let alone a lifetime.”

Malfoy’s lips were so pursed, and his back so ramrod straight, that Harry fought back the continuing desire to laugh. Malfoy as a house-elf indeed!

“Perhaps you’d enlighten me, then, as to what you had in mind,” the older man asked tightly.

Harry sat back. He could force the issue, or entice. He wasn’t very good at either, but he knew which one he was going to try.

“When I first saw you, it seemed pretty clear to me that your offer wasn’t much of a hardship.”

“I beg your pardon?” Malfoy’s outrage intensified.

“I thought you had the air of a man who had pretty much given up on life. As if there were little to interest you, or keep you going.”
“Many of my previous activities are no longer open to me,” Malfoy said curtly.

Harry nodded. He leant forward.

“Mr Malfoy, three people – three people who we think are just part of a larger organisation - set your son up for a murder he didn’t commit. And they deliberately forced him to suffer intensely by making him believe that he had done it. They have eroded his chance for the future he wished for, and for the future you envisaged for the Malfoy family. To cut a long story short, we believe that these people have plans, and at this moment, we’re not sure how the murder of my wife, and the manner in which your son was set up, feature in the bigger picture. But we do plan to find out, and to put a stop to it. I’m asking you if you would like to be involved in finding the bastards who did this.”

Harry sat back, and waited.

Malfoy was trying to resume his usual mask, but not quite succeeding. “You don’t trust the Auror Department to deal with it?”

“Do you?” Harry shot back. “We think these people have a foot in the Ministry. Why was your son’s trial moved? Somebody powerful decided to recall the whole Wizengamot from their recess. The initial speed for the trial was much faster than previous trials – I checked that. I put a spanner in someone’s plans there by asking them to wait until after my wife’s Funeral Rites. Then the minute I got Snape to legitimize Draco with Veritaserex, the trial was pulled forward. Two days! No time for him to change his mind, work on a defence, had he wished it – nothing!”

Malfoy looked thoughtful. “I assumed the initial speed was due to your – position – in the wizarding world. I expect everyone else thought so too. So, what are you asking me to do, exactly? Are you asking to use my money to fund your enquiries?”

“That money is now mine, Mr Malfoy, not yours. You knew that from the moment you agreed that I had completed my part of the bargain, the magical contract would have ensured that Gringotts would transfer all your holdings into the vaults I nominated. But I’m asking a lot more of you than that.”

“It appears you like your pound of flesh.” Malfoy was watching Harry like a hawk. “If it isn’t my death you’re after, what is it that you are expecting me to do as a penniless wretch? “

“I will give you access to the vaults, and allow you to continue to live in your own homes, as you have been doing.”

“If…? There are conditions, no doubt.”

“There’s a task,” Harry said. He saw the surprise in Malfoy’s eyes, and continued. “I’m not interested in your money; you may spend as much of it on completing your task as you will. I want you to infiltrate this organisation, help us find out what they’re up to, and help us find out who killed Ginny and set up Draco, and why. Interested?”

“You’re asking me to be a spy?”

“Mmmm. Isn’t all that intrigue and manipulation appealing?”

Malfoy snapped his fingers, and his elf appeared. “Coffee,” he demanded. “At once.”

In a moment the elf had returned, with a cafetiere of coffee. Harry thought it smelt fantastic. He wasn’t really an Earl Grey man.
“I find it sharpens the brain,” Malfoy waved a hand at the pot. “It sounds as if I am going to need it. You’d better tell me about this group, and what exactly you expect of me.”

Harry explained what they knew. “I know it doesn’t make sense, given that Draco and Ginny are Purebloods,” Harry said, several minutes into the discussion, “but everything else we know about them suggests that anti-Muggle feeling is a strong element of their cause. Given your previous views on Pureblood status, and your treatment as a consequence of your actions in what they may perceive as a worthy cause, it is possible that you may well be able to ingratiate yourself into the movement.”

“Ingirate myself? I am a Malfoy,” Lucius sneered.

“That’s probably exactly the attitude they’ll love,” Harry commented equably.

“So you expect me to join this organisation and report back to you on what they’re doing?”

“We don’t know if they’re organised enough to have a membership, or if it’s something looser. But in effect, yes. Though I won’t be your contact.”

“And who would be? Severus Snape? Who exactly, are the ‘we’ you are referring to? The Order of the Phoenix?”

Harry shook his head. “A number of interested people who are keen to find Ginny’s killers, and prevent anyone else suffering the same fate. I’m not going to give you any more information than that: it could be dangerous for them, and dangerous for you. I’m afraid you’re going to be out on your own. I’ll let you know who your contact is shortly, but it won’t be Master Snape.”

There was no way Harry was going to put Snape into the position of having to deal with Lucius Malfoy. There was too much history there. Snape had done his bit on the spying front, and Harry had no intention of ever forcing him into a similar position again.

“When will I know that I have completed the task to your satisfaction? And what happens then?” Malfoy asked.

“We’ll come to a mutual agreement on when the task is done,” Harry said. He hadn’t really thought about after. “As for afterwards…what are you asking?”

“I’m asking if the agreement reverts to the original terms, Mr Potter,” Malfoy asked.

Harry looked puzzled.

“Is this just a stay of execution? Will my life be forfeit afterwards?”

Harry was genuinely shocked. “I don’t know what sort of man you think I am, Malfoy -” he began.

“I don’t think I have any idea,” Malfoy said. “I have to admit, you’ve confunded my expectations.”

“I don’t think I’ll ask what you expected me to be,” Harry gave a slight smile. He leant forward. “I can tell you this: if you complete this task to my satisfaction, I will consider our agreement fulfilled. Your life will be yours.”

“That is…generous,” Malfoy conceded. “You will not be asking me to perform further tasks?”

“I will not.”

“And my estates?” Malfoy said, delicately.
“You’re putting me on the spot,” Harry said. “I need to think about that. Let me say this: it would be unwise of you to decide to spend absolutely everything in fulfilling your task, in an attempt to spite me, so that there is nothing left at the end.”

Malfoy looked genuinely pleased. “A carrot and a stick. You are an interesting man, Mr Potter.”

“I hope I’m an honourable one,” Harry said. “And I hope I’m giving you the chance to be one too.”

He watched Malfoy stiffen, but didn’t back down.

“When your son approached me about marrying Ginny,” he continued, “I looked into your family tree.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You son would inevitably have had influence over my children; even adults are influenced by those around them,” Harry went on. “I saw that he’d turned his life around. He was doing everything he could to make the Malfoy name respectable again. It made me wonder why he was so proud of his heritage.”

He gazed calmly at Malfoy, who was sitting rigidly in his chair, trying not to look stunned. Harry felt a shiver of pleasure at surprising the supercilious bastard.

“I found out that your family have had a great influence in wizarding affairs over the centuries, and not just because Malfoys seem to have a nose for politics. Septimus Malfoy was an incredible spell-crafter. Leonora Malfoy was a much admired Headmistress at Beauxbatons. Hyperion Malfoy created more healing potions than anyone else before or since. I could see why Draco was working so hard to restore that pride. Scorpius too, I think, is going to be another Malfoy who has a real and beneficial impact on wizarding society. To be blunt, at the moment, you represent a stain on the Malfoy heritage. But you’ve only lived – what – half the lifespan of a wizard? You’ve got time to turn things round. To offer something to the world and to your line of which you can be proud. If you want to.” Harry stood up. “I’ll leave you to think about my request.”

Malfoy got to his feet too. “Of course I am going to accept, Mr Potter. I’ll start at once. You’ll let me know my contact, but if anything comes to my attention before then, I’ll contact you discreetly. Is that acceptable?”

“You can’t let anyone know what you’re doing, you realise?” Harry asked. “Not even your son. I’m sorry that this might make things more difficult between you –”

“As you’ve indicated, Potter, this is a long game. You are already aware that my son doesn’t invite me into his home. You’ve given me perhaps more hope than I have had in many years.”

“May I have your word that you won’t abuse the position and power that your task may give you? You may find yourself aligned with the beliefs of this organisation. If they’re after the sort of intolerant society that the Death Eaters sought, be assured, I will do whatever is necessary to destroy it. Do you understand me?”

“You are, of course, entirely in a position to threaten me –”

“I’m not threatening you, Malfoy. I’m just being absolutely clear about what I expect of you. Either I have your word or the deal is off.”

“You have it, of course,” Malfoy extended a languid hand, which Harry shook.
Harry stepped away towards the fireplace.

As if unable to let Harry leave with the upper hand so clearly held, Malfoy said, “You realise that, after your confession in court, your golden boy reputation has been - tarnished - shall we say?”

Harry turned and raised an eyebrow.

“I can feel the power rolling off you.”

“I don’t much care what people think of me,” Harry shrugged. “They can think that I was unfaithful to my wife, as well as she to me, and that we stayed together to give our children a sound home. We wouldn’t be the only family with such an arrangement, I’m sure. Or they might consider that I have very little power, from choosing not to indulge. It’s always nice to be able to surprise people, of course. Or they might notice how much power I have, as you have done, and wonder: is this his normal power, fuelled by an active sex life? Or is it just a smidgen of what it could be?”

Malfoy’s eyes widened.

“Or they might think sex and magic are totally unrelated,” Harry said. “I’ll be in touch.”

He threw a handful of floo powder into the flames, and disappeared, leaving a very thoughtful Lucius Malfoy staring after him.

It was a busy week. The day after that, Aurors Hencliffe and Franklin called. Harry had to accompany them to the Ministry. “Just so that we can go over the facts, Mr Potter,” Franklin said.

Harry was hugely relieved that as he walked into the Auror offices, Ron casually strode out of his office, mug of tea in hand.

“Harry! Didn’t expect to see you today, mate!”

“I’ve been asked to go over a few facts,” Harry indicated the two Aurors.

“Really? I didn’t think we were ready for you. I didn’t get a memo at all. What on earth is going on with the system?” He shrugged, smiling at the two Aurors. “Hold on, I’ll just get my robe. The interviewing rooms can be damn chilly, can’t they? Want a spare, Harry?”

“This doesn’t concern you, Auror Weasley,” Hencliffe began.

“Of course it does. Hey! Bolt! Daventry? You need to come and watch this too,” he called, over Hencliffe’s shoulder at a young man and woman sitting at their desks.

“What are you doing, Sir?” Auror Franklin hissed. “You know you’re not allowed to be involved in this investigation – ”

“What?” Ron said, all gormless charm. Harry thought he’d really mastered that wide-eyed look, though it was amazing he could still pull it off at his age. “You got the message from Felton, of course? The international co-operation thingy?”

“What ‘thingy’?” Franklin said distastefully, her hands going to her hips, spitting out the word as if it were poisonous.
She reminded Harry a bit of Professor McGonagall.

“And I don’t believe we should be having this conversation in front of a witness,” she said primly.

“Good point,” Ron said, his eyes twinkling at Harry. “Here, step into my office, it’s on my desk. Hencliffe, I’m sure you can keep this dangerous criminal under control,” he chuckled.

“Hi Harry,” Jemima Bolt said, coming over. Harry had met her a couple of times in the pub, and Daventry too, when he’d met Ron after work sometimes.

“How’s the knee?” Harry asked.

“Brilliant, now, thanks. Good as new,” Jemima beamed at him. “Though I won’t be trying a Wronski Feint again, I can tell you! Who invented such a stupid move?”

“Er, Wronski?” Hugh Daventry suggested sarcastically, coming up. “Hi Harry.” He shook his hand.

Hencliffe rolled his eyes.

Ron and Franklin exited the office, with Franklin looking riled. Harry raised his brows at Ron, who grinned back.

“Okay, off to the interviewing rooms. I’ve ordered some coffee,” Ron added.

“This is not a social event,” Franklin said, tightly.

“No, it’s interviewing a bereaved husband and potential witness,” Ron replied, voice suddenly firm. “Whom we treat with respect.”

“It’s only suspects who get the rough treatment, eh?” Hencliffe mumbled under his breath.

“I was completely out of order, and I’ve apologised to Malfoy,” Ron said sharply. “Suspects should also be treated with respect, too, of course. This case is an obvious indicator of why,” he added, to the two Auror trainees, “as the man was completely innocent. But innocent or guilty, all prisoners should be treated with respect,” he lectured. “It’s for the Wizengamot to decide on guilt and the appropriate punishment.”

“Yes, Boss,” Hugh said, saluting.

“Allright, alright, lecture over,” Ron said. “Don’t say that I don’t take my mentoring duties seriously.”

“How far into your training are you?” Hencliffe asked the two.

“Last couple of months; finals in June, Sir,” Jemima said.

“What department are you hoping to go into?”

My God, Harry thought, a couple of minutes later, as Hencliffe continued to quiz Jemima as they walked along, completely ignoring Hugh; was he really chatting her up? He glanced at Ron, who raised his eyebrows in agreement with Harry.

When they reached the interview room, Ron said, “We’ll observe from the other room,” gave Harry a thumbs up, and disappeared.
Harry felt surprisingly bereft. Perhaps he should have had Hermione with him: weren’t you supposed to have a lawyer with you if you were interviewed by the Police? But Ron hadn’t said anything. And Harry hadn’t done anything. He wasn’t a suspect, was he?

It became clear in the next half hour that he was being ‘eliminated from enquiries’. He had to say where he was on the day Ginny died, and various questions of that sort, and then they took a different tack and asked if he recognised any of the attackers or knew any reason why anyone might want to murder Ginny.

He was terribly glad that even though Ron wasn’t in the room, he knew he was on the other side of the glass.

He came out feeling battered and shocked. Which was stupid, because he’d been expecting to be questioned. Ron came out, but Harry could see that he really needed to be in work mode. Hugh and Jemima were right behind him. He steeled himself.

“You alright, mate?” Ron asked, then said, “Course you’re not. Look – “

Harry put a quick hand out. “Bit of a shock,” he agreed, keeping his voice even. He glanced at his watch. “Damn, I’ve got a customer coming in at three. I’ll see you, yeah?”

“Sure thing,” Ron said, looking worried and relieved.

Harry could see that his two trainees weren’t quite sure what to say to him: suddenly he had morphed from Ron’s friend to the sort of person who was interviewed over a rickety table with a Recording Quill taking notes.

He got out of the building as fast as he could, exiting onto street level and taking breaths of fresh air. It was a long walk to his shop, but he needed it.

He had a cantankerous customer to deal with that afternoon, and a recalcitrant piece of timber that he ruined with a badly made cut.

Albus was out for the evening, and Harry ate bread and cheese and beer before falling into bed and then finding that he slept badly, waking from tortured images of blood and stockings and a horrid image of the subcutaneous fat peering at him from the peeled edges of the slash across Ginny’s breast. He tumbled out of bed, and found himself staring at his face in the bathroom mirror, his hands on the edge of the basin shaking. He went down and made himself tea, tiptoeing so that he didn’t wake Albus, only to realise when he glanced at the family clock that Albus wasn’t home.

He sat up in fear, wondering whether Albus too had been attacked, and an hour had passed before he realised that the clock would tell him if any of his children were in danger, and that he might well be anywhere – at his brother’s, at a friend’s, with a girl. He hauled himself back up to bed, and in the morning, when Albus zipped downstairs and snagged a piece of toast, he said nothing at all.

The next day, Molly fire-called and asked if he’d pop in after work. He’d gone along, curious.

Molly had bustled about in the kitchen, making him an evening meal. Albus would just have to fend for himself, Harry thought, and for a moment he contemplated not letting Albus know where he was, to give Albus a taste of his own medicine, before realising how childish that would be, so
he borrowed their owl and sent a quick message.

Only Molly and Arthur were home, although the boys would be around later to help get Arthur to bed. Harry was glad of the quiet comfort of the Weasley home.

“I need to ask a favour, dear,” Molly said, as Harry tucked into a steaming stew and dumplings.

“What do you need?” Harry asked. “Of course I’ll help.”

“Would you mind awfully having the meetings at Grimmauld Place?”

“Of course not!” Harry said easily. “We only came here because we thought it would be easier for you both.” Harry thought. “Floo and side-along are difficult for Arthur, I know. Even portkey is tricky, but how about you come and stay the night before – ”

“I – thank you, but no, Harry.”

Molly was looking down, avoiding his gaze. Arthur was forking potato into his mouth with his good hand.

“Molly?”

Molly shook her head. “We – it’s too much for us, Harry. I don’t just mean having people here, what with our magic not being what it was, and all the work – just – I can’t go over and over Ginny’s death. Whatever is said in those meetings, it won’t bring Ginny back.”

“No,” Harry said quietly. “No, it won’t.”

“What you’re doing – I know it needs doing – the bigger picture – but I – we – can’t think about that right now,” Molly continued.

“Of course,” Harry said.

“Tell us,” Arthur said.

“Keep you informed? I will – ”

Arthur shook his head. “Over.”

“When it’s over? Okay. And if you change your mind, just let me know.”

“You’re a good dog.”

“Arthur!”

Arthur was shaking his head frantically, but Harry started laughing.

“I hope you mean good boy,” Harry said, and Arthur nodded enthusiastically.

“Thanks,” Harry grinned.

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Molly said. “We’re going to have a discussion one of these days, you and I, but I’m not ready for it yet.”

“Alright,” Harry said, sobering at once.

He didn’t think he would ever be ready for it.
The day after Harry had had supper with the Weasley’s, Scorpius Malfoy had sent him an owl, once again thanking Harry for getting his father out of prison, and offering to help in anyway he could. Harry had invited him to come along the next Friday. Andy Boniface had arrived with him, and several others of the younger generation – Victoire, Rose, Molly and Fred had come along as well.

There was little to report, but everyone was asked to be aware of any individuals making regular anti-Muggleborn comments, or any suspicious approaches. Several had reported the ease with which such comments were being made, in pubs and clubs and even in the workplace.

As people made their way out, Hermione said, “You looked exhausted, Harry. Are you alright?”

It’s been a long week,” Harry answered, rubbing his hand over his face. He felt grey with exhaustion.

“I’d ask you to come over and stay with us but it’s my parents’ Golden Wedding Anniversary,” Hermione was apologetic.

“God, I’d forgotten all about that! Give them my love, won’t you? Damn, Ginny would have organised a card and – ”

“Don’t be silly, Harry,” Hermione said, giving him a hug. “Now, can you have a rest this weekend?”

“We can’t offer any particular activities, but if a bit of sunshine and good food would be of any help, you’d be very welcome to come back with us,” Kingsley offered, coming up behind them.

Harry turned round in surprise. “Oh, I’m fine, really – ”

“You don’t look it,” Snape said, bluntly.

“Harry! What a wonderful idea!” Hermione said warmly. “A weekend away will make you feel miles better!”

“I can’t just up sticks and leave Albus – ”

“Albus!” Hermione called imperiously, attracting her nephew, who was apparently arguing with his brother.

“Don’t, Mione!” Harry hissed. “I’m fine.”

“Whassup?” Albus asked, coming over, glancing round the group of adults.

“Nothing!” Harry snapped.

“Whoa! What’ve I done?” Albus held up his hands.

“Sorry – ” Harry began.

“Your father is under the impression that at seventeen he was old enough to vanquish Dark Lords, but at somewhere over that you couldn’t manage for a weekend alone,” Snape said. “Of course, you’d be welcome to come too, if you wished, but the company is elderly.”
“What?”

“I’m fine!” Harry insisted.

“You look like shit, Dad,” James said, joining them.

“Thanks for that, son,” Harry false-cuffed him.

James grinned. “What’s going on, then?”

“Profess – Master Snape and Mr Shacklebolt have invited your father to stay with them for the weekend,” Hermione explained. “For a bit of sun and relaxation. He’s busy finding excuses. Which would be you two.”

“Well, sod that, Dad,” James said. “Millie, the new girl at work, asked if I had any friends to make up a foursome to go and see the Cannons play the Pride of Portree, and I just asked Albus to come and he said he didn’t think he ought to. I said I thought you were knackered, not about to slit your wrists –”

“James!” Hermione was horrified, but Harry was grinning.

“Well, you’re not, are you, Dad?” James smirked back.

“Nowhere near. Just tired is all. And I don’t need you to tuck me up, Albus, thanks though.”

“Well, please, bugger off then,” James said, making them all laugh. “I haven’t seen a game in ages, and it doesn’t feel so wrong if you’re enjoying yourself too.”

“Are you sure it’s alright for us to go to a match, Dad?” Albus asked, looking a bit worried. “People will talk.”

“Your mother would have been delighted you were off watching a game,” Harry said firmly. “Don’t even think about what other people will say, or it’ll start ruining your life. Go with what feels right for you, and bugger the lot of them.”

“Right on, Harry,” Ron appeared, slinging his arms over James’ and Albus’ shoulders. “And you know I’ve got a season ticket for the Cannons, and omnioculars, so I’ll keep my beady eye on these lads, and check out the luscious young ladies they’re with.” He gave an evil grin at the boys, who groaned. Albus dug a friendly elbow in his ribs.

“You can’t go leering over young women,” Hermione said tartly.

“Oh can’t I?” Ron answered back, waggling his eyebrows. “Looking’s all I’m getting these days, you know, since she decided to experiment on magical theory. I’ve got to get my jollies somewhere.”

“Not from ogling our dates, you haven’t,” James said.

“Still in the doghouse?” Harry laughed, looking from one friend to the other.

“Quidditch is my only pleasure,” Ron said, wiping a woeful brow.

“Oh you!” Hermione swatted him.

Everyone was grinning.
“Are you sure?” Harry said, turning to Snape. His boys could do with some light relief, and a quidditch match would be brilliant. Harry wondered if Albus had spent the night before with the young lady he was going to take. And now it looked as if James was getting fixed up too. It was good, really. And the thought of lying in that hammock again, feeling the fluttering breeze and the hot sun, and not having to think about anything, was very tempting.

“I think it’s all decided,” Kingsley answered, but Harry kept looking to Snape.

“Potter, your company is tolerable. Especially when you are lounging in the sun and I am in my laboratory.”

Everyone laughed, but that was good enough for Harry.

“Thanks,” he said.

To Harry, it was a wonderful weekend. Astonishingly, he slept until past midday on the Saturday, and when he wandered into the garden, embarrassed and apologetic, Kingsley just said, “You’ve not missed a thing. Severus has been brewing all morning – a rush order came in from the local hospital. I’ve just finished this thriller – it’s not bad. Want to give it a try?”

Before he knew it, it was Sunday evening and time to go home.

Harry thanked them profoundly.

“Nonsense, you’re welcome anytime,” Kingsley gave him a hug.

“And if you’ve happened to wander into Muggle London and come across some Twinings’ Lapsang Souchong, you’d be doubly welcome,” Snape said, standing tall and restrained.

“Severus! You can’t ask guests to bring gifts!” Kingsley remonstrated, but Harry grinned.

That was a true invitation from Snape.

He returned home, sat up for a bit with Albus, talking over the game, asking about the girl Albus had taken.

“Oh, I only went with Flora,” he shrugged.

Flora had been a good friend from Hogwarts, a Muggleborn girl, and a frequent visitor to the house.

“No romance there, then?” Harry prompted.

“With Flora? She’s just a friend, Dad. Actually, she’s just broken up with her boyfriend. I sat up late talking with her one night in the week. He was a Muggle, so it was all a bit difficult.”

“Had she told him?” Harry asked.
So that was where Albus had been.

“Nah, it’s tricky isn’t it?” Albus scratched his head. “It must be such a shock to discover magic exists.”

Harry laughed.

Later that night, under the duvet in a room much more chilly than the one he had occupied for the previous two nights, Harry lay sleepless, but relaxed. He knew that, in the bare room next to his, his wife had died. He knew that some horrid threat was once again rising to torment the wizarding world.

But his sons had watched a quidditch match, and had friends and maybe lovers in their lives.

Hermione’s parents had survived being sent across the world all those years ago, with memories whipped away, to come home and share fifty years of happy marriage with their daughter.

Old acquaintances appeared to be becoming new friends.

For the first time in a long time, Harry felt hope.

As he was drifting off to sleep, a memory from that afternoon surfaced. He’d felt rather as he did now, warm and snug, though then he was warmed by the afternoon sun, a rug over him, having fallen asleep in the hammock again after lunch. He’d woken silently, absolutely still, unable to change the habit that had come in the months when he had travelled the country with Hermione, hunting Hocruxes, scared within the flimsy security of a canvas tent. He’d opened his eyes slowly, trying to judge his surroundings in the disorientation of half-sleep. The dappled shade and dry warmth soothed him to awareness of his location, and his eyes adjusted to the sight of Kingsley, still sitting at the outside table, reading a newspaper. Snape had come out of the backdoor, two espresso cups on a tray, and slid the whole onto the table. As he bent, Kingsley had turned his head, and captured Snape’s lips in a kiss. Harry had watched, motionless, as Snape’s fingers had curved around the back of Kingsley’s head, holding him in place, and Kingsley’s hand had moved to Snape’s hip.

The kiss seemed endless to Harry, lying there, and then it was over, and Snape had sat down, next to his lover, taken a bit of the paper, and Kingsley had reached across to take his cup from the tray and raised it to his lips.

That quiet moment of pleasure, of possession and gentle passion, set into the routines of everyday life, had struck Harry as hauntingly wonderful. Remembering it, he strove to ignore the counterpoint of loneliness, and hold onto the feeling of hope that there were good things to be had in the world.
At the second meeting at Grimmauld Place the atmosphere was grim.

Teddy had floo-called Harry in a panic the day before, after a chap who’d been in his year at Hogwarts was admitted to St Mungo’s.

“His brain’s like rice pudding, Harry,” he explained. “It’s awful. But I thought of you – well, you know – the man we were worried about – because Daniel was brilliant in school, brilliant at everything, and I know he had private lessons in Leglimency and Occlumency with Professor Barnfield. I thought for sure he’d go into the Aurors, but he didn’t. He was so good at everything that he could do anything he wanted, and he went off to study in Paris. We weren’t close or anything, and I’d not heard from him since. And then he turns up here. They think he’ll end up on the Janus Thickey Ward. I can’t believe it. They called CAW in, and I did a bit of lurking, and I heard them talking with the mediwizards. They said it was like his brain was scrambled eggs, like someone had just whizzed it up – dozens of spells, and to finish it off, Cruciatous until he just went completely bonkers. Merlin! I feel ill thinking about it, Harry, and it’s not as if I don’t see some pretty nasty things on a regular basis. And it’s such a waste! But I thought it might be worth investigating, you know, to see if he might have been the one who might have done the spellwork on Mr Malfoy.”

“Well done, Teddy,” Harry said, when he could get a word in at last. “I’ll tell Ron – if he hasn’t been called in already. With the Cruciatous being such a signature for the Death Eaters, I’m sure his department should at the very least have been notified.”

“It’s getting worrying, isn’t it?” Teddy said quietly. Then he looked horrified and apologetic. “Not that it wasn’t with Ginny being murdered –”

“I know what you mean, and I agree,” Harry said. “I just still can’t understand what killing Ginny has to do with anything.”

“I’ve talked to his family,” Ron said, looking round the table at the horrified faces of everyone gathered for the second meeting, after Teddy had kicked off with his information. “Sad story. The lad went to France, and started off having a great time, from the sound of it. Did really well with his studies. Got a job with the French Ministry. To be honest, his parents didn’t see that much of him, but I talked to his sister. She began to get worried about odd comments, and she met some of his friends once. She wasn’t too keen on them, but wrote it off as the language barrier that gave her a weird feeling about them. Anyway, the last few months, she said he seemed to be increasingly secretive. She went to visit him; she thought he seemed – erratic - and scared. He didn’t want her there, and they had a big argument, and she thinks now that he might have deliberately done that to make her go. She’s feeling pretty rotten about it all, anyway. Then, last week, he suddenly appears at her house, gets drunk, cries, tells her he loves her, loves his parents, and apparates out. She’s seriously worried that he’s suicidal. She floos over to France, no sign of him in his flat, calls for him at work and finds he hasn’t been there for weeks. She reports him missing to the French Auror department. Of course, turns out the poor sod was in England. We really need more intercontinental co-operation,” he said, looking to Kingsley, “at all levels, not just for particular missions.”

Kingsley nodded.
“Well, it’s sad, but he was one of them,” Victoire said.

They all looked at her.

“It’s not as if he was some complete innocent,” she shrugged.

“Sometimes you can get in over your depth,” Harry said, very conscious of Snape sitting down the table. “It can be hard to get out. It sounds like he might have wanted to.”

“I should think that there might be quite a few members who’re shitting themselves now,” James commented. “I mean, that was a warning, wasn’t it? They could have killed him cleanly, but they didn’t. He had to suffer, and he’s left there rotting and still alive so that nobody will forget.”

“Some people will be too terrified to get out, but some might realise that this really isn’t a group they want to be involved with,” Kingsley said, “which might mean that there are people that are willing to talk. Keep your eyes and ears open.”

Harry looked to Neville, who was sitting there very quietly. Neville had spent years researching plants and drug treatments that might help his parents. They were still on the Janus Thickey Ward, and they did sometimes speak and recognise him, but the effects were never long-lasting.

“Neville,” Harry asked carefully. “None of the treatments you’ve devised might help in questioning him? Just enough to help find out who’s done this to him?”

“Possibly,” Neville said cautiously, “but I’d have to be sure his mediwizards were happy for me to try. I’m not sure if it would be dangerous so soon after the damage.”

“It should be better,” Teddy sat forward, interested. “The brain is still reacting. If you can do something before the healing sort of sets it, you might be able to help him.”

“I’d be pleased to look at what you’re using and see if there are any further modifications I could help with,” Snape said quietly. “Sometimes even the base by which a draught is delivered can make a difference.”

Neville nodded. “The sooner the better, then, if you have time. Tomorrow morning? It’s the best time to harvest some of the leaves.”

Harry marvelled at how Neville had changed. It had started the year of the DA, of the Department of Mysteries, but he’d been away that last year, hunting Horcruxes, when Neville had really turned into a man and a strong wizard. It was hard to remember him now as the boy he had been, but Snape hadn’t known him for all these intervening years. Had Snape seen the transformation, whilst he was Headmaster?

Audrey, Percy’s wife had floo-ed Harry earlier in the day, asking if she could bring some provisions over, as it would be much easier for people not to be hungry, or trying to fit in food before or after the meeting. Harry was pretty much happy with anything people chose to do, but had been quite surprised when Audrey had appeared with the most enormous cauldron of curry and another of rice. Harry had quickly got Mitty to take charge of it. All the while they were talking, the smell was wafting over them. Harry found it distracting and delicious at the same time.

Most people stayed to have some, and before Harry knew it, there was a rota to provide a meal every week. Harry wasn’t surprised to find that when everyone had gone, there was plenty left to feed him and Albus for the next couple of days.

It was strange how people expected men not to be good cooks, even though most famous chefs
were men. Harry had learnt to cook at the Dursleys, and had always cooked for the family. Ginny’s forte had been what Harry called fiddly food – the sort of time-consuming meals that Ginny cooked if they had people over to dinner. Harry really enjoyed them, but he also enjoyed plain meat and veg, casseroles and roasts and thrown-together stir fries. He certainly wasn’t too proud to accept someone else’s offerings.

Harry wondered if anyone was treating Draco with similar kindness. Draco had left as soon as the meeting part was over for the first two weeks, and Harry determined to ask him to stay the next week. The man looked as if he had aged twenty years, his receding hairline no longer distinguished but somehow weary. There only seemed a spark of life when he looked at his son across the table. His grief was something he had to bear alone. Harry felt guilty that people felt sorry for him rather than Malfoy, and yet, it wasn’t as if Ginny wasn’t important to him too. He loved her. He had loved her. Maybe that love had changed, maybe that love hadn’t ever been the fierce passion that she had shared with Malfoy, but it still counted for something.

But so did Malfoy’s.

Harry found himself having odd thoughts about love over the week. How strange it was, how very real it was even when the object of it no longer existed. He thought about Molly and Arthur, Ron and Hermione, Snape and Kingsley.

Try as he might, he found it very hard to think of Snape as Severus, even though he'd managed to say it a time or two. He was not a man who exuded warmth, like Kingsley did. His name was tight and sharp, and suited him. Snape. Besides, ‘Severus’ made him think of his son.

“Hey, Harry!” George said, spotting his silent partner entering the shop. “I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“No, I came on the off-chance. Got a few minutes?”

“Sure, come on through,” George lifted the counter. “Pete! The shop’s all yours mate, I’m just going for a cuppa.”

“Sure thing, boss,” the young salesman said, with a mock salute to his baseball cap as he strolled over to take up a position near the till.

Harry and George headed up the stairs.

Five minutes later, Harry was settled at the small table in the little kitchen above the shop. Although George no longer lived there, he had never rented it to anyone else, and he entertained members of the family in it probably a great deal more than he did in the massive pile that he and Angelina had bought in the Cotswolds. For all his wealth, George had no pretensions at all, and handed Harry a steaming cup of tea in a chipped mug that Harry was sure he had been using there since the twins first opened Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.

After Fred’s death, George had struggled to find the enthusiasm for jokes and tricks. He’d kept working in the shop though, selling the old ideas, as if immersing himself in it helped him find a link to Fred.
They said time healed all ills: Harry doubted it, but he did know it eventually got easier. George had started dabbling, inventing things again, bit by bit, firstly to amuse Teddy, and then Bill’s children, all the while selling the ideas that worked in the shop. Then Angelina had come back into his life, and though it was Fred who’d taken her to the ball all those years ago, they fit together perfectly. Harry had often wondered if it rankled at all that Angelina had chosen Fred, but in fairness, Fred had been the one doing the asking. Maybe George liked that extra link to his brother, that Fred too had liked Angelina. Harry didn’t know. It was good enough that George was happy. And with that happiness, and fathering Fred and Roxanne, had come a huge burst of creativity that didn’t seem to end. Roxanne in particular seemed to be a chip off the old block, and Harry was pretty sure she was keeping Hogwarts as lively as her father and his twin had. She already talked of entering the business as soon as she finished school.

Thinking of his children, Harry wondered if he was being unfair coming to George.

“What is it, Harry? You’re looking serious.”

Harry scratched his head. “Well, I wanted to ask you if you were willing to do something, but – I don’t know, maybe I shouldn’t.”

“Great way to go, mate. You know I won’t rest until you’ve told me now,” George teased.

Harry quirked a small smile. It was funny how things changed over the years. The age gap that had existed at school had been minimalised by the passing of the years, and what with their business interactions, George had become a good friend as well as his brother-in-law.

“I was worried about putting you into danger.”

George sat back and stretched out his long legs. “Looks like we’re all going to be in that,” he said. “Come on, spill. I’m old enough to make my own judgement calls.”

“You’re right. Well, it’s sort of a business opportunity, although it isn’t really. Well, it might make money – well, it will, but –”

“Bloody hell, Harry, cut to the chase!”

“Yeah, sorry, that was a mess,” Harry admitted. “Right, it’s this.” He looked round, as if sensing.

“Tons of wards. What’re you checking for?” George asked.

“Silencing spells. I know your staff are good, but –”

“Permanent one-way ward on this room,” George said. “I can hear if they call up, no noise gets down.”

“Good. Okay. The thing is, I – we –” Harry whirled his finger in an encompassing gesture – “the sort-out-the-bastards-brigade, needs a contact for a spy. I’m thinking that could be you.”

“We-ll, Mr Potter, you are a bundle of surprises,” George said, leaning forward and resting his elbows on the table. “You – we – have a spy?”

“Only just,” Harry said honestly. “I don’t suppose he’s found out anything yet. But we’ve tasked him to infiltrate whatever this bloody organisation is. He needs a contact, that he can justifiably meet up with. Without it looking dodgy. I know it sounds like I’m not trusting the others, and that’s not the case. But when Snape was spying, the whole Order knew who he was. It’s astonishing that his cover wasn’t blown at least twice a week. Voldemort was a brilliant Legilimens: he could have
captured any of us and got the secret out in minutes. I don’t know why he didn’t. I think he was too arrogant to really believe that any of his Death Eaters would dare to do it.”

“Hmmm, so it’s not Snape. And it sounds like it’s someone you care about – ”

Harry couldn’t help the giant snort that erupted.


“Shacklebolt and Snape.”

“Hold on, even Ron doesn’t know about this?”

“If Ron knew, it would compromise his position in the Ministry,” Harry shook his head. “He’s going to kill me for keeping him in the dark, but – and if – if he treats the spy any differently, that could be bad all round too.”

George looked at him shrewdly. “So, he knows the spy. Which means he’s either a friend or,” George was clearly thinking. “It’ll compromise Ron. Would you treat a spy better or worse? Better, so someone…”

Harry saw the moment he made the jump to the truth.

“Your spy is one of Ron’s ex-Death Eaters?” George leapt up. “Fucking hell, Harry, you’re not thinking about Lucius effing Malfoy? You can’t trust that man! Merlin’s saggy bollocks, he practically arranged Ginny’s death in her first year! Have you gone out of your bloody mind?”

“What I’m about to tell you can go no further than this room,” Harry warned.

“I can’t think of anything that you can tell me that would make me trust that slimy snake,” George snapped.

“He offered me his life. In exchange for Draco’s. Like what happened during the trials after the war.”

“He did?”

“I accepted.”

“You – you accepted?”

Yes. I own him. His life, and all his wealth.”

George was speechless.

“You accepted?” he said again. His eyes sharpened. “Before or after you knew the truth? That Draco hadn’t done it?”

“After.”

“ Bloody hell, Harry, when did you get so ruthless?” George didn’t mince his words.

“I don’t know. Perhaps when someone killed my wife?” Harry said harshly.

George held up his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright. But – ” George looked away.
“What?” Harry said. “We’re talking pretty straight here, don’t hold back. It’s not your style.”

“Alright, I won’t,” George said forcefully. He took a breath. “Harry – ” His tone changed, the aggression falling from it. “You knew she was having an affair with Draco. Wanted to leave you.”

“Do you think that means I feel less gutted by her death?” Harry said, astonished. “George, I might not have been in love with her, but I still cared for her! We’d been married for over twenty years, for god’s sake. We wouldn’t have agreed to keep things going the way we did for the kids if we hadn’t got on well. I wasn’t the right husband for her, but we were family. We talked about the kids, about life. We would have remained friends, I’m sure. I miss her.”

“But – come on, Harry, you must have been angry with her?” George said curiously.

“No. Yes. I suppose I was pissed it was Malfoy to begin with, but – she was really happy. That made life much easier, to be honest. I didn’t have to feel guilty because I couldn’t be what she wanted. And it made her – sort of joyful, I suppose. And with Malfoy, she could show it.”

“What does that mean?” George questioned.

Harry sighed. Should he tell George? “Look, I don’t want you to feel I’m slanging her off.”

“But?”

“Malfoy wasn’t the first,” Harry said quietly. He could see George’s eyes widen in shock.

“When things got serious with him, it was a relief, really. Not having to worry about anything getting out. I mean, if it did get out, it was fine, because she was planning to marry him. I didn’t want people saying bad things about her. I didn’t want the children hurt.”

“Merlin’s knickers, my sister was a bitch!”

“No!” Harry said quickly. “She was a good Mum, a good daughter, a brilliant quidditch player – ”

“But not a good wife,” George said.

“I think she would have been a good wife for Malfoy,” Harry said. “Look, it didn’t work out, but I don’t regret it, George. We had three great kids, and we were happy for a long time. Not all relationships are cut out to last forever.”

“Well, I don’t know what to think. You sound as if Ginny walked all over you, and yet you’re being a shit to Malfoy,” he said bluntly.

Harry raised an eyebrow. “A minute ago you were swearing about him, now you’re feeling sympathetic?”

“But you knew Draco was innocent.”

“Yeah, but I told Lucius he was,” Harry took the wind out of George’s sails yet again.

“You’ve got me. I don’t understand this at all.”

“It wouldn’t have been fair to let him think Draco had done it.”

“But why did he offer, then?”

“He’d already made the offer. I had it under consideration. I told him that Draco was innocent. But,
as you know, Draco still intended to plead guilty.”

“But you intended to show the evidence and free Draco.”

“I told Lucius that I had the evidence, but that to show it would be at great cost to my family. Which it was, frankly. I’d rather have not had to put the kids through that, or Molly and Arthur.”

“So Malfoy – blimey.”

“It’s all about honour in that family,” Harry said. “Twisted as it all is.”

“So what happens now? How did this spying come about?”

“Well, I wasn’t going to take his life, George! Come on!”

“You wanted his money?” George couldn’t believe it.

“Don’t be daft. I’m stinking rich already, what with the inheritances and all the dosh Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes bring in.”

“You make a bob or two yourself,” George added. “I thought about buying one of your pieces and nearly died at the cost.”

“Yeah, but you’re famous for being tight,” Harry grinned.


“I don’t intend to harm him, but I thought he could be useful. Frankly, I thought he might like the chance of getting whoever set up his son. And there’s a nice bit of – balance – in using his life offer to find Gin’s murderers after what he did to her at school. I think she’d be pretty pleased about it,” Harry said, his eyebrow quirking.

George gave a slow smile. “She’d be laughing in her grave, if she had one,” George agreed. “Alright, so where do I fit in?”

Lucius Malfoy sat, sipping a glass of excellent burgundy, in the salon on the first floor of his Parisian town house. Opposite him, looking more at ease than he might have expected on his Louis XVI chairs, sat Harry Potter, George Weasley, and Minister Shacklebolt. Ex-Minister, of course. Nevertheless, it was some years since he had played host to such a group of eminent guests: a politician of Shacklebolt’s calibre, a millionaire businessman, and the ever-intriguing Harry Potter.

He had felt curiosity rather than irritation when he’d received Potter’s blunt missive, which stated simply,

_Malfoy,

_I have need of La Petite Maison. Meet us there at 6.30pm, this evening. Please confirm if this is convenient by return owl._

_P_
He would have considered it rude, except that Potter owned the house. Owned him. There were no fancy words, just practicalities. There was the option for refusal. It could have been a lot worse.

He had wondered who ‘us’ was.

He would never have guessed George Weasley and Shacklebolt in a million years.

He had led his guests from the floo to the impressive salon. The glow of the evening sun flooded in through long windows, casting light beams across the wizard–made rugs, once precious flying carpets from the Mogul Empire. Their spells had long since faded as much as the wools and silks from which they were woven, but even as a child he had loved them, sitting on them for many happy hours when he was forced to remain quietly beside his grandmother’s chair, thousands of miles away in his imagination on flying carpet adventures in the exotic lands which he longed to experience.

He was pleased that his guests had paused, momentarily, on the threshold. It was not a room that could be ignored.

He had earlier had the house elf open a bottle of vintage burgundy to let it breathe, and was pleased to see his guests enjoying the wine. Potter seemed to be enjoying the little plate of *amuse-bouche* as well.

He waited patiently for his guests to come to the point.

“I don’t know if you’re aware,” Potter said, putting down the glass, “but I’m a shareholder in Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes.”

Well, that was a surprise. Potter must be worth millions. Even without *his* money, Lucius thought.

Which meant that Potter hadn’t needed his money.

“I was not aware,” he said cautiously. “Congratulations.”

Potter laughed.

“We’d like to rent this house. At least, the ground floor of it,” Potter said calmly.

“I see.” He didn’t. It was Potter’s bloody house! Didn’t he realise that?

“I saw the house in the list of properties that you forwarded to me,” Potter said, pulling that carpet out from under Lucius’ feet, “and thought it would be just the thing.”

“Just the thing? Just the thing for what, might I ask?”

“Just the place for opening a new branch of WWW,” Potter said.

“Are you completely barking?” Lucius snapped, before realising that he had not a leg to stand on. But damn-it-all-to-hell! La Petite Maison had been in the family for generations. That many of the properties around had converted into shops or restaurants was neither here not there. “I beg your pardon,” he said, biting his tongue.

“No, that’s alright,” Harry said cheerfully. “That’s just the sort of attitude we need, actually.”

“Indeed?” Lucius practically growled. He looked at George with narrowed eyes. The ginger-haired
wizard was casually dressed, but his robes were well cut and the deep grey was well chosen with that hair. His boots looked to be finest dragon-skin. Shacklebolt was sitting back, smart and businesslike, looking utterly at ease. “I take it you have shared – intimate information – about my – situation – with your colleagues?”

“Yes.”

There was no prevarication, which took Malfoy by surprise. He didn’t know why he’d expected Potter to be more discreet.

“You needn’t worry that I’ve spread it far and wide,” Potter said, as if reading his mind. “Kingsley actually suggested that you might be a good spy, so you owe him your life, in a way. Only one other person, besides us here,” he gestured around the room, “is aware of your situation, both in terms of the fact that I hold your life and your task. It would have been unfair on you should no-one else be aware of the latter, in case you were endangered and I wasn’t in a position to help. Oh, Kingsley has something for you.”

Kingsley reached into his robe pocket, took out a small coin, and handed it to Malfoy.

“Keep it on you. It’s an emergency portkey, in case you’re in real danger. It will take you to my office.”

Lucius was stunned. Potter’s matter of fact attitude – as if Lucius should have every right to help, if he were in danger – took his breath away. He’d thought he was out on his own. Now, here they were, saying that not only was he not alone, but he had the might of Kingsley Shacklebolt behind him. He did not know what the man was currently doing, but it was obvious from his presence that his old position, as Head Auror, was not entirely behind him. He was here, in France, for a start, which obviously spoke of a European role.

He’d be doing some investigating on his - allies, for want of a better word.

He turned the coin over in his hand, and slipped it into his pocket.

Potter was talking again, and he nearly missed the import of his first words.

“This is what I have in mind. George has shops in America, Australia, Spain – well, I’m not going to list them all – but surprisingly, given that his family too have connections here, not in Paris. And it occurred to me that this would be perfect.”

“I see.”

“You don’t, but you will,” Potter said. “This is what happens. George makes you an offer to buy the house. You refuse. It gets in the press, maybe just a little. Over here, rather than in England. George wants it. The location is actually perfect, and everyone knows how well chosen every location of a WWW shop is. You’ve recently started investing in various businesses: you’re making yourself a new place in the world, as we know. You offer George a deal: the use of the ground floor, for a percentage of profits. George agrees.”

“That’s all very well, but –”

“You therefore have every reason to visit George as and when you need, which is the objective of this little exercise, as George is to be your contact.”

“And it raises your profile,” Weasley said, “which I believe you’ll need to do if you’ve a hope in hell of managing to achieve anything.”
“And what percentage of the profits am I to expect? It will be paid into your accounts, I take it,” he said to Potter. “You’ll be paying with one hand and gaining it back with the other.”

“You know the deal on the accounts. It’s up to you to negotiate with George on the percentage.”

Potter really did believe in the carrot and stick method. The profits could be astronomical. But he was also right, it would raise his profile. He would be conducting a deal with one of the most profitable and well loved businesses in the Wizarding World. The clientele were all of a younger generation, two generations, both parents and children, which would, again, raise his profile across a wider market. It would help him to establish himself quickly to an entirely different audience to the ones he was already working on. Somehow he expected Potter to be an impulsive person, and yet once again everything showed that he could play a long game.

Well, so could he.

“Very well.”

Potter nodded. He picked up his glass and sipped his wine. “I like this,” he said.

“It’s an excellent vintage. You own two dozen bottles, or so.”

There was a moment’s silence.

Shacklebolt took another of the little savoury nothings and popped it into his mouth.

Potter carefully put the cut glass down on the delicate table beside his chair, and sat forward. He made the smallest gesture with his hand.

“I’ve cast a privacy ward, though, frankly, you don’t deserve the consideration. You chose to offer your life, and you chose to accept this alternative. I have never forced anything upon you. So you can cut the antagonism and snipey little comments right now, alright? If I want something, I’ll ask for it.” He glanced up. “Rather like I did with this property. Just to be absolutely clear, I don’t need anything from you apart from your assistance in finding my wife’s killer, and in helping us to find and shut down whatever organisation did it and framed your son. I’m not going to run off with your Rembrandts or your antiques or your wine cellar. You may continue to live exactly as you have done – more extravagantly, frankly, than you’ve done recently. I know it’s not going to be easy, but this needs doing. Now, I expect my friends will have the courtesy to pretend that you have not just been obnoxiously rude. We came here to make things easier for you. And to that end,” he released the silencing spell, “We have some information that might be of use as a starting point.”

Lucius once again revised his opinion of the wizard in front of him, and listened intently as Shacklebolt told him about Daniel Poulter.
Forty five minutes later, Harry, George and Kingsley stood on top of the Eiffel Tower. Harry had mentioned before setting off for Paris that he’d never visited it, and the two older men had humoured him, persuading him to go up in the Muggle lifts. Night had fallen, and the cityscape was lit up all around. Harry leant on the rail, the wind blowing in his hair.

“It’s fantastic!” he enthused, grinning at the other two. “It’s like being on a broom, without the flying bit.”

“What is there to a broom, apart from the flying bit, you daft-head?” George cuffed him amicably.

“Height?” Harry answered back. “The wind? The view?”

“When did you last fly?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Not sure,” Harry shrugged. “We had a knock up quidditch match at the Burrow last summer,” he remembered.

“What’s stopping you, if you love it so much?”

“Old age?” Harry quipped.

“Thanks,” Kingsley said.

“I didn’t mean – ”

Kingsley chuckled. “You better not have. Well, I don’t know about you two, but I’m absolutely starving. Those little nibbles at Malfoy’s have just made me hungrier.”

“They were great, weren’t they?” Harry said.

“Fiddly little nonsenses,” George sniped. “How’s that suppose to fill you up?

“It’s supposed to whet your appetite, not sate it,” Kingsley grinned. “And as I missed lunch, I could eat a horse.”

“You’re in the right place, then,” George said. “Plenty of horse on the menu over here, they say.”

“There’s a nice little restaurant on Rue St. Etienne,” Kingsley suggested. “No horse, as far as I know. Do you fancy it?”

Harry was about to say no when he thought that, if Lily was going to come and live in Paris, it might be a good idea if he knew a good restaurant. Weren’t students supposed to like being taken out to meals by their parents? Albus was out too, tonight, he remembered. “I’m in,” he agreed.

“Na, Angelina’s parents are coming over tonight, I’d better show my face,” George said easily.

“You going to apparate from up here?” Harry asked.

“Might as well,” George said.

“Thanks, then, George. I know he’s a pain in the arse, but we can only hope he’ll be useful. I know you won’t stand for any bullshit from him, anyway.”
“If you have any doubts, contact me,” Kingsley said seriously.

“Fair enough,” George said. “Enjoy your frogs’ legs,” he grinned, and was gone with a pop!

Fifteen minutes later Harry and Kingsley were sitting in the restaurant, having a beer as they looked through the menu. Harry had waved a translation spell over his own, one of the useful skills Hermione had taught him years back.

“What’s good?” he asked, after a moment.

The maitre d’ had greeted Kingsley effusively by name, and kissed him on both cheeks, so Harry assumed he was a frequent diner.

“The filet d’agneau is really good here – lamb is a house speciality. But the steak’s great, too. Of course, in France, it’s the sauces that are to die for – what?”

“Just relieved,” Harry grinned. “The first item on the menu with this translation spell came up as ‘cow’s head with cabbage and rat lenses’. I thought I’d stumbled into Snape’s store cupboard.”

Kingsley was laughing hard, reaching across the table to turn Harry’s menu round and look at the translations that were hovering next to the text.

“Oh, my word! And look at this one! ‘Chicken neck stuffed with organs’– oh oh, that’s what it actually is – no mistake.”

“Think I’ll give that one a miss,” Harry hadn’t laughed so much in ages. “’Strawberries in an emulsion –’” he choked, reading on.

“Someone definitely needs to work on that spell,” Kingsley grinned, sitting back. “Why do you call him Snape? His name’s Severus.”

“I – I don’t feel I ought,” Harry said. “It feels presumptuous.”

“You call me Kingsley.”

“You’re not Snape. There I go again. You’re – more relaxed, I suppose.”

Kingsley looked at him inquisitively.

“Don’t you think Severus is more relaxed nowadays?”

“Oh yes,” Harry said quickly, not wanting to cause offence. “He’s a different man than when I knew him back then. But,” he shrugged, “he was my teacher for six years.”

“So was Minerva,” Kingsley commented.

“Well, I still have trouble not calling her Professor McGonagall too, even though she’s retired,” Harry said. “I don’t think he would want me to,” he added. “I asked him to call me Harry, but I think sometimes I’m still Potter-the-Pain to him.”

“Maybe,” Kingsley said. The waiter came over. “Have you decided?” Kingsley asked Harry. “I’m going to go for the lamb, it’s too good to miss. I wasn’t going to have a starter, but why not? The langoustines in garlic butter are fantastic.”
“I’ll have the lamb, but I’ll have the goat’s cheese tart for starter. I had goat’s cheese over here when we came over when Gin played for England. Never found anything quite like it back home. Will you order for me? My accent’s enough to make the kids die of hysterics.”

“Fancy a bottle of red? The house wine here is reliable, even if it isn’t quite up to Malfoy’s standards,” Kingsley quirked a wicked eye at Harry.

“He’s such a git,” Harry agreed. “House wine’s fine for me. I wouldn’t have a clue how to choose, anyway.” He’d glanced at the wine menu, which ran to more than a dozen pages.

The waiter had gone, some olives, bread and some little fancy things reminiscent of those they’d eaten at Malfoy’s had been deposited on the table with a flourish, and the wine had been poured.

“He doesn’t think of you as a pain,” Kingsley said. “It’s just - you challenge him.”

“Always have,” Harry sighed. “What have I done this time?”

“No, it’s good,” Kingsley said. “However he comes across, he likes a bit of intellectual challenge.”

Harry snorted. “There’s no way Snape would find me intellectually challenging! Come off it, Kingsley!”

Kingsley shrugged. “You make him think about things from a different perspective. For example, what you said about Albus. About setting you up to die. It’s made him consider his own role in going along with that. I think he feels he failed you.”

“Bugger that!” Harry retorted. “He was the only one saving me, for most of the time. And Dumbledore used him – he got him to keep saving me and then dumped it on him that it was just so I could die at the right time. He was a right old bastard. Where did that leave Snape? It was too late in the game to make any other decision.”

“I think he’s been going over where he could have done things differently.”

“Bloody hell! It’s all over,” Harry said. “Dumbledore asked far too much of Snape as it was. He was juggling a dozen balls in the air, and he couldn’t have done anything else without dropping the lot. Something would have gone wrong for someone else. We placed our trust in Dumbledore: too much, frankly. But he just swept us all along, and we were all happy to let him lead us.”

“You don’t hold a grudge?”

“Against Dumbledore?”

“Severus.”

“Don’t be daft; why would I? I admit, he was a horrible, horrible teacher, and he hated my guts, but he was doing bloody amazing things with no recognition and no protection. I don’t know how he did it, frankly, year after year. I feel anxious asking Malfoy to do it. James Bond might be a hero in the Muggle world, but it sounds a miserable and lonely life to me. Oh!” he added, thinking. “Were you and Snape together then? Did he have you?”

Kingsley shook his head. “No. Obviously, I knew him, through the Order. Didn’t like him much either at first,” he grinned. His face straightened. “Didn’t trust him, of course. That’s changed.”

Harry nodded. “Yes.”
The waiter slipped their starters in front of them, and left with a little bow.

“Anyway, things are different now, aren’t they? You’ve both been so kind to me.”

“Nonsense,” Kingsley said, dismissing the thanks.

Harry just smiled. “You’ve got an interesting privacy ward there,” he commented, changing the subject. “How come the waiter didn’t look all confused?”

“It just translates whatever we’re saying into idle chatter, should anyone overhear it,” Kingsley explained, picking up one of the langoustines with obvious pleasure.

“The magic must be very complicated,” Harry said, with interest.

They got into a long conversation on magical theory.

Kingsley had gone off to the loo, after the main course, and while they were deciding if they could manage a dessert and whether to have another bottle of wine. Harry sat back in his chair. What had started as an evening that he’d rather not have had turned into a very pleasant night out. He looked around the restaurant. He liked the warm-toned lighting, the friendly but discreet service, the quiet liveliness of the place. He smiled genially, observing a couple holding hands across their white tablecloth, then did a double-take as he realised that they were both men.

He looked around at his fellow diners more carefully. There were several tables where groups sat, chatting animatedly, but most were occupied by couples. And most of them were of the same sex.

Harry saw Kingsley returning in one of the many mirrors that covered the walls. He watched several heads turn, around the room, watching him. Kingsley was wearing muggle clothes, as he was himself, having done a quick transfiguration before they ascended the Eiffel Tower. The low slung jeans and white open-necked shirt suited Kingsley, the shirt only hinting at the muscles underneath, whereas the faded denim fairly strained against bulging thigh muscles. Harry noted at least two people staring at his arse as well, before Kingsley slid back into his seat.

“Kingsley,” Harry leant across the table conspiratorially. “Did you bring me to a gay restaurant?”

“What?” Kingsley glanced round, and a slow smile formed. “There’s no sign on the door: it’s open to anyone. But yeah, I suppose quite a lot of gay people come here.”

Harry started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

“Part of the reason I came, was because I thought it would be handy to know a good place to bring Lily. She’s thinking of studying in Paris.” He continued to giggle.

“And I thought it was for my scintillating company,” Kingsley quirked. “More wine, or beer?” he asked, summoning a waiter.

“Coffee, I think. I could drink a glass more, but not a whole bottle, and I’m not mad on the beer, really. It’s not a patch on bitter, is it?”

“How about a cognac with the coffee, then?”

“Sounds good,” Harry agreed, though he wasn’t that keen on brandy. So far, though, everything
that Kingsley had recommended had been delicious.

When the waiter had gone, Kingsley sat forward, elbows on the table. They both started to speak at the same time, Kingsley asking, “Would your daughter feel uncomfortable if you brought her here?”

And Harry saying, “I didn’t mean to be rude about your company.”

They both halted and grinned. “No worries,” Kingsley said.

Harry looked around again. “No, I think she’d be very happy to come here, the food’s great and the atmosphere is really relaxed. It was just funny that the only place I’ll know in Paris is a gay bistro. She’ll be asking me if I’ve started batting for the other team,” he grinned.

“There’s quite a few men in here wishing you were,” Kingsley teased.

“What? No-one’s even noticed me. Though your arse caused a lot of interest just now.”

“Really? Which tables?”

Harry laughed. Kingsley was so comfortable with himself that it was very relaxing to be in his company.

“Table at eleven o’clock,” and both chaps on the one at two.”

Kingsley looked into the mirrors, reversing the directions.

Harry was amused, but practically spat his water over the table when Kingsley said, “The chap at eleven has been watching you all evening. He’s either eyeing me up as opposition, or wondering if we’d be up for a threesome.”

“Bastard,” Harry said, after he’d finished spluttering into his napkin.

To add to his embarrassment, the waiter had arrived with the drinks and had offered to slap him on the back, before proffering a card to Kingsley, after which ensued a brief conversation. The waiter had shrugged, given Harry a gentle smile, and headed off wending his way expertly through the tables.

“What was that all about?” Harry asked.

“Do you really want to know?” A smile played over Kingsley’s lips.

“Go on, I can see I’m not going to like it,” Harry said.

“On the contrary, it was a compliment.”

“Hmmm?”

Kingsley passed over the card. “The guy at eleven o’clock asked us whether we’d like to join him for a drink,” he grinned.

“No!” Harry couldn’t stop himself from glancing across the restaurant, where the guy raised his glass at him.

“Oh my god!”
“Told you,” Kingsley said.

“But – but he’s quite good looking!” Harry burst out.

Kingsley laughed aloud. “Why shouldn’t he be?”

“Kingsley, you’re an attractive man, but why would he want anything to do with me? I’m a middle-aged, too short, nondescript – nothing.”

Kingsley took a sip of his coffee, inhaling the intense aroma. He looked at Harry seriously over the rim. “You’re a wizard. You’re certainly not middle-aged in wizard terms – good heavens, even Severus and I aren’t, and we’ve got twenty years or more on you. Wizards age much slower, once they’re adults. You probably look thirty to him, max. You’ve got a good body, an attractive face, and he can’t see exactly how much of a short-arse you are because you’re sitting down. What’s not to like?”

Harry laughed, feeling teased and flattered.

“What’s with the false modesty? You must have had lots of women after you?”

“No,” Harry shook his head.

“I find that very hard to believe. I’m sure I remember, before I left London, a flock of women around you at one of the Ministry balls.”

“Yeah, but apart from the fact that was over twenty years ago, they didn’t find me attractive,” Harry said. “It was just a bit of post-Voldemort hero worship, wanting to get their pictures in the paper with me, that sort of thing. Some knew I had money too: always a big attraction.”

Kingsley sat back, his coffee finished, and twirled the stem of the cognac glass. “Well, I expect you’ll have another flock hovering, once they think you’ve had enough time to recover. You’ll be back on the marriage market.”

Harry’s face must have reflected his shock.

“God, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound so unfeeling,” Kingsley said, reaching across the table and putting his hand over Harry’s.

Kingsley’s hand felt large, and warm. Protective. Harry wanted to turn his own over and grasp those fingers, draw strength from them. It would be entirely inappropriate, especially here. He felt those ridiculous tears sprouting again. Damn! Why did they suddenly hit out of the blue?

He detached his hand carefully and picked up the brandy glass, trying to blink them away as he took a sip. He grimaced, although the fire of the drink gave him an excuse for the shine in his eyes. He pushed the glass across the table to Kingsley.

“Not my cup of tea,” he said. “D’you want it? I – I’m sorry to be such a weed,” he apologised. “I feel a right twit. I suddenly just - the tears – and – ” He fought them off, picking up his cup instead and drinking the cooling coffee.

“Harry, your wife has just died. You’re entitled. Don’t feel you have to be all macho for me.”

Harry nodded, his throat tight. “I’ve ruined the evening.”

“I’ve had a great time,” Kingsley said, “and I think, until a minute or two back, so had you. Let’s
chalk that up as a few good hours, and not worry about the rest, alright?”

“You’re very easy company,” Harry said, having blown his nose.

“Glad to hear it. Years of practice with Severus will do that to a man.”

Harry snorted. “He’s much more relaxed company himself than I expected,” he confided.

“Good. We enjoy your company too.” He drank down the cognac. “All done?”

Harry nodded. Kingsley signalled to the waiter again, indicating it was time for the bill, and five minutes later, they were outside, walking along to a nearby alley to apparate from.

“I’ll see you Friday,” Kingsley said, surprised Harry with a quick hug, and was gone.

Kingsley wandered through into the bedroom, where Severus was sitting in bed, bare-chested, reading.

“What happened? I thought you’d be in the lab all night.”

“Four failures,” Severus said, looking over his reading glasses at his lover.

“Ouch.”

“I pretty much expected it,” Severus dismissed the wasted evening, his eyes on the skin revealed as Kingsley undid the buttons of his shirt. “Did you go to Le Lion d’Or with Harry and George?”

“Just Harry. We were propositioned.”

“Were you indeed? I’m not surprised in those jeans. Your thighs look like they could crack a man in half.”

Kingsley looked down at himself. “They’re good, aren’t they?” He slid his hands over his thighs, brushing one up over his crotch. He heard Severus’ intake of breath, smiled, and popped the button out of the hole.

“You’re a tease, Kingsley Shacklebolt,” Severus said, putting his book onto the bedside table without taking his eyes off the slow strip in front of him.

“No teasing, just lots of promise,” Shacklebolt stretched his chest wide as he peeled off the shirt.

Severus pushed down the sheets, and took hold of the swelling flesh that was so happily responding to the sight in front of him.

“Mmm, I want that,” KIingsley said, as he stalked towards the bed.

“I want to see you with your flies open,” Severus responded, “and your cock jutting out.”

“Oh, you do, do you?” Kingsley slowly slid the zipper down.

“Definitely,” Severus agreed, admiring the heavy penis that stood to attention in the V-shaped gap. “That’s a good look on you.” He licked his lips.
Kingsley’s cock jumped in response, and he groaned. He climbed onto the bed, still wearing the jeans.

Severus reached out a hand, tugging Kingsley towards him with a firm grip. “So you haven’t already indulged in a torrid threesome with our diminutive colleague?”

“I haven’t,” Kingsley said. He slid his hand down Severus’ abdomen, coming to rest on the rise of one hip. “He took an hour and a half to realise that the clientele were mostly men who were interested in other men.”

Severus laughed, releasing his handful, and turning his face into Kingsley’s shoulder, biting gently at the tendon. It was a move that always provoked his lover, and he was not disappointed, as Kingsley groaned, stretching his neck for more. “Not the most observant of fellows, then.”

“I don’t know, he called me attractive,” Kingsley edged his hand across, stretching his fingers wide, and was rewarded with Severus bucking his hips, trying to get more contact.

“Did he now? Do I need to worry that you’ll trade me in for a younger, handsomer model?” Severus’ lips had moved to Kingsley’s nipple. His tongue licked a stripe, before his teeth took hold, tugging a little, as he awaited his answer.

“God, you know I love that! Not a chance in hell,” he added, in response. “So you think he’s attractive, do you?”

“You don’t?” Snape countered, biting then licking soothingly.

“He doesn’t realise he is. Cried a little, actually, when I suggested the women would be after him now he’s on his own again.”

Severus pulled back. “You’ve had a ghastly time.”

“No need to stop,” Kingsley’s hand slid down, cradling Severus’ balls, rolling them gently. “Actually, I had a really good time. He was only a little soggy for a minute. We laughed a lot.”

“With Potter?” Severus said, disbelievingly, letting his legs fall apart. His head had fallen back.

“You look fucking fantastic like this.” Kingsley’s voice was husky as he shoved the sheets further down so he could admire more of that long lean body. “Yes, with Harry, which you called him earlier, and don’t pretend you don’t find him acceptable company, either. I know you.”

“If you know me, you know that mouth of yours could be being used for much better things than talking about Harry,” he said, his breath hitching as Kingsley worked his magic. “I’ll demonstrate.”

Moments later, the only sounds were the creaking of the bed, the rustling of the sheets, and the sloppy sounds of mutual enjoyment.
New Developments

Daniel Poulter was the first topic of discussion at the next meeting, as Neville and Snape reported back on their joint visits.

Neville revealed that when he saw him, he realised that he did know Daniel Poulter: the name hadn’t rung any bells, but that hadn’t particularly surprised him, as in the years when Daniel and Teddy had been at school he had only been teaching part-time. Seeing the young man with the vacant gaze, so reminiscent of the blank expression of his parents, he had had a sharp memory of seeing that face, fired with humour, flying through the Hogwarts' corridors one day, laughing and shouting with his friends.

"I just wish I'd known him," Neville said. "Maybe I could have done something -"

"You can't be responsible for everyone you come across," Hermione said gently.

Neville nodded, but obviously still felt troubled by it.

The family and Mediwizards had been happy for them to try anything.

Snape explained that it had been a bit of a hitch when Poulter had started talking in French, but a quick translation spell had allowed them to get the gist of it.

“None of it made sense,” Neville said glumly.

“It might not have made sense to us,” Snape said, “but it might have made sense to him. We can’t be sure it was meaningless.”

“What did he say?” asked Victoire. “In French? It might have some meaning in French that didn’t come across in the translation spell.”

“Excellent point,” Kingsley gave her a thumbs up.

Victoire blushed.

Harry hid a smile. Kingsley certainly had an aura about him. His whole personality was attractive, Harry thought, and both sexes responded to him easily. That he was partnered with Snape was astonishing, really. They were chalk and cheese. And yet…

“I can’t remember the exact words in French,” Neville said worriedly. “Severus?”

Harry nearly choked on his tea. They were on first name terms?

“I couldn’t be sure of being accurate,” Snape agreed. “We’d best put it in a pensieve.”

The pensieve was brought, Snape extracted his memory, and dropped it into the basin.

“Shall we?” he said to Victoire.

“I’ve never done it before,” she said nervously.

“I could accompany you,” Draco said tentatively. He hardly spoke usually. “I’ve done it before, and I speak French. Obviously, not as well as you, but I’ve spent a fair amount of time in France.”
There was some shifting of positions around the table, to allow the two to go in together.

“Harry,” Ron said, sidling up to squat down beside him whilst the rest of them were waiting for the travellers to resurface from the bowl.

“Problem?” Harry asked, turning to talk to him.

“You know we bought the grub for tonight?”

“Yeah, thanks,” Harry said. “Did you want to get it cooking?”

“Nah, I’ve already had a word with Mitty, she’s got all that in hand. The thing is, what with it being Rose’s birthday, we - ”

“Shit! Shit!” Harry bit out.

Half the table turned to look at him.

“Come into the hall,” he whispered.

They both got up.

James brushed past them, returning from the loo. “I’ll stick the kettle on again, shall I, Dad? Whilst they’re doing that?”

“Good lad,” Harry nodded.

He whisked down the corridor into the sitting room with Ron. “I’m so sorry! I completely forgot,” he apologised, face red. “Ginny was so good at all that stuff – ”

“Hey, don’t sweat it,” Ron said, putting a hand on his arm. “I only wanted to ask if you’d mind there being a few beers and some wine to go with the food. I packed it small, but if you’d rather not – ”

“Of course I don’t mind!” Harry said. “God, I can’t believe I’m such a useless uncle. What on earth is she doing here on her birthday anyway? She should be out with her friends, having fun, not stuck here having to think about this.”

“Well,” Ron said, rubbing the back of his neck, “half the people she’d have chosen to spend the evening with are here anyway, so…”

“We should have cancelled,” Harry said. “People don’t need to always come anyway. It’s not possible.”

“I know this sounds horrid, mate, but I think they quite enjoy it. I mean, not thinking about what happened to Gin, of course, but the trying to solve a problem, to have a role in things. You know, like we felt back then, sometimes.”

“What, shit-scared?” Harry suggested.

“Come on, some of it was fun, wasn’t it?” Ron bumped his shoulder.

“You’ve got your rose-tinted specs on, haven’t you?” Harry looked at Ron in amazement.

“Don’t you miss the adrenalin-rush at all?” Ron asked. “Really?”
“You’re bonkers, Ron,” Harry shook his head.

“Not even defeating the troll? The chess game?”

“The spiders?” Harry countered.

“Yeah, well, I could have done without that bit,” Ron agreed.

“I could have done without being tortured, and I expect Hermione could too,” Harry said shortly, making Ron sober instantly. “You can’t really want your Rose to have to face stuff like that?”

“I hadn’t really thought of it like that,” Ron looked a bit horrified. “But if we can sort them out by strategizing –”

“Yeah, well I hope we bloody well can,” Harry said, “because if any of our kids end up like Ginny then I’m going to –”

“Dad! Ron! Everyone’s waiting for you!” Albus called from the kitchen doorway.

“I see your point,” Ron said grimly as they headed back down the corridor. “Still, alright for the beer then?”

Poulter had been reciting a couplet of poetry, over and over. Neither Draco nor Victoire recognised it. “I’ll ask Mum if she knows it,” Victoire promised.

Harry could see the pride of involvement on her face that Ron was alluding to, but he wished with all his heart that it wasn’t necessary.

“I’ll see what I can scratch up,” Malfoy said quietly.

The meeting came to an end. Draco got up to leave.

Harry stood up, rattling his chair, and Draco turned to look.

“One last thing,” Harry said.

The room fell silent.

“I’m afraid I owe someone here an apology. I’m beginning to realise all the little things that Gin did that made this family run smoothly, and today, I’ve failed at another of them. I can only apologise, and say that I’ll be working on getting better at it. So, I hope you’ll all stand and wish Rose a Happy Birthday, and Ron tells me that there’s beer and wine to go with the food tonight, so stay as long as you like. Happy Birthday, Rose!”

Rose sat blushing as they all sang her *Happy Birthday*, but she glowed with pleasure too.

Much later, after they had eaten, the younger generation had moved into the sitting room with the booze and were watching DVDs on Harry’s system.

In the kitchen, only Ron and Hermione remained at the table with Harry.
“I don’t know how these youngsters do it,” Percy had said a few moments earlier, having popped his head into the living room to say goodbye to his niece and wish her Happy Birthday once again. “They’re drinking like fish in there.”

“Bloody prig,” Ron grumbled, after he’d gone. “I bet he was too uptight to have more than a pint even when he was young.” He took a swig from his bottle, winced and got up. “And I’m getting old too. I’ve had enough. A cup of tea! That’s what I bloody need. How sad is that?”

“Put enough in for me,” Hermione agreed, as Ron filled the kettle.

“Me too,” Harry added, and then they all looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Sorry about that lot,” Hermione said, twitching her head in the general direction of the living room. “I didn’t mean for them to settle in for the night.”

“They’re fine,” Harry waved it off. “They can all stay over, if they want. Makes no difference to me. I like having the house full, anyway.”

“They’ll watch films all night,” Hermione warned him. “And then they’ll be too drunk to floo home.”

“It’s Saturday tomorrow,” Harry shrugged. “Who cares? They can sleep in there or there’s plenty of beds.”

“Sure you don’t mind?” Hermione asked. “It’s a damn cheek of us –”

“Oh, cut the crap,” Harry said equably.

Mione grinned. “Well, if you’re truly not bothered, maybe we’ll leave you to it. Our house is empty, and I’ve a fancy to swing from the chandeliers –”

Ron swung round faster than a wand with a Point-me spell.

“Are you suggesting - ?”

Hermione’s eyes were twinkling.

“Bugger the tea,” Ron said, grabbing Hermione’s hand and heading off towards the floo in the parlour. “Keep the kids all weekend, if you can, mate,” he called back to Harry.

“Are you sure –?” Hermione began, as she was dragged along.

Harry grinned. “Have fun. If there’s a magical explosion I don’t want to know about it!”

Harry began to clear up. After a few minutes, Mitty appeared, her ears flopping low and her shoulders drooping.

“Master doesn’t want Mitty to do the cleaning anymore?” she said, sadly.

“I thought you’d be in bed, Mitty,” Harry replied. “I didn’t want to disturb your rest. I know we’ve been relying on you such a lot lately.”

“Mitty is here to serve,” Mitty began to sob, wringing her pillow-case outfit.
Harry had been in a good mood, really. It had been a nice evening. He suddenly realised what Ron meant, about the planning. There was a real spirit of camaraderie that was unique and … comforting, in a way. And the food and party bit had been fun, with everyone relaxing. He liked knowing the kids were enjoying themselves in the sitting room. He really didn’t want it all ruined by a weepy house-elf when he'd be quite happy to pootle along and get the clearing up done on his own.

But….needs must.

“Please don’t cry,” he said, crouching down beside the elf. “I’d be very glad of your help.”

“Master is too kind,” Mitty wobbled back and forward on her heels.

“Well, there’s a lot to do,” Harry said. “It's Rose’s birthday and the young people are watching films. I expect most of them will stay the night, so would you mind making sure all the beds have fresh sheets?”

“Mitty is happy to be doing it!” the elf beamed. “And they will be needing breakfast, and lots of coffee, and Mitty can be doing it all!”

Harry grinned at her simple pleasure. If only humans were so easily pleased.

“And will Master Harry want the green sheets or the brown ones with blobs on?”

“Oh! You needn’t worry about my bed – ” Harry began, and then thought about the number of people staying. “Actually,” he took a deep breath, “it would be good if you’d do my room, and just clear the tops of any of my stuff?” he asked. “So visitors can go in there. I could try out my pack-away room trunk,” he said. “You know the one? Put that up in the master bedroom, will you, Mitty? I’ll give that a go.”

“Master is going back into his proper place?” Mitty said excitedly.

“Well, someone has to sometime,” Harry said. “I don’t suppose any of the visitors will want to go in there.”

Not in the room Ginny had died in.

Somehow, the thought of doing it with the house full of other people made it seem easier.

Harry had slept in there before, of course. He’d started sleeping in the linked bedroom, which was on the other side of an en-suite that served the two, years ago. It had often struck Harry that the fact that the house was designed like that just showed that the arrangement that he had with Ginny was not unusual at all, that when the house was built, the master and mistress expected to have their own chambers. It was an odd comfort.

Now, the room on the other side of the bathroom was empty. The Rites had made sure of that, and Harry hadn’t even thought about returning the furniture that he’d banished to the attic. He’d been in there though. He’d needed to check that the magic had washed the taint of the evil from the air, had truly cleansed the room.

It had.

Its bland cream walls didn’t carry any trace of Ginny lingering there.

“Mitty will do everything and then come back and help Master!” the elf said happily, and blinked
Harry was pleased that she hadn’t insisted on him going to bed and leaving everything to her. The elf had got used to the fact that Harry liked to use his hands, liked to cook, to be active, to do.

Not that he always wanted to be washing and cleaning, but they had found a working balance. He suspected with Ginny gone, Mitty wasn’t quite sure of her role. He really ought to talk to her.

And then it hit him like a bludger.

“Mitty!”

The elf appeared at once, her face hidden behind a mountain of sheets. “Master called?” the muffled words came through the cottons.

“Sorry,” Harry apologised. “Mitty, when you’re done with the beds, can you come back down?”

“Mitty was promising Master to do that anyway,” the elf said curiously as she patted the pile down and peered around the edge.

“Of course you were,” Harry said, still thrumming with adrenalin at the thoughts racing through him. “Right, then, I’ll see you back in a moment.”

Mitty bobbed a curtsey, almost dropping the towering linens.

Harry ran the taps, scraping plates and flinging them into the sudsy water, his thoughts whirling.

He’d practically finished the whole lot of washing up by hand, having forgotten that he’d intended to set a washing spell, when the elf reappeared.

“Master has been very busy!” she praised. She snapped her fingers. Steam rose from the crockery as it dried instantly, and with another snap, the plates and dishes started floating across the kitchen to stack themselves in the dresser, and the cutlery shot across and loaded itself into the right slots in the drawer.

Harry sat down, and patted the chair next to him. “Come and sit down, Mitty,” he invited.

The elf was used to Harry’s often strange behaviour, to being included in family occasions with her own place at the table, and to being given presents at Yule and on her birthday by all the family, and so hopped onto the chair.

“Mitty, I had a sudden thought. You were here the day Ginny died, weren’t you?”

To Harry’s horror, the elf threw herself off the chair and onto the floor, banging her head repeatedly. It was years since Harry had seen her show such behaviour.

“Mitty, stop! STOP!”

The elf lifted her head. Green slime streaked from one of her nostrils to the red-tiled floor. Her eyes were pools of misery, filled to overflowing.

“Sit down,” Harry said firmly, helping the elf up and back onto her chair. He was about to hand her a hanky when he realised that might cause even more distress, if she thought it was clothes. “Wipe your nose,” he said gently, “and dry your eyes. I had no intention of upsetting you, Mitty.”

The elf did as she was told, pulling a rather disgusting piece of cloth out of the capacious pocket.
she had stitched onto the front of her outfit.

“We’re all very upset at Mistress Ginny’s death,” he said gently. “I’m so sorry that we hadn’t thought how distressing it must be for you too, when you were so close.”

“Mitty is a bad elf!” Mitty wailed, in response.

Harry got up and shut the kitchen door. He didn’t want the children disturbed.

“Tell me why you think you’re a bad elf?” Harry asked. “I’m sure that can’t be true.”

“Master is so kind! And Master James and Master Albus and Mistress Lily is all so kind to Mitty, but she is such a bad elf,” she howled.

Harry instantly noticed that Ginny’s name was missing from the roll call of kind family members.

“Was Mistress Ginny not kind to you?” Harry asked in surprise. Harry couldn’t believe it. Ginny was sometimes a bit dictatorial with the elf, but Mitty had seemed to relish the clear instructions, and Ginny had always said how absolutely brilliant it was to have an elf and how she didn’t know how her parents had managed without.

Mitty looked shifty. “Mistress was very kind to Mitty,” she said. She wiggled on her chair.

“But?” Harry prompted.

“Mistress was not being kind to Master,” Mitty sobbed, and then banged her head on the table over and over.

Harry reached over and stopped her.

“Is this about Mr Malfoy, Mitty?” Harry asked.

The elf’s eyes nearly popped out of her head. The tears that had reappeared splashed out, and one of them plopped onto Harry’s knee.

“Master is knowing about Mister Malfoy?”

“I did know,” Harry said.

“Mitty is not knowing what to do,” Mitty sobbed, pulling up the front of her pillow-case and burying her face in it.

Harry tried fiercely not to look at what was revealed. He really did not want to look down there. And yet his eyes started drifting down…he yanked a piece of paper that had been left on the table covered in doodles and dropped it on the elf’s lap. She didn’t seem to notice.

“Mistress is bringing Mr Malfoy into the house and Mitty is getting them lunch and Mitty is very happy to serve Mistress and Mr Malfoy’s family are on the family tree and everything is very happy and then they is going upstairs, and Mitty is hearing noises, and she is not sure if Mistress is alright, and so Mitty goes to check, and Mistress shouts at her – ” Mitty heaved a breath and a giant sob.

“Oh, Mitty,” Harry said, his hand patting her arm. “So the men weren’t in the room at that point?”

“There is only being Mr Malfoy, without his clothes on, and his bottom is -”
“Yes,” Harry said quickly. He did not need a description of Malfoy’s bottom.

“And Mistress is shouting at me to go away, and so I do.”

“And you didn’t see her again?” Harry said sympathetically. “No wonder you’re so upset –”

“Of course I is seeing Mistress again!” the elf contradicted. “Mistress speaks to Mitty later and says when Mr Malfoy comes Mitty can go and visit her brother.”

Harry breathed in. So, it wasn’t the first time that Malfoy had been with Ginny in the house. It was a regular thing.

It hurt.

He knew they were having an affair. That it was much more than that.

But this was his home.

The family’s home.

Malfoy had his own place – several, probably. Why the hell couldn’t they fuck there, or in a hotel?

He bit back his anger. He needed to find out what else Mitty could tell him.

“So, Malfoy was a – a frequent visitor?” Harry asked. “When did they start – coming home? Together?”

“They is coming most Tuesdays, and sometimes Thursdays, but not when Miss Lily is home from Hogwarts. It is being since Miss Lily went back last September.” Mitty gave a huge sob.

Harry felt gutted. What had made them start bringing the affair into the house? Although Harry worked long hours, he was his own boss. Sometimes he decided to come home early, or in the day. He could have come across them at any time.

Had they wanted Harry to find them?

Was it an extra thrill of excitement that Ginny sought?

The taste felt bitter in his mouth.

Harry looked down at the elf, sitting miserable and huddled over.

“Did Ginny tell you not to say anything?” Harry asked.

The elf shook her head. “I is not knowing what to do. Mistress is doing things with Mr Malfoy that she isn’t doing with Master.”

It took Harry a moment to decipher that.

“Is the bedroom, you mean?”

“If they is making babies they’ll be Malfoy babies, and then Mitty doesn’t know if she will have to be a Malfoy house-elf,” the elf sobbed.

“Oh Mitty! This is your home,” Harry said gently.

“But Mitty is liking babies,” the elf said, and started wailing louder than ever.
The door opened and Albus peered in.

“Mitty! What’s up?” he said, coming over to perch on the floor in front of the elf.

“Mind the snot,” Harry said through the side of his mouth, giving him a quick shove to stop him kneeling in the goo on the tile.

“Mitty is a bad elf!” the little creature wailed again.

“Of course you’re not,” Albus said firmly. “You’re a very good house-elf. We can’t manage without you – ”

The sobs got louder.

Harry and Albus looked at each other.

“Mitty? You’re not ill, are you?” Harry asked. “Or – or – you don’t have to leave us because your Mistress has gone, do you? We want you to stay.”

“Mitty wants to stay too, but I is not knowing what to do!” Mitty’s pillow-case was soaked through.

“Why do you think you might not be able to stay?” Harry said gently. “You know we’re not cross with you, don’t you? Ginny only sent you away because she thought you might not be comfortable while Mr Malfoy was in my place,” Harry said, looking to Albus in apology and explanation.

“Mitty is so bad, Mitty is so bad,” the elf rocked back and forward.

“Why are you bad?” Albus asked.

“Mitty might have to go to a new Master,” the elf almost yelled.


“Mitty is having a baby and - ”

“WHAT!”

The two men stared at each other, horror and embarrassment on both their faces.

“Mitty, why didn’t you say?” Harry said. “We’ve been working you so hard – ”

“Master is so kind,” Mitty flung her face into his lap. “Mitty wants to work for her kind Master, but she doesn’t want to leave her baby with Dinky’s Master, and what shall Mitty do?” she sobbed.

Harry resigned himself to elf snot all over his trousers. He could feel it seeping through already. He didn’t think even a cleaning spell would make him want to wear them again.

He patted her back awkwardly.

“I wish you’d told us before,” Harry said. “Who is the baby’s father? He must be so excited!”

More wailing commenced.

“He isn’t happy about it?” Albus asked, sounding annoyed on her behalf.

“He isn’t even knowing!”
“Mitty! You haven’t told him? Why on earth not?”

“Because I is only seeing Dinky on Tuesday’s and Thursday’s when Mistress is sending me away!” Mitty howled.

“You’re having your brother’s baby?” Harry said, astonished, and Albus choked, his eyes flying to Harry’s, shock and humour vying in them.

“Master is being silly,” Mitty lifted her head and hauled herself back into the chair. “Of course I is not. Dinky works with Toaster.”

“Your brother is called Toaster?” Albus was trying to hold back laughter.

Harry elbowed him. “Mitty, I want you to go and tell Dinky first thing in the morning. He must be very worried about you, if he hasn’t seen you for weeks. And I’m sure he will be delighted to hear about the baby. Er, do you know when you’ll be having it?”

Mitty had been about to throw herself on him again, but at the last question she pulled back, and patted her tummy instead. “When it is being ready to come out, of course.”

“Of course. I’m sorry,” Harry said, “I just don’t know much about elf pregnancies and babies.” He scratched his head. “How do you feel? Should we be getting special food in for you, Mitty?”

“Master is so kind, so good – ”

“Just as you’ve always been good to us,” Harry said. “I want only the best for you and the baby, Mitty, do you understand? No heavy lifting, or working if you’re tired, and I’m sure you should have a nap in the afternoon – ”

Mitty was beaming at him. She wiped her eyes. “Master doesn’t need to worry about all that! House-elves is very strong.”

“I know, but that’s no reason not to take care of yourself and your baby.” A thought occurred to Harry. “Is it your first baby, Mitty?”

The elf nodded.

“And you’re worrying that the baby might have to live with her father? Is that normal?”

“I is not knowing,” she said, her face drooping. “Elves is usually living together.”

“Which would you prefer?” Harry asked. “Should I ask Dinky’s owner if Dinky could come and live with us? Or would you rather work for Dinky’s family?”

“Master is willing to do that for Mitty?”

“Of course. You and your baby and its father want to be together, don’t you?”

Mitty’s ears flapped as she nodded. “Mitty has told Dinky many and many and many times how kind her family is, but Mitty is never believing that Dinky could come too!”

“Well, you’d better tell me who Dinky’s owner is, and I’ll go and visit him tomorrow.”

“Dinky is working for Master Thomas Wilkes,” the elf said.

“I’ve not heard of him, but I’m sure we can sort it all out, alright?”
Mitty nodded again, gazing up at her master as if he were Merlin himself.

Harry stood up. He put his hand on Mitty’s shoulder. He could feel the bumps of her skin through the cotton fabric. “I’m sorry that you were put in such a difficult position,” he said gently. “I know it’s hard to understand, but your Mistress was a very good woman. I’m glad you kept her secrets.”

Mitty jumped down off the chair. The soggy paper that had been in her lap fluttered to the floor, and she whisked it up and handed it to Harry, who took it tentatively.

“I is just being sorry that I was not there to protect Mistress,” the elf said. “House elves is hearing everything. Mistress must have put up a silencing spell,” she shook her head side-to-side sadly. “Otherwise Mr Malfoy’s reporter-men would have rushed to help her kind Mistress, Mitty is sure.”

Harry and Albus stood, mouths dropping open, as the elf scuttled away towards her room, which was just off the pantry.

“Mitty?” Harry chased after her, then tried to appear calm and relaxed. “Mr Malfoy’s reporter-men?”

The elf nodded.

“Do you mean Angus Leiland?” Albus asked.

“Mr Leiland is working for Quidditch Queens, not The Prophet,” Mitty said, in the tone of one imparting information that the recipient really ought to know.

“Of course he does,” Albus agreed. “He interviewed Mum back in January, didn’t he?”

The elf nodded. “Right here, in the kitchen,” she slapped her rather large foot on the tiles. “I is not understanding why a kitchen is a place for interviewing.”

“And someone came to interview Ginny the day she died?” Harry prompted. “Did they come with Mr Malfoy? At the same time?”

Mitty was shaking her head again. “Mr Malfoy is flooing in,” she said. “And Mitty is just about to go like Mistress had said she must, and Mitty is happy to go and see her Dinky, but then Mitty sees a mouse peeking out in the pantry, and I is not leaving a mouse in the house!” she said indignantly. “Mitty keeps a clean house!”

“You do,” Harry said, wondering if they were ever going to get to the point. He didn’t want to push it and frighten Mitty off, or into more fits of tears. “A very clean house. You’re an excellent house-elf, Mitty.”

The elf beamed with pride.

“So you dealt with the mouse, I’m sure;” Harry said. “What happened then?”

“After Mitty has put the mouse in the boiler – “

Albus gagged. Harry gave a little shake of his head at him.

Mitty continued, “and checked that there is being no others in a nest, I is going, and then the door bell rings – ”

“The front door?” Albus asked.
“Of course the front door,” Mitty chided, “the back door is not having a bell.”

Albus and Harry exchanged glances. Very few people used the front door. Harry did, if he’d decided to walk home. But most wizards travelled by floo. When they had first come to live in Grimmauld Place, Harry had revised all the warding. The property had no longer been under Fidelius, and they had gained the usual door furniture to blend in with their Muggle neighbours. As the children had grown up, and wanted friends to be able to drop around, it had been necessary to adjust the wards yet again. Harry had worked hard to create a balance which offered privacy without the family feeling that they were living in a prison. He had taught the children how to make the floo recognise someone so that any friend who they had ‘signed in’ to the system would be allowed access to the parlour. It was impossible to get from the parlour to elsewhere in the house unless accompanied by a member of the family or the family member had dropped the warding for that particular person or occasion. They could all do it with barely a thought and a flick of the wrist.

It was impossible for visitors to apparate into the house.

It was impossible to enter the house unless invited.

“And who was there?” Harry asked. “Did you know them?”

“I is not seeing them before,” Mitty said, “but one says they is from The Prophet and they have an appointment for an interview with Mistress.”

“How many were there, Mitty?” Albus asked.

“They is being three wizards,” Mitty answered.

“So what happened then?” Harry asked, trying to keep his voice steady over the pounding of his heart.

“Mitty is shutting the door and checking Mistress’ diary,” Mitty said firmly.

“Well done!” Albus said.

Mitty preened.

“And did Mistress have an appointment?” Harry asked.

“Yes, so Mitty lets the wizards in, but then she is not being sure what to do.”

“That must have been difficult,” Harry agreed. “What did you do?”

“Mitty is not supposed to be in the house,” the elf said, “but Mitty is needing to be looking after Mistress’ guests. Mitty is worrying. But the talking wizard says can they set up their camera in the library, so Mitty is taking them to the library, which is a proper place for interviewing, and she brings them some tea and cake, and the wizard says thank you and they will wait for Mistress, and so Mitty goes to see Dinky. And when Mitty gets back, Mr Ronald is here and he is punching Mr Malfoy.”

“Do you remember what they looked like, Mitty?” Albus asked, urgently.

Harry kicked him quietly with his foot.

“In case they can tell us anything,” Albus added.
“They is wizards,” Mitty answered.

“Weren’t they tall, or short? What was their hair like? Can you think of anything special about each to help describe them?”

“They is being wizards,” Mitty said again, and Harry realised with sinking hopes that to Mitty, all wizards looked pretty much alike.

“But you haven’t seen them before?” he asked.

Mitty shook her head.

“Do you think you would recognise them again?”

“I is always recognising people I have seen before,” Mitty said proudly.

“Good,” Harry said. “Tomorrow I’m going to ask Ron to bring you a photo and you can tell me if it’s one of them. And if either of the other two come again, Mitty, don’t let them in, alright? In fact, don’t let anyone you don’t already know into the house, whatever reason they say. Come and get me and I’ll decide if they’re ok.”

Mitty had begun shaking. “Did Mitty do wrong, Master? Is Mitty a bad elf?”

“Mitty is a very good elf, and some very bad men tricked her. We think we know who one of them is, and you can help by telling us if the photo Ron has is one of them or not. We’re doing all we can to find out who they are, and why they wanted to hurt Ginny, and whether they want to hurt anyone else. In the meantime, you and I have to protect all our children, don’t we?” Harry said carefully.

“Mitty let in the men who … who … killed her Mistress?” Her eyes expanded to saucer shaped proportions. “Mitty is … Mitty is the worst elf ever!” And she started to hit herself in the face.

“Mitty!” Harry said sharply. “Stop that at once and listen!”

Harry had spoken firmly to Mitty before, but he had never snapped at her, and the elf paused with one hand half-way to boxing her ear.

“Now listen carefully,” Harry said. “Are you listening?” he added sternly.

Mitty nodded.

Harry took her hand and put it on her belly. “You have a baby in there, Mitty. You know it’s a rule in this house that you are not allowed to punish yourself. And now that rule is more important than ever, because you would be punishing your baby too, wouldn’t you? And that baby hasn’t done anything to deserve it at all, has it?”

Mitty shook her head, wide-eyed.

“I’m ordering you to give yourself no punishments, and to look after yourself and your baby very carefully, do you understand, Mitty? I’ll be very, very upset if you don’t take very great care of the two of you.”

The elf nodded wonderingly.

“Can I say something, Dad?” Albus asked.
Harry nodded.

Albus took the elf’s hands in his own. “I know you’re going to be upset if it was those men that killed Mum,” he said quietly.

Harry steeled himself for the elf to start getting agitated again.

“But whoever it was, was determined to kill her. If you hadn’t have gone, they might have hurt you and your baby. If we’d been in the house, they might have killed us too. None of us could have known what was going to happen. So now, we just have to think about making everything safe so that no-one else gets hurt. You will help us so that Lily and everyone here is safe, won’t you, Mitty?”

Mitty nodded her head vigorously.

“Thank you,” Albus said, and gave her a hug.

A green hand crept over his shoulder and his back was gently patted in return.

“Off to bed now,” Harry said gently. “And off to tell Dinky your wonderful news in the morning.”

Albus and Harry hauled themselves into chairs and stared at each other as the elf scampered away.
It was 2.20am and the worst of the night wasn’t over.

Harry was just brushing his teeth when he heard a knock. He strode out of the bathroom and found James sticking his head around the bedroom door.

“Are you not sleeping in here?” James’ brows furrowed as he took in the tidy room.

“I’ve got a bed made up in the other room,” Harry said. “I wasn’t sure how many people were staying. Mitty’s put clean sheets on all the beds. Whassup?”

James lurched a bit as he straightened. “Albus has put Scorpius and Andy in the same room!”

“So?” Harry said, eyebrows drawing together. “Aren’t there enough rooms to go around?”

“In the green room!” James’ voice was full of implication.

“Yeah? Did the girls want that room?”

“There’s only one bed!”

Harry turned back to the bathroom and spat out his mouthful of toothpaste. He was really too tired for more drama tonight.

James had followed him and was leaning against the door jamb, his arms crossed and looking belligerent. Harry’s heart sank. James in a strop was a painful thing. Harry had thought they were long past the tantrum stage, but his son reminded him of how he had looked as a two year old, cross and determined.

“What’s the problem? If Millie were here, I expect you’d be sharing a bed.”

“They’re men!”

“Exactly,” Harry said. “Old enough to know what they want. As far as I understand it, they’ve been together for years. You can’t expect them to sleep in separate rooms, surely?”

James stuck his chin out.

“What are you asking for?” Harry questioned, rinsing and spitting. “You want to do dorms? All the boys in one and the girls in another?”

“No!” James said angrily. “There’s no way I’m sleeping in the same room as them!”

“Being gay isn’t contagious, James,” Harry sighed.

“I’m not worried about turning queer!”

“From the number of girls you’ve been out with, I didn’t think that was likely,” Harry agreed. “So what are you worried about?”

“They’d be eyeing us up!”

“I seriously doubt it,” Harry said, running water into the sink and getting out his razor. He hadn’t
planned on shaving the Muggle way, but he needed to do something with his hands.

Before he strangled his son.

“And if that’s what’s worrying you, then why are you having a hissy fit about them sharing a room? They won’t trouble you at all then.”

“Dad, you can’t let two men share a bed in this house! It’s disgusting.”

Harry put the razor down and turned to his son, hands on his hips. “Actually, James, if there’s anyone whose behaviour is disgusting, it’s yours. They are our guests. What are you proposing? Having everyone else to stay and telling them to bugger off home? If they’re anywhere near as drunk as you are that’ll be a recipe for disaster.”

“I’m not drunk.”

“You *are* drunk and you know it. That’s neither here nor there. What’s bothering me is your lack of tolerance and hospitality.”

“You’re being all Muggle, Dad. It’s just not done in Wizarding society.”

“It *is* done, believe it or not. It’s just intolerance such as you are demonstrating right now that forces men to have to hide their affections. I’m shocked, really. I didn’t expect this of you, James,” Harry said, leaning his bottom against the sink and crossing his arms.

“Bill thinks the same as me,” James said, as if that was a trump card.

Harry held back a groan. Bill had always been James’ hero.

“Bill is partially affected with werewolf toxins and is married to a woman who is half creature. None of which is anyone’s business but their own, but I’m not quite sure where he gets off on casting aspersions on people who want to sleep with their fellow humans,” Harry said.

“Mum wouldn’t have allowed it,” James argued.

“Then I would have been very disappointed in her,” Harry snapped, “given that Scorpius would have been her step-son. But your mother was a warm-hearted woman, and I’m sure she would have welcomed Scorpius into the family, and if you *dare* use your mother’s name like that ever again, drunk or not, James, I’ll – ” Harry took a deep breath, feeling the swirling rise of his magic, responding like adrenalin to the magnitude of the anger that had exploded within him.

James stepped back, looking horrified.

“Go to bed,” Harry bit out. “I’ll go and make sure everyone is sorted.”

“I’m not sleeping here!” James practically ran across the bedroom, slamming the door behind him.

Harry yanked it open and yelled after him, fear for his son vying with his fury, “Walk home, then, James! The fresh air might clear that thick head of yours!”

Harry leant against the wall, shaking, as James’ lurching footsteps clattered down the stairs. It was years since he’d shouted at any of his children.

More than anything, he was aware of the shimmer he’d seen in James’ eyes. His son had been holding back tears.
They’d have to sort this out in the morning, Harry thought.

It was inevitable that something would give, given the stress and shock they were all still suffering from. But he hadn’t seen this coming.

He pulled himself up and headed down the stairs.

The kitchen was a bustling hive of activity, as the youngsters piled beer bottles into a box and china into the sink. Fred was pouring a glass of water, spraying Andy, who was dealing with the dirty cups. Andy swatted him good naturedly, whilst Fred tried to stick his finger over the tap end to spray him some more. Both stopped like naughty school boys when they spotted Harry.

“Did James just go out?” Albus asked, looking up from the bin, where he was scraping cake remains off the plates.

“You know he’s got to work in the morning. Saturday is the busiest day for the travel agency,” Harry said, avoiding the question and offering an explanation to the youngsters who didn’t know them so well. “Right, you lot ready to turn in? Follow me.”

Albus had intended to put Rose and Molly into Lily’s room, but Harry scotched that idea. Lily would feel pissed off enough that she’d missed the party, without having her space invaded without her permission.

Teddy already had his own room in the house: as Harry’s godson, he’d always been a frequent visitor. Victoire slipped into the room after him with a saucy smile at Harry. Teddy and Victoire had stopped going out years ago, but they had remained very close. Neither of them had other partners at the moment. Harry wasn’t sure if they were friends or friends with benefits: it wasn’t really any of his business. He certainly wasn’t going to begrudge them finding comfort in each other: they were heading towards thirty after all, and old enough to know what they wanted from each other.

The rest of them ambled along to the next door, which was the green room. Before Harry had said a word, Rose had slipped in and thrown herself on the bed.

“Night night,” she said, curling up as they all laughed.

Molly came and sat on the other side. “Budge over, birthday girl, there’s room for two in there.”

“I can transfigure a second bed if you want it,” Harry offered.

“I’m too tired to care,” Rose snuggled her cheek against the pillow. “This is comfy.”

“Fine by me,” Molly said, pulling off her socks.

“Sleep tight, then, girls,” Albus grinned.

They were heading out the door when Rose bounced off the bed in a sudden burst of energy, having to right herself on the bedside table. Harry looked at her fondly. He’d never seen her squiffy before. The next moment she came up and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“Night, Harry, thank you for letting us all stay. I’ve had a really nice birthday. I hope that’s
alright?"

“I’m glad to hear it.” Harry gave her a hug back. “Now, off to sleep, and I do hope your Mum will be over with some of her super-duper Hangover Potion in the morning, or we’ll all be up shit creek.”

Everyone laughed, and Fred belched.

“Oops?”

“Get out, stinky boy!” Molly shouted from the bed. She was usually as quiet as a mouse, as uptight as her father Percy.

“You can see she doesn’t have brothers,” Rose grinned.

“Hey!” Albus said, in defence of brothers who had sisters.

Rose thumbed her nose at him.

“You know where the bathroom is,” Harry intervened, chuckling. “And Mitty will have left towels on the shelf. Night, girls.”

“I was going to stick Scorpius and Andy in there,” Albus said, as they stood in the corridor once again. “You’d better come up with me and Fred. Or they could go in James’ room,” Albus suggested, with a mischievous look at his father.

“Or they could sleep in here,” Harry countered, opening the door to his room.

“Hey, have you moved out?” Albus asked, peering in at the tidiness.

Harry hadn’t thought he was normally particularly messy, but the room did have that spare room bare look.

“We’re not putting you out, are we?” Scorpius asked, looking worried. “We could just floo back –”

“After the amount of alcohol you lot have consumed?” Harry scoffed. “Not a good idea. Anyway, I’ve just moved back into the master-bedroom is all.”

They weren’t to know that he had moved out years ago, rather than just since Ginny’s death.

“Fred’n I’ll head up then,” Albus yawned. “Night all.”

Fred gave a silent wave, and followed Albus up the next flight of stairs to the room on the top floor which many years ago had been Sirius Black’s.

Harry ushered Scorpius and Andy into the make-shift guest room, loping across and opening a door. “Bathroom,” he said. “It shares with the room on the other side – that’s me. I’ll just finish up shaving and then it’s all yours. Towels in the cupboard. Do you need anything else?”

“No, thanks, Mr Potter,” both men said.

“Are you sure this is alright?” Andy asked. “James didn’t go because of us, did he?”

“James went because he was drunk and I shouted at him,” Harry answered, with an honesty that avoided the truth. “We don’t usually, so we were both a bit upset. We were talking about his mum.
We’ll sort it tomorrow. Goodnight, boys,” and Harry went into the bathroom and shut the door, scrubbing the tears that were suddenly welling in his own eyes.

Despite being exhausted, Harry lay in the master bedroom wide-awake. Somehow the fact that everything had been wiped clean of Ginny now seemed wrong. There was no lingering scent of her perfume, or whiff of the moisturizer that she used to use to combat the wind damage that flying caused to her cheeks. It was as if he was in a different room, in a different house.

Eventually, he got up and padded downstairs. He put the kettle on to boil and went to look at the damage in the sitting room, but was pleasantly surprised to see that the youngsters had cleared practically everything away, and even straightened the cushions before heading to bed.

They were all growing up.

Somehow, that made his argument with James even worse.

Harry realised that his anxiety about it was the main cause of his sleeplessness. He hated being at outs with his kids. It was a long time since it had happened. He supposed he was foolish to think that now they were grown up, they would never disagree about anything, but this wasn’t just anything. This was something fundamental. Harry felt appalled at the intolerance, and shamed that he could have brought a child up so badly that he would harbour such views.

But Albus didn’t seem to be bothered in the slightest.

Why was James?

He’d heard it said that people who protested were often fighting their own inclinations in that direction. Could James be gay and be worrying about it? It seemed unlikely. James really had had a string of girl-friends: since he was fourteen or so, there was always a Susan or a Sunita or a Siobhan flitting into and out of his life. James had even moved in with Franke, when he’d left Hogwarts; although she’d moved out after a couple of months. But James hadn’t seemed at all bothered by Kingsley and Snape. Harry wondered if perhaps James hadn’t realised that they were in a relationship: the men made no overt gestures in public, sat at different places at the table, and so on. He felt a horrible tightness in his chest at the thought of how James might behave when he did find out. It would be unbearable if his son was rude to them.

He wondered how he could address the problem.

No obvious solution came to him. It wasn’t as if James was alone in his attitude – after all, that was why Kingsley had left his job and the country.

It made him realise how brave Scorpius and Andy were in their openness. And he felt a bit of hope that things might get better, seeing as how the other youngsters appeared to have accepted their presence socially that evening: it was only when it came to bed arrangements that things had flared up, and even then, it was only James who’d been bothered.

He made himself a big mug of tea. On the kitchen table, in a tin, was some left-over birthday cake, so he helped himself to a big slice and carried the lot into the sitting room, where he eased himself onto the sofa, back against the arm with his legs spread out along the seat, feeling a small and ridiculous sense of pride that he’d manoeuvred into place without spilling a drop of tea.
The cake was good, which meant that Molly senior rather than Hermione had made it. There was lots of chocolate butter-cream between the layers of cake, and Harry cursed as he dropped a bit on the white t-shirt that he was wearing. He put down his tea on the carpet and picked the bit off, but it had already left a brown smear. Too late to worry about it. He finished the rest of the cake and his tea without really thinking about anything.

Feeling pleasantly full, he summoned the blanket that lived on a box at the end of the sofa, and snuggled down.

Might as well sleep here as anywhere.

It was a thought Harry regretted four hours later when he was woken by the early morning sunlight streaming straight in the windows. Birds were chirping happily. He wriggled, trying to get comfortable again, but the persistent pressure in his bladder put paid to that idea. He got up, staggered upstairs to the loo, and delighted in the relief.

Coming out onto the landing, the house was still quiet. Harry was knackered and groggy, so he headed back to bed to catch a couple more hours sleep.

He was rubbing the gunk from the corner of his eye as he swung open his bedroom door.

His head shot up at the unexpected sound.

His hand fell from the door knob.

His jaw dropped open. Even as it did so, he felt ridiculous, but it was out of his control.

His eyes were glued to the tableau in front of him.

Scorpius Malfoy was wide awake, even if his eyes had been shut as Harry entered the room.

He was sitting up against the bed-head, one arm flung back, holding onto the top rail over his shoulder. Absurdly, Harry’s attention was drawn to his underarm hair, which was thick and wiry and blond. Harry had never seen anything like it, even at school when he shared a dorm with Neville and Seamus.

He’d never seen anyone having their cock sucked before, either, and certainly not by another man.

Scorpius seemed speechless too. Andy hadn’t realised that Harry had come in, lying as he was between Scorpius’ legs with his back to the door. His shoulders rippled as his head bobbed up and down, and his bottom, underneath the sheets, undulated against the mattress.

His mattress.

Scorpius shoved a hand at Andy’s head at about the same moment Harry found himself able to move too.

Malfy’s cock exited the man’s mouth with a distinct pop! as Andy said, “What? I didn’t get you with my teeth, did I?” and Harry said,

“Shit! Sorry! Wrong door!” before slamming it swiftly behind him.
He stood in the corridor for a moment, fighting an urge to gasp out a laugh of pure horrified embarrassment.

He turned and dashed into Ginny’s room – the room he was supposed to be in, he realised, and stood with his back to the door.

Holy shit!

How bloody awful of him to have barged in on them! God, he’d have to apologise! And how cringingly dreadful was that going to be?! What must they be thinking?

He was horribly aware that he was wearing nothing but baggy boxers and a dirty t-shirt. He must have looked ridiculous. He’d better get dressed. He was about to head into the en-suite when he realised that he really could not go into the shared bathroom and start clattering about as if nothing had happened. As if they weren’t on the other side of the door, naked and interrupted and…

And his clean clothes were in that bedroom: he hadn’t thought about getting some out the night before. Not that that mattered, he could wear the same as yesterday.

But he needed a shower. The girls were hopefully still asleep. He’d go and use the one down the corridor. Action. That was it.

He picked up his clothes and hurried down the landing to the bathroom: he really didn’t want to face the boys again until he was dressed and had donned an aura of control and normality.

Under the steamy water of the shower, the images played over in his mind. He could not get over how completely given to the experience Scorpius had been, with his head thrown back and his body stretched out.

Harry didn’t know when wash turned to wank, but he quickly scooted his mind to his favourite do-it-quick fantasy: he had a houseful of guests, and a leisurely play wasn’t on the cards. It was a while since he’d even thought of doing it, what with everything that had been happening. He leant one arm against the tiles, letting the water cascade down his back as he worked himself quickly. He’d never, ever mentioned to anyone, not to Ginny or his friends at Hogwarts, even when the boys had sat around at night in the dorm talking wank stories, that his favourite scenario was the Patil twins. He hadn’t seen them for years, it was a fantasy born the night of the Yule Ball during the Triwizard Tournament. He might have lusted after Cho, but there was something wicked about thinking of those two girls, usually so reserved and elegant, surrounding him, golden brown skin against his white, lithe bodies pressed all around him so that he hardly knew where one started and the other finished, but both of them almost suffocating him with their desire. His hand sped up at the familiar thought, his cock rigid and tense under the shifting flow of his foreskin. He felt his balls tightening, his breath gasping as he got close. Rosmerta, his other guilty fantasy, flashed momentarily into the scene, distracting him, and then suddenly it wasn’t Padma or Parvati or Rosmerta, but Scorpius Malfoy stretching taut against him, hard everywhere, and Harry was spurting, almost doubling over with the force of it, his hand flying on, wringing the last of it out of himself, as his mind leapt back from the image that had just brought him his best orgasm in years.

He stared down at himself, the redness of his cock, familiar and yet suddenly alien, as if the softening flesh in his hand had deliberately chosen to confound him. The water sluiced down his body, cleansing his skin but leaving his thoughts untouched.

The doorbell rang, jarring Harry’s frazzled nerves.

Mitty would answer it.
It rang again, and Harry pulled on his jeans, shoving his arms into his shirt sleeves as he ran down the stairs, remembering that he’d told Mitty to go to see Dinky. He glanced at the clock in the hall, wondering who the hell was ringing on the door before nine on a Saturday morning. He glanced down at the socks still in his hands, and began to shove them into his pocket as he flung open the door.

Head Auror Ramsey Felton stood there, with Franklin and Hencliffe, and three other Aurors, all in full uniform.

“What’s happened?” Harry asked, suddenly terrified. “Is James alright?” He stepped forward, reaching out a hand to Franklin. The socks were still in it.

Auror Franklin’s nose wrinkled.

Felton’s fist closed around his arm.

“You are under arrest, Mr Potter, on suspicion of murdering Mrs Ginevra Potter, nee Weasley, on – ”

“What?”

“You heard,” Felton said roughly. “Hencliffe, take his other arm. Straight to the holding cells, on my nod.”

“Hold on!” Harry said, disbelieving. “This is all – you’re crazy!”

“We’re taking you into custody now, Mr Potter,” Franklin confirmed, her face a mask. “You will be given the opportunity to make your statement at the Ministry.”

“Well, let me just tell my kids – ” Harry tried to turn.

“We’ve witnessed you breaking through Auror wards,” Felton said. “There’s no way we’re stupid enough to let you back in that house. On three. One, two – ”

Harry dropped the socks as the whole party disappeared in a rolling thunderclap of apparition.
“Did you find him?” Andy asked, as Scorpius reappeared in the bedroom.

“He’s not in the kitchen or sitting room, or the library or parlour. Maybe he went back in his bedroom without us hearing? Should I knock on the door?”

“If he’s in his room, it’s because he doesn’t want to see us,” Andy shook his head. “I’m so sorry, Scorp. You just looked so hot, and I didn’t think – ”

Scorpius went up and sat down next to Andy, who was fastening his shoes as he sat on the edge of the bed.

After Harry’s appearance, they’d both been horrified. Harry had been so welcoming, so accepting of their relationship, that it had been a breath of fresh air in terms of the treatment that many wizards exhibited towards them. But Scorpius had seen the shock on Harry’s face, and to realise that they had abused his hospitality was unconscionable.

“Maybe he’s gone out to avoid us?” he asked.

“Maybe,” Andy nodded. “I’m really sorry,” he said again.

“Hush,” Scorpius turned and took Andy’s guilt-stricken face in his hands, and gave him a gentle kiss. “It wasn’t as if I was objecting, was it? I could’ve said no.”

“Takes a strong man to say no when his cock’s in another’s mouth,” Andy quirked.

“Mmmm. Especially yours,” Scorpius said, his eyes deepening to stormy grey. He pulled back reluctantly.

“What do you think we should do?”

“I think we ought to go,” Andy said.

“Just like that?”

“Maybe our presence is really offensive, he might be waiting for us to leave.”

Scorpius nodded.

“You’re probably right. We’ll send a letter of apology as soon as we get back,” he said. “I’m not sure whether he’ll want us to come to any more meetings.”

“Bugger. They’re interesting, aren’t they?” Andy commented. “Makes me feel like we can actually achieve something.”

“Yeah. It’s worrying, this new rubbish. Merlin knows, there’s enough intolerance already without this too. I wanted to be able to help. Good for the family image too,” he said pragmatically.

“It’s taken a battering with your father being accused, but that should blow over, shouldn’t it?” Andy said, giving a sympathetic touch to Scorpius’ arm.

“People will always say that there’s no smoke without fire,” Scorpius shrugged. “We’ve never really come out of the cloud of Grandfather’s dealings.”

“He’s old, isn’t he?” Andy said. “It might have helped, him being there at the trial. People could
see that he looked washed up – sorry, Scorp, but you know what I mean.”

Scorpius did know. His grandfather had been a very hazy figure in his life – he had been away in Azkaban for much of his childhood. Scorpius had been eight the first time he had met him. He supposed, thinking back, that the man looked better now than he had then, although he looked a lot older than his years. ‘Washed up’ was a bit harsh – Lucius Malfoy was always dressed impeccably, and held himself ramrod straight, but there was no doubting he wasn’t a patch on the man that Scorpius had seen in the family portrait that had been painted when his father had been a toddler. Lucius had never been invited to their home. For some reason, the Ministry had allowed him to hold onto Malfoy Manor – the property was bound up by ancient trusts, apparently, that even the Ministry had been unable to break, and they had visited him occasionally there. Scorpius had never liked the house, or the visits, or his grandfather. People had spat on him in the street because of his Grandfather, long before they spat on him because he wouldn’t hide his love for Andy. When he had told his father about Andy Boniface, and said he had no intention of hiding the best thing that had ever happened to him, his father had merely said, “Well, I think it’s probably time for you to stop seeing your Grandfather. He’s rather old school,” and Scorpius felt that Andy had given him a double whammy, the brilliance that was Andy’s love and the release from ever visiting the old man ever again. It had been quite a surprise to find Lucius Malfoy carefully seating himself beside him in the court, even if he’d barely spoken a word to him.

They stood up. Andy had already tidied the bed, though he assumed that the family house elf would be changing the sheets, even had Harry not witnessed the scene he had.

It appeared everyone was still asleep, the house quiet as they padded down the stairs.

They could smell the unmistakeable aroma of bacon wafting up from the kitchen, and looking at each other, headed down the next flight to see if Harry was there.

“Mitty is making breakfast,” said a house-elf standing on a chair in front of the stove. She appeared to have a pink tulip perched on the top of her head.

“Oh! Er, we were just about to head off. Is Mr Potter around?”

“Master is not being in the house,” the elf shook her head. “But Mitty is telling him last night that she is preparing breakfasts for Master’s guests.”

Andy looked to Scorpius, unsure what to do.

“I’m sorry, I’m afraid we’ve got to go,” Scorpius said, then added, as the elf looked crest-fallen, “it smells fantastic, though.”

Rewarded with a beaming smile, Scorpius added, “Could you give our apologies to Albus for just disappearing? And we’ll be sending a note to Mr Potter.”

“Mitty will be telling the Masters,” she bobbed a sort of curtsey before turning back to deal with the sausages spitting in a second pan.

The two young men headed to the floo and home.

Half an hour later Hermione floo-ed in. “Anyone home?” she called.

Mitty scuttled along to meet her as she came into the kitchen.
“Good morning, Mitty. What a lovely tulip! I do love those ones with the frilly petals. Is it for a special occasion?”

The elf nodded, almost jumping up and down.

“And that is?” Hermione prompted.

“Mitty is getting married to Dinky!”

"Mitty! How exciting! When did this happen?"

“Mitty is telling Dinky this morning about the baby and Dinky is asking her at once!”

“Well, that’s wonderful!” Hermione said, sinking onto one of the kitchen chairs. “And did you say that you is – that you’re having a baby?”

Mitty’s ears flapped as she nodded repeatedly, creating a small rushing sound.

“Goodness! That’s wonderful news! And er…who is Dinky? I didn’t realise another elf lived here too.”

“Dinky is not living here yet, but Master is promising last night to be asking Dinky’s master this morning,” the elf squeaked excitedly.

“Ah. Is Harry out then? Kids all still in bed?”

“Master Harry is out, and Masters Malfoy and Boniface have gone home, and the others has not come down to Mitty’s breakfast yet,” the elf explained, looking a little woebegone.

“After all your hard work? What a pity,” Hermione sympathised. “I don’t suppose you have any tea at the ready, do you, Mitty? I’d love a cup.”

Mitty happily made Hermione tea, which Hermione drank as she wandered into the living room to check everything was neat and tidy. It had been her daughter’s birthday after all, and Harry had been a darling about it. With Rose having left Hogwarts but Hugo still there, she’d wondered how this birthday would work out, but hopefully the kids had all had a relaxing time together. She bent over to pick up the throw that was bundled up on the sofa. Her back twinged a bit. That’s what you got for a night on the tiles at her age, she thought, with a satisfied smirk. Ron had been determined to show her just what she’d been missing, and who was she to complain?

She wondered who’d slept on the sofa, drinking tea and eating birthday cake. One of the boys, no doubt. She folded up the blanket and popped it on the chest where it lived, then took the cup and the chocolate-smeared plate back to the kitchen. She took a number of vials out of her bag and lined them up on the table, writing a small note saying,

‘Hangover Potion: one bottle each maximum.  
If it doesn’t cure it, you drank far too much.  
Tough.’

Then she called goodbye to Mitty, and headed back to the floo.
“Oh, thank Merlin for Mione!” Fred groaned, coming down with Albus and seeing the bottles on the table. He picked one up, snorted at the note, lifted it in salute, and downed it in one.

His curly black hair blew out into an enormous, straight Afro, before the curls pinged back in and it bounced back to its normal proportions.

“Bloody hell, that looks a powerful batch!” Albus grinned.

Mitty had appeared and he took the pint-sized steaming mug of tea she was holding out to him.

“Thanks Mitty. Oh, how did it go?” he asked enthusiastically.

Fred had sat down and handed a vial towards him.

Albus shook his head. “I didn’t drink as much as you lot: Mitty’s tea will do me,” he said, making the elf beam in pleasure as she started to tell Albus all about it as she dished up breakfast.

Soon, Rose and Molly, Teddy and Victoire had appeared, and they were all eating and drinking gallons of tea, coffee and fruit juice, and tucking into the feast.

“Are Scorp and Andy not up yet?” Molly asked, around a mouthful of toast.

“They is already going,” Mitty said, reloading the toast rack. “Without any breakfast!”

“They missed out on a treat, then, Mitty, more fool them,” Teddy said, causing the elf to bob a happy little bow, before she waddled off.

“Your Dad not here?” Rose asked, once they were full.

“Well, he was going to see your Dad today, and Dinky’s owner,” Albus said.

“Did she say she was having a baby?” Molly asked in a conspiratorial whisper.

The girls had come in at the tail end of the story.

Albus nodded.

“I’ve never seen a baby house-elf. Do you think they’re cute?” Molly said.

“Cute? Are you out of your mind?” Fred guffawed.

“Hey, most babies are cute, it’s some evolutionary thing,” Rose said knowledgeably. She took after her mother.

“Yeah, right,” Fred said disbelievingly. “I bet Hagrid looked an absolute sweetie when he was in his cradle.”

“I don’t think he would have fitted in a cradle,” Albus sniggered.

“Well, I think he looks a sweetie now,” Rose said, “let alone when he was a baby.”

“I’ll tell him that next time we see him,” Albus chuckled. “Maybe he’ll ask you out.”

“Oh my god, do not get me even thinking about that,” Rose laughed.
“You could have cute little giant babies together,” Fred teased. “You’d have to use the bath for a cot.”

“Don’t even go there, I’ve got my legs crossed already,” Rose grimaced. “It can’t be physically possible, can it? With a giant?”

“It was Hagrid’s Mum who was a giant and not the other way round?” Molly asked.

“Ouch! Ouch! Stop talking about it!” Rose squealed.

Laughing, they made more tea. It was early afternoon before the visitors finally floo-ed out.

Albus headed into the sitting room, turned on the television, and watched Chelsea play Arsenal, before falling asleep in the same position his father had been the night before.

It was dark when he woke, the room lit by the changing pattern of lights emitted by the early evening Saturday night talent show. He watched for a minute as a dog ‘sang’ in accompaniment to its owner tap-dancing, wincing in sympathy with the judges. Some people really had no shame.

He reached into the slot in his jeans and withdrew his wand, pointing it at the lights as he stood up. Out in the corridor, it was dark too. He made his way down to the kitchen, flicking on lights as he went.

The kitchen was tidy, empty.

“Mitty?” he called.

The elf appeared at once.

“Is Dad in?”

The elf shook her head, and gave a great sniff.

Albus crouched down. “What’s happened? Wouldn’t Dinky’s owner let him come?” he asked gently.

“Mitty is not knowing,” Mitty’s eyes filled with tears. “Master is not returning yet.”

“Dad’s been out all day?” Albus queried, surprised.

The elf nodded.

“Mitty, I’m sure Dad intended to tell you as soon as he could. He must have been held up somewhere. He had lots to do today after all the help you gave us last night, didn’t he? Why don’t you just pop over to Dinky’s and see if he knows how Dad got on with Mr Whatsit.”

“Mr Whatsit?” the elf asked, wide-eyed.

“Dinky’s owner. Thomas Whatever-it-was.”

“Not, Thomas Whatever-it-was, Master Thomas Wilkes,” the elf corrected.

“That’s the chappie! Will it be alright for you to go there now?”
“No one will be knowing,” Mitty nodded, “just Dinky and me and Toaster.”

“Come back at once and let me know, will you?” Albus said, before the elf disappeared.

Mitty nodded and was gone with a pop!

Albus stood up, stretching his legs, and strolled over to the pantry. Soon, he was making himself a cheese sandwich. He took a can of cola from the cool cupboard. He was really glad that his Dad had incorporated so many of the good things of the Muggle world into their lives. There was nothing like cola in the Wizarding World.

Mitty popped back.

“How’d it go?” Albus asked, round the bite of cheese and pickle that he’d just taken.

“Dinky is saying Master Harry has not come,” the elf said miserably. “Dinky is thinking Master Harry Potter isn’t wanting another house elf, but Dinky is a good worker, he is, and - ”

“I’m sure he is, and I’m sure Dad hasn’t changed his mind,” Albus cut in quickly. “Is Dinky sure Dad hasn’t been there?”

“He is keeping his eyes and ears open all day,” Mitty nodded.

“You’re not to worry about it,” Albus said firmly. “Dad was going to see Ron too, and maybe he got caught up. I’ll just go and firecall. No worrying, alright?”

But Albus was beginning to worry himself. Dad knew how upset Mitty would get, and it wasn’t like him to leave anyone hanging when he’d made a promise.

“Albus! Hi,” Rose answered, when he put the floo call through. “Aren’t you watching the TV? That talent thing is on.”

“Yeah, I know, and it’s as crap as ever. Is your Dad there, Rose?”

“Sure, come through.”

Albus stepped out into the smart modern house where Rose’s family lived. It was very unlike most Wizarding homes, with clean lines and no nooks and crannies, and Albus was glad that he didn’t live there. Ron came into the room, beer in hand.

“Hi Albus. Whassup?”

“Dad’s not here?”

“No, why?”

“What time did he go?”

“We haven’t seen him today. We were only over at your place last night. Why?”

“Something’s up,” Albus said, worry suddenly bursting into life.

“Mione!” Ron called. “Turn that TV off, Rose,” he added.
“What is it?” Hermione asked, a pinny on and flour down the front.

Ron looked to Albus.

“I haven’t seen Dad all day –”

“Not gone off to Severus’ again, has he?” Hermione asked.

Albus hadn’t thought of that. He knew his Dad had been over there a couple of times in the evenings, as well as that weekend, but –

“He said he was coming to see you today, Ron. And Dinky’s owner. He hasn’t been to either.”

“Who’s Dinky?” Ron asked.

“The elf Albus’ house-elf wants to marry,” Hermione said, sitting down.

Everyone looked at her. “I talked to her this morning when I dropped the Hangover Potion over. She’s pregnant. She thought Harry was over at Dinky’s owner then. You mean, he never went? You checked?”

Albus nodded. “I fell asleep this afternoon, after watching the footie, and woke up half an hour ago or so. Mitty was all upset and I sent her over to check. He hasn’t been.”

“Maybe it went out of his mind?” Ron suggested.

“It wouldn’t, not something like that, and anyway, he was coming to see you too and he hasn’t. And it was important.”

“What’s happened?”

“We were talking to Mitty last night and she told us she’d let the three men in that killed Mum.”

“What?”

Albus nodded. “They told her they were reporters from the Prophet. She hadn’t seen them before, but she checked Mum’s diary, saw she had an interview and let them in.”

“And didn’t do anything to stop them killing her Mistress?” Hermione looked stunned.

“She left them in the house. Mum had instructed her that she was to go over to visit her brother when she had Malfoy round. You know, if they were upstairs,” Albus said, blushing.

Hermione patted his hand.

“She hadn’t realised anything,” Albus defended the elf. “She just made a passing comment about them. Dad said he’d ask you to bring a photo of the guy in St Mungo’s to see if she recognised him. Darien Poulter. He wouldn’t have not come to see you.”

“You’re right, something’s wrong,” Ron said, face grim. “Who saw him last, d’you know?”

“Well, we all pretty much saw him when we went to bed,” Rose said. She’d been sitting quietly up till that point. “I don’t know if Andy or Scorpius saw him this morning, they left before the rest of us got up.”

“What about James? Have you spoken to him?” Hermione asked.
Albus shook his head. “He had to work today, so I don’t suppose he would have seen Dad anyway.”

“He might have seen your Dad before work,” Ron suggested, “if they were both up early.”

Albus shook his head. “He went home last night. To his flat. But I’ll call him anyway, he needs to know.”

“There might be nothing to worry about,” Ron said, putting his hand on Albus’ shoulder. “I think we’d better call all the youngsters who stayed over, though, just in case anyone saw anything. Better still, get everyone together. Albus, go back to your place, and get James, Andy and Scorpius to come over. Who else stayed the night?”

“Fred and Molly and me,” Rose said. “And Teddy and Victoire.”

“Okay, we’ll call them, and join you in ten minutes. Alright?”

Albus nodded.

“Don’t worry about it too much,” Ron said again. “He’s a grown man. He might have nipped off to do all sorts of things. If he’s at home when you get back, just floo call. Did you leave a note about where you were?”

Albus shook his head.

“There you are, then,” Ron said. “Neither did he. It could be nothing.”

But none of them believed that.

They were all at Grimmauld Place fifteen minutes later, except for Teddy, who was working the night shift.

“But it doesn’t matter,” Victoire said, to Ron, “he was with me.”

“No, I mean in case he saw Harry in the night, or first thing,” Ron said.

“He didn’t,” Victoire said easily. “He was with me all the time.”

“Well, you can’t know if he went to the loo in the night – ”

Hermione coughed.

“What?” Ron turned to look at her.

“I think Victoire is telling you they shared Teddy’s room, yes?” Hermione asked her niece.

“Of course,” Victoire was unconcerned.

Ron hated the blush that crept up his cheeks. And feeling an idiot. It was obviously the French influence, being so easy talking about sex, he thought. He didn’t know how he’d feel when Rose started bringing men home. Were parents supposed to allow their children to sleep together? Even if it helped their magic? Which he wasn’t so convinced about now, although he wasn’t complaining about things being back on track with Hermione, either. Of course, they’d done it before they were married, but there was a lot of sneaking about up all the winding stairs in the
Burrow. Added to the excitement, really, that sense of naughtiness and fear of being caught. There was no way Rose could sneak anyone into her room at home, with the layout of the house. He’d have to know, and consent. He hadn’t really thought about Harry facing such decisions before he’d had to. Of course, Teddy was much older, and Harry had boys first. But then, as Teddy was much older, had he been having girls to stay over for years? At Harry’s?

Damn, he’d have to talk to Harry about that later.

“Right,” Ron said. “Okay, well, we’ll get hold of him later if we need to. Let’s just get some facts. It could be that there’s nothing wrong at all, but let’s just go over who last saw Harry. Now, Albus said you all saw him when you went up to bed?”

“He showed us our rooms,” Molly agreed. “I didn’t see him after that.”

“Did anyone see him after that?” Ron asked. “Either last night or this morning?”

Scorpius and Andy looked at each other.

“We did,” Scorpius said. Then thought. “Actually, did you see him, Andy? Really see him?”

“I heard him. But I had my back to the door,” he agreed.

“Did he say anything important?” Albus asked. “Where he was going? Anything?”

“No, nothing like that,” Scorpius said, his cheeks turning pink.

Ron looked at him. “Tell us exactly what he said, as best you remember it. It might be more important than you know.”

“It wasn’t,” Scorpius said.

“Look, I know this seems silly, but honestly, little things might matter. And you’re wasting time here. It doesn’t matter if you don’t remember the exact words –”

“He said,” Scorpius said tightly, “‘Shit! Sorry! Wrong door!’”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Er, what?” Ron said. “Can you give us some context? What door was he talking about?”

“Oh Merlin,” Albus said, “he used the wrong door? From the bathroom?”

“What? No, he wasn’t in the bathroom.”

“He came in from the corridor?” Albus’ eyebrows drew together.

Andy nodded.

“Into where?” Ron asked. “Why was it the wrong door?”

“Dad knew we were having lots of people to stay, so he moved into Mum’s room last night,” Albus said. “And put Scorpius and Andy into his room.”

“You mean we turfed him out of his bed?” Andy said in embarrassment. “And then -”

“He said he was moving back in,” Scorpius interrupted.
“Yeah, but he’s slept in the other room for years,” James said. “I can see why he’d get the wrong door. But why was he in the corridor?”

“I think he might have just had a shower,” Molly offered tentatively.

They all looked at her.

“There was a T-shirt and boxers on the floor in the bathroom, and a wet towel,” she said, embarrassed.

“Why would he shower down there?” Albus wondered. “He had his own bathroom.”

“Was the T-shirt white?” Scorpius asked.

“Yes,” Molly nodded.

“That’s what he was wearing,” Scorpius confirmed, “so he hadn’t had a shower when he came in. His hair wasn’t wet either,” he added, thinking about it.

“What time was this?” Ron asked.

Scorpius and Andy looked at each other. “Around eight?” Andy said, and Scorpius nodded.

“And you didn’t see him again?”

“No, and we looked around for him,” Andy said.

Ron’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Scorpius’ hands clenched together. “He caught us in an – embarrassing – moment. We wanted to apologise.”

“Embarrassing?”

Hermione kicked him under the table.

“Oh!” Ron’s flush returned full force. “Right. Okay.”

James mumbled something under his breath.

“What was that?” Ron was on him like a snake.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing is nothing, James. What did you say?” Ron demanded.

“It was nothing,” James said mulishly.

“He said, ‘It serves him right,’” Molly, who was sitting next to James, repeated. “What does that mean?”

James sighed. “Thanks for that, Molly. I’ll remember that little favour.” He turned back to Ron. “Look, Dad and I had an argument last night –”

“You did? Is that why you slammed out of the house?” Albus stared at his brother.

“I didn’t slam out of the house,” James snarled.
“Suit yourself,” Albus shrugged disbelievingly. “What did you and Dad argue about? Maybe it’s important, James,” he urged, when he could see his brother’s reluctance. “What served him right? Not Mum dying?”

“Of course not Mum dying!” James snapped. “Where the hell did that come from? Look, I argued with him about you putting those two into the same room. You were going to put them into the green room. Dad shouted at me. I – I might have said something about Mum…. He was scary, his magic started swirling around him. So if he walked in on them and had a shock, it served him bloody well right. Alright?”

“Merlin’s knickers, you must have had a bad day at work to be in such a foul mood,” Albus said angrily. “Here I am worried sick about Dad and you –”

“You think I’m not worried?” James screeched. “I can’t believe you didn’t call me earlier!”

“I didn’t realise earlier, twat!”

“Your father’s magic rose?” Hermione interrupted. “You could feel it?”

James turned to her, glad of the chance to get himself under control. “Yes.”

“And have you felt it before?”

He shook his head.

“Nothing broke, though, right?” Ron said.

They all turned to stare at him.

“Forget I said that,” Ron said. “Right, let’s just get this timeline straight. You were all here last evening, and after we went, Harry and Albus had a conversation with Mitty, yes?”

Albus nodded.

“What about?” James interrupted.

“Mitty let in the murderers. And she’s having a sprog.”

The revelation caused a riot around the table.

“We’ll come back to that,” Ron said quickly. “Let’s just get this timeline. Every minute we’re wasting is a minute where we don’t know what’s happening to Harry,” he added, which shut everyone up very effectively. “What time, Albus?”

Between about 12.30 and 1.30, I’d say.”

“I went up to see Dad at about 2.15,” James volunteered, finally realising the seriousness of the situation. “I suppose we argued for five, ten minutes. Something like that. Dad shouted after me to walk home; told me I needed to clear my head. I think he probably wanted to make sure I didn’t floo or apparate,” he added, as realisation dawned.

“Sensible. Anyone see him after that? Before eight when the boys saw him?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“So why did he open the door from the corridor? Why was he out there?” Ron mused.
“Oh!” Hermione said suddenly. “I picked up a blanket and mug and cake plate from the sitting room this morning. Do you think maybe he couldn’t sleep in Ginny’s room and went down for a snack and a kip on the sofa?”

“There was a smear on his T-shirt,” Scorpius said. “Could have been chocolate cake.”

“Well, that all makes sense,” Ron said, with some relief. “He’d only had a few hours sleep; no wonder he opened his own door rather than the other room. So now we need to know what happened after eight. No, after he’d showered. He was supposed to come and see me and Mitty’s boyfriend’s owner, neither of which he did. Did he tell anyone else of any other plans?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“And you say you looked everywhere for him?” He turned back to Scorpius and Andy. “What rooms did you look in? And what time did you go?”

“We looked in the downstairs rooms – parlour, sitting room, library, then we went down to the kitchen. The house elf was there, and she said Harry was out, so we left.”

“I saw her in the kitchen around ten,” Hermione said. “She said Harry was seeing her fiance’s owner. She’d got engaged that morning, she said.”

“Dad told her to go and tell Dinky this morning,” Albus confirmed, “and he told her he’d try and sort out for Dinky to come and live with us. That was why he was going to see Thomas Wilkes.”

“But he never got there,” Ron said. He paused. “And Mitty was out of the house this morning. We need to ask her what time she went. She was back cooking breakfast by – what time would you say, boys?”

“Hold on,” Andy said, sitting forward, an urgent look on his face. “If the elf wasn’t here, who answered the doorbell?”

“What doorbell?” Scorpius looked at his lover.

“The doorbell rang while you were in the shower.” He looked around. “Didn’t anyone else hear it?”

“I was out to the world,” Rose said.

“Me too,” Molly said. “Rose had to bully me out of bed at half eleven.”

“I didn’t hear anything,” Fred said. “Sorry.”

“You can’t hear the doorbell on the top floor,” Albus explained. “Mum rigged it. There was a spell of Muggles playing pranks by ringing it late at night when we were kids, and it used to wake us up. There’s no way you can get down fast enough anyway, so we never bothered to change it. Hardly anyone comes to the door.”

“Right, I’m just going to check.”

Everyone began to stand up.

“No, wait here,” Ron ordered. “I need to check for spells.”

Five minutes later he returned.
“Apparition spells, a whole cluster. And this.” He dropped a sock onto the table. “I think Harry was leaving us a message.”

There was a moment of silent shock.

“Oh my god, he’s been taken! And it’s been all day,” Rose had her hands over her face.

“Ministry or Kingsley?” Hermione said to Ron.

He hesitated a moment. “Kingsley.”

“That’s what I thought,” she nodded.

She swung round. “Albus, James, what’s Kingsley’s floo address?”

The brothers looked at each other.

“We don’t know,” they said, realising the fact.

“You could owl,” Fred suggested.

“Takes too long and I think he’s got them blocked,” Ron said. He looked at Hermione. “We ought to get Snape too. You know what I’m thinking?”

“There before you, love. You do Shacklebolt, I’ll do Snape. That ought to guarantee they’ll both get the message, wherever they are.”

Hermione pulled out her wand. Her brain was frantic with worry. It threw her back to the old days, to have to perform when fear was eating at her. She shut her eyes, breathed deeply, and thought of the previous night. “Expecto Patronum!”

An otter leapt from her wand. Quickly, she gave it instructions and sent it on its way. Next to her, a misty Jack Russell terrier gave a yip! before sitting obediently at Ron’s feet, tongue lolling from its mouth, as Ron gave it its orders. In a moment, it had bounded across the room and gone.

Ron and Hermione looked up to see all the children staring at them in amazement.

“What the hell were they?” Fred asked.

“*Patronus* messengers,” Hermione said.

“Nothing can stop them, and they’re fast,” Ron said.

“I’ve never seen anything like them before,” Rose looked excited.

“They’re difficult,” Ron said. “Even when you’ve got the knack.”

“When did you learn to do that? Did they teach you that at Hogwarts in your day?” Scorpius asked.

Hermione laughed. “Harry taught us.”

“Dad did?” James queried.

“Dumbledore’s Army,” Ron said. “Taught a load of us.”

“But – you were kids then, weren’t you?” Albus frowned.
“Fifteen. Harry was fifteen.” He turned to Hermione. “He learnt that spell when he was thirteen. Can you believe it? I’ve never really thought how amazing that was! We all just expected him to be able to do anything, because he was Harry Potter. And he usually bloody did.”

“I thought a *Patronus* charm was for getting rid of Dementors,” Andy said.

“It is,” Hermione agreed. “Lethifolds too, but they’re brilliant for carrying messages. The Order of the Phoenix used them.”

They heard the flare of the floo in the parlour.

The next moment, Snape and Shacklebolt strode in.

“You called?”

“It’s Harry,” Ron said. “He’s been taken.”
Payback

Harry stumbled as they landed, knocking into the Auror holding his arm, who stepped on Harry’s foot as he righted them both.

“Oh! Shit!” Harry yelped.

“Mind your tongue,” snapped the man, his grip on Harry’s bicep tightening painfully.

Harry glanced down at his naked foot, expecting to see blood. Fortunately there was none, but he sure as hell would have a whopper of a bruise there.

He shivered. It was cold. Had he ever been less prepared for anything? He had no socks or shoes, no robes. No –

“Wand,” snapped the Auror, holding his hand out.

“I haven’t got it,” Harry said, instantly relieved that he’d been stupid enough not to have it on him when he’d answered the door.

“What idiot answers the door without a wand?” scoffed one of the others, reflecting his thoughts.

“One who’s disturbed in the shower and is half-dressed?” Harry said sarcastically.

“Don’t you take that tone with me,” the Auror responded.

“Search him,” Felton said. He’d let Harry’s arm go the minute they’d arrived, and had been having a word with the officer on duty at the desk.

“Where the bloody hell d’you think I’m hiding my wand?” Harry argued. “Hey! You bastards!”

One of the Aurors had flicked a spell at him, and Harry found himself butt-naked.

The Aurors walked round him, as if he was some exhibit in a gallery.

“For fuck’s sake!” Harry snapped.

Auror Franklin was standing directly in front of him, her gaze tracking slowly down his body.

He stuck his hands over his bits, mortified.

“Alright, alright, you’ve seen I haven’t got it! Give me my damn clothes back!”

“Search him, Hencliffe,” Felton said.

The Auror who had broken the news of his wife’s death to him pulled him over to the counter. Harry stood with his back to it, glaring into faces which stared disdainfully back at him. How had he fallen into this hell?

The duty officer was handing something to Hencliffe. Harry turned his head to see the man pulling on thin gloves. His heart literally leapt in his chest, and his balls scurried up into his guts.

“What the – ”

“Open your mouth,” the Auror said emotionlessly, grabbing hold of his chin and yanking it down.
Harry could not believe it.

His jaw was released.

“Stand with your legs apart and arms stretched out.”

Harry did so, feeling like the sketch by Da Vinci of the man in a circle. He’d got a circle of his own, with the duty officer and counter behind and the Aurors in front. Well, let them look at his tackle! He had nothing to be ashamed of.

Bastards.

Out of the corner of his eye he was aware of the officer handing something to Hencliffe.

“Name?” the officer asked him.

Harry half-turned round to answer, not wanting to put his back to the horde. “Potter. Harry Potter,” he said.

As if they didn’t know that.

The man was filling out a long curlng form.

“Address?” Harry could hear a slight tremor in the man’s voice.

“12, Grimmauld Place, London. Do I have to be fucking naked to answer these questions?”

He felt a shove on his back. His hands were slapped onto the counter; a leg kicked his ankles apart. A hand gripped his shoulder.

“You have to be naked to be searched, prisoner,” Hencliffe snarled in his ear, and the next moment, Harry felt his arse invaded.

“Fucking hell!” he yelled. “Get your fucking – what the – you think I keep my wand up my fucking arse?” Tears sprang into his eyes.

The Auror had removed his finger. Harry whipped round so that his back was to the counter. His legs were shaking. He could feel his magic rising in a tide. He knew instantly he needed to control it, to hide it.

Hencliffe peeled off the thin glove with obvious distaste, letting everyone see the hint of faecal matter smeared into the lube on it. Harry wished the ground would open up and swallow him.

“What else did you expect to find up my arse?” he went on the offensive. “You think I shit gold and diamonds?”

One of the younger Aurors sniggered. Felton’s stare cut off the noise instantly. The young man straightened, standing firmly to attention, eyes ahead.

“Date of birth?” the duty officer said. Harry could hear him trying to keep his tone flat.


“Marital status?”

Harry’s jaw dropped.
The duty officer looked up, his expression impatient. Realisation dawned. “I’ll put down widower,” he said, hastily.

It was like a bizarre nightmare.

Forty minutes later he found himself in a cell, wearing a rough grey prisoner’s robe.

“Fenton, I want to see my solicitor, Hermione Weasley,” he demanded of the Head Auror. Requests to send a message to his family had been ignored completely.

“You will address me as Sir, Prisoner 987429,” Fenton said. He slammed the door shut, and watched as three Aurors locked it and cast extra wards. Then he raised his head to meet Harry’s furious gaze. “I wouldn’t think about making any more complaints, if I were you,” he said coldly, and strode away.

Harry sank down onto the bed. The room was identical to the one he’d seen Malfoy in, containing a narrow iron-framed bed with a thin mattress and a thinner blanket, a table and chair, fixed to the floor, and a toilet and basin in the corner. Identical, except that everything was open to view through the railings that made up one wall.

His legs felt shaky and his bowels felt funny. He’d never had a finger up his arse and he wondered if it normally made you feel like you needed the loo, or whether that was the remnants of the lube which felt all slick and squicky as he moved. More likely fear, he thought with self mockery.

His tummy rumbled. He didn’t hold out much hope for being given a nice hearty breakfast.

Well, he had gone without food for extended periods at the Dursleys, where his prison had been smaller and without facilities at all.

He could endure.

Twenty four hours later, he found his confidence shaken. Before, when he’d been a boy locked away under the stairs, he’d had no hope, no expectation of anyone releasing him, or of kindness from the Dursleys.

This time, he’d found himself counting out the time: how long it would be before anyone would realise he’d gone, who would realise first, what they might do to find him. His brain played out a dozen different scenarios.

He wished he hadn’t shouted at James.

He couldn’t regret what he’d said to him, but he shouldn’t have let it escalate into a shouting match. And he felt such a failure that it had even been an issue.

What if he was never found, and the last thing James had of him was a bloody argument?

He couldn’t let himself think that.

With nothing else to do, and having gone over timescales again and again, his mind wandered to the events just before he left. He’d been locking them away, trying not to think about what had happened.

That he’d had Scorpius Malfoy’s image in his head when he’d come.
Maybe it was the fact that he’d argued with James about them, and then he’d worried about it before sleeping that had made that happen. That would be logical, wouldn’t it?

But he couldn’t deny that the sight of the two men had been stunning. Shocking, yes. But...*scorching!* Which was awful, because he was twice their age. They went to school with his children! He ought to be disgusted with himself. He *was* disgusted with himself, and yet...the gossip magazines always featured the hottest young things, didn’t they? Beautiful young witches and wizards. It was natural to admire beauty, wasn’t it? And Scorpius Malfoy had a beautiful body, there was no denying that. How could such mutual delight and lithe bodies be anything but a pleasure to look at? Who could fail to enjoy having their cock sucked, whoever was doing it? Harry hadn’t experienced it for years, but he certainly hadn’t forgotten how brilliant it was.

Harry shifted on the bed. The movement made him aware of his arse: it was as if he could still feel that bastard’s finger up it. It had hurt like fucking buggery. He snorted to himself. Bloody appropriate choice of words! But – did Scorpius and Andy do that? Did Snape and Kingsley? And a cock was a mile bigger than a finger. He couldn’t imagine how anyone could enjoy it.

He’d stick with being straight, thank you very much.

When no-one had come by lunch-time on the second day, his spirits plummeted, and he began revising his thoughts. The Aurors would have told his family that he’d been taken into custody, wouldn’t they? That he’d been charged with murdering Ginny? They’d be so shocked, so hurt. He was furious. Please heaven, it had been kept out of the papers.

By late afternoon, he began to worry.

They wouldn’t believe the charges, would they?

He was sitting on the toilet the next morning, exceptionally glad for the coverage provided by the robe, when he heard footsteps clumping along the corridor, and the jingle of keys. In a split-second decision on whether to be seen wiping his arse or covered sitting on the loo, he remained where he was.

A minute later, he was staring into the face of the warder he’d complained about, the one who’d been on duty and offered him some ‘time alone’ with Malfoy.

The man he’d punched.

Shit.

“Sitting pretty, are we, Prisoner?” the man sneered.

Harry said nothing.

“You will stand to attention, Prisoner!” he barked.

Harry had a moment of deliberation. Calmly, he wiped his arse, stood up, washed his hands and flushed the loo, then walked over to stand in front of the furious-looking warder.

“Oh, we’ll wipe that smile off your face,” the man said angrily.
“I don’t believe I was smiling,” Harry retorted, “having very little to smile about, given that I’m here despite my innocence, and denied access to my solicitor.”

“Oh, Mr High and Bloody Mighty! Think you’re so different to everyone else, don’t you? You need taking down a peg or two, that’s what you need.”

“I need to see my solicitor, is what I need and what I am being deprived of, despite my legal rights – ”

“Legal rights?” the man chuckled. “No-one down in this section has legal rights. Dangerous criminals is what we house down here. Maximum security. Nobody bloody knows you’re here, so don’t even think of making demands on me, matey. Down here, you do what I say, when I say it, understand?”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Think you’re funny do you?” the man snarled. “Oh, you’ll learn. You’ll learn soon enough. When I arrive, you stand to attention. If you’ve shit hanging out your arse, I don’t bloody care. You stand to attention, right here. You shut up, and you stand up. Is that clear?”

“Perfectly,” Harry said.

“Lunch is suspended for your cheek,” the man said, and stormed away.

Harry stared after the horrid little man.

To be truthful, given the state he’d seen Malfoy in, he was surprised that he hadn’t been subjected to the sort of beatings Malfoy had suffered, but there had been no Aurors invading his cell. There didn’t appear to be any other prisoners within sight or earshot. It had been totally quiet.

It hadn’t occurred to him that the solitude was supposed to be unsettling him.

Now, he could not believe that being deprived of lunch was going to be the limit of his punishment.

Harry felt a lot better that the warder had let slip that no-one knew where he was. At least it gave him hope that his family and friends hadn’t abandoned him because they believed him guilty, and he had confidence that they would find him.

In the night, Harry woke, sweating. His stomach was wracked with appalling cramps.

He spent the next several hours on the toilet, but with his body vomiting and evacuating at the same time, the area around the lavatory was disgusting. In the early stages, when he’d had time between the cramps, he’d banged on the bars, calling for a bucket.

No one came.

He’d never felt so ill in his life.

At breakfast time, the warder appeared. Harry was sitting on the toilet, slumped and retching.

“I thought I told you to stand to attention when I came,” the warder barked.
Harry raised his head disbelievingly.

The man stared at him.

Slowly, Harry rose to his feet. He staggered over to the bars.

“Fucking hell, you stink,” the warder held his nose.

“I’ve run out of toilet paper, and I need a bucket,” Harry said.

“You’ve had your week’s ration of paper, and we don’t allow excess furniture,” the warder smiled.

“For fuck’s sake, I’ve got a tummy bug,” Harry yelled, doubling over as the cramps hit again. He turned and dashed to the loo.

“I’ll allow you a clean up.”

“Thanks,” Harry bit out, his head propped with one hand as the watery stools splashed from his body into the bowl.

He was almost blasted from the toilet as he was hit with the force of a high-powered hose. The blasting water churned up the vomit lying puddled on the floor, splashing it up his robes and around the cell. He fell off the toilet as the freezing spray hit him square in the chest.

It went on interminably.

Harry lay on the floor, unable to do anything. His body hadn’t stopped shitting.

He fell asleep there.

There was no lunch, and he couldn’t have eaten it anyway.

He slept through the afternoon, lying on the floor. The sound of the door clanking woke him. It was a different warder, who just shoved a plate of food in and scurried away.

Harry couldn’t eat, but he knew he needed to drink. Carefully, he knelt on all fours and staggered over to the sink. The tin mug had been blasted across the room. He fetched it. His body felt absolutely appalling. He couldn’t believe that 24 hours of sickness could be so draining. No water came from the tap.

He made his way across to the bars, and started banging the cup on them.

No-one came.

By morning, Harry was seriously thirsty, and shivering. Everything in the room had been soaked by the blasting water, including his clothes and the bed. But at least his stomach cramps had died down.

When his breakfast was pushed through the bars, he told the night-man that there was no water. The man shrugged, but brought him a bottle. Harry thanked him.

He ate the cold porridge, and drank half the water.

When the warder showed up, Harry came and stood at the railings.

“Your manners are improving, I see. I thought they would.”
“There’s no water in the tap,” Harry said.

The warder glanced down. “You’ve been given bottled water: what’s the problem?”

Harry glared.

“Ah, you need a wash. I thought you still stank.”

Two minutes later, Harry was hosed again.

That afternoon, the cramps started again.

By the evening, lying in faeces and vomit, Harry appreciated that the warder had found a very effective way to retaliate. There’d be no broken bones, but his dignity had been stripped from him, and he was in agony.

Many hours later, Harry realised, through the blur that his thoughts had become, that perhaps the warder’s intention was not just to humiliate but to actually kill him. He was pretty sure that although the poison had started in the food, it was now in the water. Harry would dehydrate to death if he didn’t drink, and dehydrate to death if he did. He was so cold that his teeth clacked. His robes were covered in vomit and shit. The warder had caught Harry dipping his mug into the toilet bowl to try and get water untainted with poison: consequently the water to the cistern had been cut off as well. Harry was surrounded by the stink and stick of his own body waste. Sucking on his robe eased the dryness of his mouth a little, but the dawning realisation came that he would soon be dead, and it was absurd to think that somewhere above him, ordinary people were wandering about in the Ministry. Somewhere up above, Ron worked. Was he out somewhere else looking for Harry? Had his own department deceived him?

What he needed, he thought, his mind wandering, was one of Snape’s bezoars.

Harry smiled, remembering Snape’s first ever lecture.

He remembered saving Ron with a bezoar.

Why hadn’t he always kept one in his pocket?

He stretched out his arm along the stone floor. His body was spasming with the cold. He thought of Snape, and the warm Spanish sunlight. He tried closing his eyes, and remembering what it felt like on his skin, whilst he was toasty and snug in the hammock. Kingsley was bending over Snape, and they were kissing. He smiled, glad that they had found such happiness. He wished Snape knew where he was, and was bringing him a bezoar and some Spanish sun.

He looked along the line of his hand, and with his mind filled with the thought, pushed. The heavy anti-magic wards felt like a tight corset around him, pushing in as he pushed out, but in the palm of his hand, he felt the magic forming. He looked at it, his mind dizzy and vague, and told himself that he needed that bezoar, and he needed Snape.

He wasn’t sure if it was a trick of the light. It was so cold that his breath was forming little puffs of smoke. But there, in his hand, the smoke looked like a miniature stag. He smiled at it, and told it to go and fetch Snape, and a bezoar, and sunshine.
“He’s a prime suspect,” Snape said.

“What the fuck? Dad?” Albus leapt to his feet.

“What the bloody hell are you saying?” James too was standing, fists clenched, the two boys a united front.

“Please,” Kingsley said, in his calming tones. “Severus is not saying your father killed your mother – ”

“Good, because I’ll knock his teeth out – ” James interrupted.

“Do stop this posturing,” Snape said cuttingly, “and face facts.”

“He’s right,” Hermione put in.

“Mione!” James said, in the voice of one betrayed.

“No one here thinks Harry did any such thing,” Hermione said gently, “but the fact is, in by far the majority of cases, when a woman has been killed, her husband is the murderer. With Malfoy – Draco - cleared, he’s the obvious suspect.”

“But Dad wouldn’t kill Mum! He wouldn’t hurt a fly!”

“I’m sorry to shake you out of your cosy world view, but your father has a record of violence – ” Snape started.

“What?”

“Albus,” Ron said patiently, “he killed Voldemort.”

“But that’s different!”

“It is, but it shows him capable of it,” Hermione sighed.

“Not to mention all the others.” Ron rubbed the back of his neck.

“What others?” Scorpius asked.

Hermione and Ron glanced at each other. Hermione took over. “Well, lots of people thought Harry was responsible for the death of a boy called Cedric Diggory. It was Voldemort of course, but at the time no-one believed him. If they really are holding Harry, they’ll bring it up. And then there was what happened with Professor Quirrell, and the troll, and Vincent Crabbe died whilst he was there – well, so were we, but anything and everything will be used against him if they want to argue that he’s capable of murder. And it all says he is. Well, he is. He had to be,” Hermione finished.

“Uncle Harry?” Molly said, sounding strangled.

“We all did things back then. Your grandmother killed Bellatrix Lestrange,” Ron said sharply. “It was war.”
“Grandma?” Fred gasped.

“For Merlin’s sake, they must teach you bloody history at school!”

“No one mentioned Grandma killing anyone!”

“Well, they should have,” Shacklebolt said. “Molly Weasley took out one of the most dangerous and sadistic Death Eaters single-handed, in a duel in front of dozens of people. She was magnificent. You do know she was awarded the Order of Merlin?”

It was obvious they didn’t know.

Scorpius sat there, wishing he could shrink into the background. He knew the name of Bellatrix Lestrange, of course. She had been his grandmother’s sister. As if it wasn’t bad enough that his grandfather had been Voldemort’s right hand man. His father had only mentioned her once though, when Scorpius had been about ten and looking at the family tree, and said it was a nice name. His father had said grimly, “She was completely mad. Mad, sadistic and powerful. If I ever get like that, Scorpius, kill me at once. I can’t hear her name without shuddering.”

Scorpius wondered once again if he should be there. This morning, he’d thought they’d have to stop coming because they’d embarrassed Mr Potter, abused his hospitality. James obviously didn’t want him there. Now, it was a much bigger issue. His father’s freedom had led to Mr Potter’s loss of it. If Harry hadn’t got his father set free, this would never have happened. Not that his father didn’t deserve to be free, but what else could James and Albus be thinking?

He shifted on his seat.

Shacklebolt turned to look at him. “Was there something you wanted to say, Scorpius?”

“I – I wondered if people might feel better if I wasn’t here,” he said. He was aware of James turning so that Scorpius couldn’t see his face, though Albus, at least, was looking at him with puzzlement. As was Kingsley. “If Mr Potter hadn’t got my father his freedom, he wouldn’t be in this position,” he explained.

There was a hubbub of outcry.

“You can’t think that!”

“Of course we want you here!”

“Dad got your father out because it was the right thing to do,” Albus said. “Your father was innocent. That’s all there is to it. Don’t be such a dick.”

Scorpius snorted. He wished he’d known Albus better in school: the guy was funny, no nonsense. Kind.

“Ron?” Hermione said.

“What?” Ron flashed a quick look at Scorpius, and away again. “Oh, nothing.”

“Spit it out, Mr Weasley,” Snape sighed. “We’ll waste time if you pussy-foot around. I’m sure Scorpius can bear whatever insult you’re thinking of throwing,” he looked across at the boy.

The mocking words bolstered Scorpius. Which was what Severus had intended, he had no doubt.

“I was just wondering if Malfoy – Draco,” he looked across at Scorpius, “could have done some
sort of double bluff. But then I discounted it.”

“Yes, the thought had occurred to me too,” Snape agreed.

Ron looked as if he’d been given a pat on the back rather than an anticipated put-down.

“Fleetingly,” Snape qualified. “I have the utmost confidence in my invention. What we saw as a result of the Veritaserox investigation was undoubtedly real.”

“And my father loved her,” Scorpius put in. “And he’s an honourable man.”

Ron looked away, shoving his hands into his pockets.

Scorpius stood up. “Look, I know you and Dad have history. But my father was willing to die – and willing to leave me, to honour a promise to honour your sister – ” He found his voice escalating, and bit his words off, furious with himself. He’d never meant to let anyone know how much it had hurt that his father had been willing to abandon him, knowing himself to be innocent.

Andy stood up beside him. Scorpius started pushing his way through to the door.

Albus blocked his path. “We know your Dad’s honourable,” he said. “He wrote to our Dad, after the Veritaserox. To tell him that he’d keep his promise. The only reason he found that difficult,” he went on, “was you. He begged Dad to keep his promise to look after you when he was gone. Which meant when Dad had visited him in prison, what had mattered to him was you, getting Dad to make that promise to care for you. Don’t think it was easy for him to even think of leaving you, Scorp.”

Scorpius swallowed. “I can look after myself,” he said, evading the real issue.

“Your Dad knew that,” Hermione said. “He said it in the letter.”

“You’ve all read Dad’s letter?” Scorpius said disbelievingly.

“He showed it to James and Lily and me. Kingsley, Severus, Ron and Hermione were there, because it was about the Veritaserox and what to do. Dad wanted us to know why the evidence had to be shown, even though – well, people say things about Mum,” he said bluntly.

“You – he – ”

“We all agreed to it,” James said, joining in at last. He looked to Ron. “Look, Ron’s an Auror; it’s his job to be suspicious. Don’t give him shit about that: we’ve got to question everything. Now either bugger off, or sit down and get over your little hissy fit.”

There was a tense silence in the room at James’ rudeness.

“As if bowing to the pressure of it, he snapped, “Can we get on? I’m worried sick about Dad, and we’re wasting time.”

It wasn’t an apology, but it was an excuse, at least.

Kingsley took up the reins. “We do need to get a move on, but we don’t want to miss anything. So, let’s sum up: what have we got so far?”

“Right,” Ron said, as if Kingsley was his commanding officer and he was a junior reporting. “Firstly, Harry hasn’t been seen since around eight this morning. It looks like he’s been abducted. But we can’t be 100% sure that he hasn’t gone somewhere of his own will. Yes, yes, I know,” he
said, seeing the protests “there’s the ring on the door, the apparition evidence and the sock. I’m 90% sure that he’s been taken. But if we report him as a missing person when he’s gone off somewhere on a bit of an investigation on his own we’ll look right twats, not to mention, Harry’ll likely go bananas at us himself. And the fact is, they won’t do anything about a missing adult for twenty four hours, at least. Not unless there’s a history of suicidal intentions, which, unless anyone can tell me otherwise, has never entered Harry’s head.” He looked around, but no-one disputed that. “I think, that if we haven’t heard from him by the morning, then we report him missing. But there’s lots we can consider in the meantime. Firstly, if he has been abducted, who’s done it? If he’d been arrested, as Prof – Master Snape is suggesting, we would’ve heard. Every suspect has the right to contact their lawyer: he would have got a message straight through to Hermione. And it would have been all over the radio and the evening editions. “

“And Dad would have been in touch,” Scorpius interrupted.

“Exactly. As everyone knows, work hasn’t been letting me get involved, but I’ve had my ear to the ground, and I haven’t seen any indication that Harry was being considered as a suspect.” Ron paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. “That, actually, might be worrying, because, as Master Snape said, he should have been.” He rubbed his hands over his face. “Anyway, I’ll go into work in a minute and check that out. If he hasn’t been arrested, then he’s been taken. So who would want to do that? It’s a very, very long shot, but it may be nothing to do with Ginny’s death, or Ginny’s death might just have catapulted him into the public eye again and stirred up old hatreds. I’ll get my team to check out every bloody ex-Death Eater, just in case. But if it’s this new group – we’re looking to you for leads, Kingsley.”

“I know this might sound silly,” Andy said, in the voice of one expecting to be smacked down.

“Nothing is silly,” Shacklebolt said.

Snape humphed beside him.

Hermione snorted, hearing it.

Shacklebolt deliberately ignored them. “Any thoughts are always good,” he encouraged.

“I wondered whether someone might have kidnapped him. For a ransom.”

“Why would they do that now?” Victoire asked.

“I – I don’t mean to be rude,” he said, looking at the Potter men, “but your Mum must have earnt a lot as a quidditch professional, mustn’t she? I mean, I don’t know anything about your family finances, but - well, he must be rich now, mustn’t he?”

“I don’t think Mum’s death would have made much difference to things,” James said carefully. “If a ransom was the reason, anyone could have kidnapped us as kids. It would have been a damn sight easier.”

“Not with the security spells your Dad put all over you,” Ron said.


“Location-monitoring spells, anti-apparition spells – you name it.”

“I don’t remember any of that!”

“No, well, you wouldn’t. Your parents are -were - bugger it, you know what I mean,” Ron said.
“They were both amazing spell-casters. Just because your Mum played quidditch, didn’t mean she didn’t have other talents, you know,” he said, seeing James’ mouth opening. “You should have seen her in the DA! Anyway, the spells were just until you went to Hogwarts, and you’d got your own wand.”

“Don’t all kids have that?” Fred asked. “I remember having to argue with Dad to have mine lifted.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Yeah, well, it was George got us all to do them,” Ron said. “They aren’t common, actually. It’s just, some of the Death Eaters were coming out of Azkaban, so there was that threat, and then – well, your Dad’s business had been very profitable. George did worry about you being kidnapped, after he’d watched some Muggle film.”

“Blimey,” Albus pulled a face. “Talk about learning something new every day.”


“You see some merit in it?” Snape asked, surprised.

“No,” Hermione shook her head.

Snape waited for her to explain.

“It’s just I’m trying to get a handle on the bigger picture,” Hermione continued. “What would be the advantage to anyone of killing Ginny? Of setting up Draco? Of kidnapping Harry? They’ve got to be linked. But I can’t see it,” she said in frustration. “And Harry’s somewhere and I’m getting more and more worried.” Her eyes darted to the boys. “I’m sorry, I didn’t meant to say that.”

Shacklebolt stood up. “I think we’ve done almost everything we can here. We’ll report him missing in the morning if we don’t turn anything up. In the meantime, we can do more than the MLE anyway. I’ll see what I can find out, you do the same, Ron. Boys, I suggest you check with anyone you know, anyone you can think off who Harry might have gone to visit. I know you won’t want to worry her, but you need to speak to Lily. And check with the other members of the group. Scorpius, can you contact your father? He must have lots of informants: see if he can dig anything up.”

“What if he puts it in The Prophet?” Molly asked.

“Ask him not to for the moment, please,” Kingsley looked to Scorpius.

“I will.”

“Isn’t his ownership of The Prophet going to be a conflict of interest?” Victoire asked.

“The media is a valuable tool,” Snape said. “We can use it or be abused by it. Draco owning it can only be in our favour in the long term.”

“What can I do?” Hermione asked.

Kingsley looked around the room. “Things are escalating. These youngsters are going to need defences.”

There was a sudden hush in the room.

“They need teaching. The Patronus charm for starters, for communicating. Draw up a list of what
you think they need to know. We’ll need to work on this immediately.” He looked around at everyone. “There’s something big brewing. I know it’s scary, but try not to be too worried. We meet tomorrow, here, 7pm. If anyone has any urgent information in the meantime, contact Hermione.” He looked to the Potter brothers, who both looked annoyed. “James, I know you’re Head of the Potter family in your father’s absence, and it should be you, but you need to learn the Patronus charm first.”

James opened his mouth to protest.

“Your father’s life may depend on it,” Shacklebolt said seriously.

There was no answer to that.

The younger ones had all left.

Hermione was asking the boys if they’d like her to stay the night, when Kingsley came over.

“Can I interrupt? I’ve got a couple more things we ought to do, if that’s OK?”

“Of course,” Hermione said, at the same time as Albus said, “Sure.”

“We need to search the house. Just to be absolutely positive Harry hasn’t left any clues. If we all walk around together, you’ll know if anything is unexpected, out of place. And if you’ll forgive us for intruding, Ron and I might pick something up. The Auror training does give you the odd useful skill.”

“I’ll wait in the library, then,” Hermione said easily.

“Actually, Hermione, I was going to ask you to just go over things with the house-elf. I gather from comments earlier that she seems happy to talk to you?”

“I was thinking before that we could ask her to join us, but then I thought it might be too nerve-wracking for her, sitting with a load of wizards and witches,” Hermione said. “But actually, it might be a good idea to ask her to come around the house.”

“Why’s that?” Ron asked, voicing the thoughts of the others, judging by their faces.

“Because she can tell you whether she’s done anything in any of the rooms today. With all the kids staying over, I’d be very surprised if she hasn’t been whipping round tidying everything up. And she’ll feel safer doing that: it’s her territory, her work.”

“Good points,” Kingsley said warmly.

“Is it alright to disturb her?” Albus asked. “You know, with the baby and everything?”

“Well, that’s why I think it’s better this way,” Hermione said. “And being pregnant doesn’t mean you’re incapable. But tell her she must go to bed straight after, and get a good night’s rest. She’s had a stressful day.”

Half an hour later, they had searched outside, by wandlight, both in front of the house using
disillusionment spells, and in the back garden, gone through all the living areas, and were making their way through the bedrooms.

“This is Potter’s room?” Snape said, not bothering to hide his surprise.

The room looked remarkably bare. There was no clutter. Without asking for permission, he strode over to the wardrobe, and threw open the door. He was immensely relieved to find clothes hanging within it. For a moment, he’d wondered if Potter had done a runner.

Which would have been a very worrying thing.

He rifled through, roughly.

“What’re you looking for?” Ron asked, coming to stand beside him.

“Anything unusual,” Snape said.

He breathed in deeply. Cleaning spells and the aroma of robes that had been worn and just thrust back in, assaulted his senses. The whiff of trainers. He twitched his nose disdainfully. How could anyone put smelly trainers in with their clothes?

He shut the door and looked again at the room.

There was a large, surprisingly modern bed. There were no posts or curtains, just smooth pale wood. The other furniture was pale wood too, two large low sets of drawers either side of the bed, rather than nightstands. The bed faced the windows. Outside, by the light of the Muggle street-lamps, he could see the branches of a tree, a living shadow against the world beyond.

There was a chair by the window, and a small writing table.

Every surface was empty.

Shacklebolt too was running some spells, while the boys, Hermione and the elf, stood by the door.

Snape wandered over and opened the top drawer of one of the chests. Potter’s underwear. He favoured black. Snape put his hand in and ran it underneath.

“He’s gonna be pissed to know you’ve been fiddling with his pants,” Albus commented.

It was Shacklebolt who turned round. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I know it’s intrusive. I’m afraid it inevitably is in these sort of circumstances. Anything?” he asked Snape, going over to the other side and doing the same.

They went through all the drawers.

“Nothing,” Shacklebolt said.

“What’s so odd about that?” James asked.

“What’s in your bedside drawers?” Shacklebolt turned the question around.

James opened his mouth and shut it again, a blush starting to form.

“Exactly,” Ron grinned. “Everyone has private things in their bedside drawers. Condoms, get-it-up potion, headache potion, tissues, toy-uh, broken bits of comb that they’ve never cleared out,” he swiftly changed the word he’d been about to say. “Fluff, pens, coins -.”
“Cannon’s programmes,” Hermione mumbled under her breath.

The boys next to her grinned.

“She probably put it all away because he set up camp next door,” Albus said. “He didn’t know who’d be in here. It’ll be in his secret drawers.”

“His secret drawers?” Kingsley asked.

Albus shrugged. “We all have secret drawers, for our private things. Dad created the wizard space.”

“Do you know what he’s got hidden in here? I don’t mean the actual items, just where he might have spaces.”

“There’s extra space in his wardrobe,” James volunteered. “He keeps his old school trunk in it. I saw him getting it out when we were kids, to show us what quidditch gloves used to look like in the old days. And I suppose he must have usual bedside stuff in his bedside table, but I’ve never seen him opening any magic drawer in it. I don’t bother with all the locking and unlocking to keep my broken combs in,” he said, looking with a smirk at Ron, “but Dad probably does. I don’t suppose he’d want you poking in it, even if you could open it.”

“I won’t worry about that for now,” Kingsley agreed. “Just getting a feel for whether things feel right or not.”

Snape looked at the bed. How had Harry felt, coming in to his own room and seeing Scorpius and Andy? What exactly had they been doing? He cast a small detection spell. There were no spells for lubrication or stretching registering, so it was unlikely that he’d caught them doing anything much. In which case, he was quite surprised that Harry had been as startled as Scorpius had suggested. He’d become aware that Harry was watching, that time at home when he’d kissed Kingsley in the courtyard. Potter’s behaviour afterwards didn’t seem to have altered at all. Potter almost seemed as asexual as his comment in the court implied. Perhaps that was the wrong word; Potter had three children after all. He himself had spent long periods without sex. It was not impossible; you did get used to it. Thank God, life had changed. He glanced across at Kingsley.

As if sensing his regard, Kingsley looked back across the expanse of Harry Potter’s bed, raising an eyebrow.

“Have you done anything in here, Mitty?” Hermione asked.

“Mitty is changing the bed, again, and cleaning the bathroom,” the elf said, pleased to be helping, “but Mitty is not knowing if Master Harry is coming back into this bedroom, or not, so I is leaving the other room, just tidying the bedclothes in it.”

Ron walked across and opened the bathroom door. “All tidy,” he agreed. “You can get to the other room through here.”

They heard the sound of him opening the other door.

“You go that way, Severus, I’ll come in from the hallway, just in case anything odd strikes us,” Kingsley said.

Ron’s shout had them all running.
In the other bedroom, on the bedside table, was Harry’s wand.

“He’s been taken then,” Ron said, as if only believing it for the first time. “Shit! Shit!”

“You haven’t moved anything, Mitty? Only the bedclothes?” Kingsley asked, as he looked around the room, casting spells as he went.

“Nothing, Sirs,” the elf shook her head. “I is leaving Master Harry’s wand exactly as it is.”

“Has he ever left it on the side before?” Severus asked.

The elf looked puzzled. “Sometimes Master is leaving it on the side in the other room,” she said. “Sometimes he is leaving it beside the shower. Sometimes he is leaving it on the side in the kitchen -”

“When he goes out of the house?” Hermione asked sharply. “Mitty, has he ever left the wand when he’s gone out of the house?”

The elf nodded, much to their amazement. “But only when he is going into the garden to look in the woodshed,” she added.

“He’s never gone off the property without it before?”

“Not that Mitty is knowing,” the elf looked worried.

“That’s alright, Mitty, thank you,” Hermione said.

They looked through the other rooms in a cursory fashion: the finding of the wand had dampened everyone’s spirits.

Kingsley and Snape took their leave as James put in a floo call to Hogwarts. It was very late. He was not sure who would answer the floo. Headmaster Peter Brown had slowly pulled the school into the modern world by its bootstraps; one of his improvements had been the appointment of administrative staff, including a bursar and a secretary. In the daytime, the secretary, Adrian Donnelly, fielded all the floo calls, but James assumed he wouldn’t be in the school office at this time of night. He’d arrived after James had left, so he was doubly reluctant to disturb a stranger’s Saturday evening. He was quite relieved to see a familiar face on the other side of the fire.

“Mrs Banton! I’m so sorry to disturb your evening. It’s James Potter,” he added quickly.

“Of course I know who you are, young man! Now, what can have got you making floo calls at this time of night? Not drunk, are you?” she asked suspiciously.

“No, of course not!”

“No ‘of course’ about it,” she said. “The whole of the Falcons team tried to floo in one night after they’d had a rather good post-match celebration. Thought they’d race their broomsticks around the corridors, they did. I soon put a stop to that!”

“Oh dear,” James said sympathetically. “The thing is, I was wondering if I could see my sister. It’s important.”

Mrs Banton looked at a watch she wore pinned to her robe front. “Her dorm’s all settled down for the night at this time, Mr Potter.”
“I – I know. But –”

“It’s important. Yes, I gather that. You’d better tell me.”

“The thing is – well, Dad’s not there, is he? He hasn’t been there today?”

He saw her eyes narrow. “I don’t think so. I’ll just check the visitors’ log.”

James waited on the hearth. Mrs Banton, he noted, had a tapestry cushion to kneel on, which was the most sensible idea he’d ever seen.

“No, he’s not been here today. Last visit was when your mother died,” she said, without mincing words.

“Right,” James said slowly.

“Is he – missing?”

“Er, well. That’s hard to say. We just wondered if he might have called to see Lily.”

“No, definitely not, I’m afraid.”

James braced himself. “I could really do with seeing her, just to check whether he sent her an owl or anything.”

“I can check that for you. Hold on a moment, please.”

James transfigured a knut into a cushion while he waited.

“No, your father hasn’t sent any owls today. The last one was on Thursday.”

“How do you know that?” he asked, brows furrowing.

“Oh, all post is registered,” she said.

“It is?”

“The Headmaster is always concerned with the safety of our students,” she said.

“And that means all post is - registered?” James repeated, shocked.

“All posts in and out, all visits. I can assure you, your father hasn’t been here, Mr Potter.”

“Well, I - thanks for your help, Mrs Banton. The thing is, I really ought to tell Lily -”

Mrs Banton looked at him assessingly. “I really can’t allow a whole dorm to be woken up,” she said apologetically. “But – if you don’t mind waiting yet again?”

“No problem.”

James didn’t know whether he was frustrated or relieved that he didn’t have to tell Lily yet. It could all be alright. Couldn’t it?

“I’ve just checked the schedules for the dorm,” she said, “and two of the girls sharing with your sister are up early for quidditch practice. If you have no news, you can call me again at 6.30am: I’ll fetch your sister for you then. I honestly don’t think there is any reason to upset your sister at this time of night, do you, Mr Potter?”
James didn’t think there was anything else to be said. He thanked Mrs Banton, and pulled away.

He found that Albus had seen everyone off by the time he’d finished, even Hermione.

They spent an hour making floo calls, to no avail.

Finally, there was nothing else to do.

“Shall I stay here?” James asked, uncertainly. “I would,” he went on, without waiting for an answer, “but what if Dad tries to contact me at my flat? I know it’s unlikely – ”

“No, that’s a good point.” Albus said. “Just in case.”

James shoved his hands in his pockets, reluctant to leave.

“I feel so bloody useless!” he burst out, after a moment.

“Yeah,” Albus agreed. “I’m gonna camp down by the floo tonight,” he said after a moment.

“Good thinking. I’ll do the same. We’ve got good help, Albus.”

“Yeah. Dad’s got good friends.”

There was another moment of lurking.

“Dad’s not going to try my floo, is he?” James said. “If he has the chance, he’ll try here. Or Ron and Mione’s.”

“That’s much more likely,” Albus agreed cautiously.

“Fetch my duvet too, then, I’ll bunk down here with you,” James said.

Over the years, they’d had their moments of sibling rivalry and frustration with each other, but as Albus took the stairs two at a time to collect the bedding, and James transfigured chairs into beds by the floo, both felt a huge sense of relief to have his brother at his side.
Meanwhile...part II

It was 4am when Ron was woken by tapping at the window.

He leapt out of bed, quickly alert. Hermione grunted beside him.

“What is it?” she asked, suddenly rousing.

Ron’s search at the Ministry the previous evening, checking through the Auror records of arrested suspects, and even a trip to the holding cells, had elicited no information. Rather than wait till the next meeting, he’d sent a Patronus messenger through to Kingsley.

He opened the window and took the message from the Ministry owl, giving it a treat from the pot that he kept on the windowsill. The owl flew straight off, so obviously hadn’t been told to wait for a reply.

Ron read the note.

“I’ve got to go. There’s been a sighting of Nott senior and Thorfinn Rowle in Ireland.”

Both had served twenty years in Azkaban, and after living apparently peacefully, had suddenly disappeared, within days of each other, three months ago. It was the most important case currently, for Ron’s department, and every sighting had been followed up, but by the time they’d arrived, there’d been no trace of the missing wizards.

“Do you think they’re connected to Harry’s disappearance?” Hermione asked, swinging her legs over the side of the bed.

“I hadn’t even thought of that,” Ron said. “It’s not likely, is it? Or is it? No need to get up,” he added, pulling his battle robes out of the wardrobe. He glanced at them, and added an extra Impervius spell: he’d had one or two trips to Ireland before. The rain might make the countryside beautiful, but it was a bugger if you were out watching and waiting in it.

“Send Scruff to let me know you’re OK,” Hermione said. “I don’t trust anything right now.”

Scruff was the name she’d called Ron’s Patronus in a moment of teasing.

“I will,” Ron kissed her on the cheek and was gone.

“How long have they been missing?” the girl asked, chewing gum as she spoke.

It was nearly nine o’clock, and the Ministry had been almost deserted when James and Albus had arrived three quarters of an hour earlier. The duty wizard had shepherded them into a waiting room, where they’d been kept waiting. James had gone out to see if they’d been forgotten, and got a very brusque response.

Sunday morning was obviously a bad time to need help.

“Twenty four hours,” James said. He’d tried to tell the girl what had happened, but she’d just slapped her form down on the desk, and said she’d ask the questions.
“Child, is it?” she asked. “What age?”

“Adult,” James said. “I did mention it was my father.”

“Had a heavy night,” she said, as if that explained everything. “Over at Wandlight. Ever been there?”

“Yes,” James said, through gritted teeth.

“Thought your face was familiar. Must’ve seen you around. I go most Saturday nights –”

“Look, interesting as your social life must be to you,” Albus interrupted, leaning forward, “we’re trying to report a missing person here.”

“Yeah, your Dad. I’ve ticked the boxes, see?” She turned the form round as if they ought to admire her ticking skills.

“Well, what’s going to be done?” Albus demanded.

“Nothin’ I shouldn’t think,” she said, sucking a strand of hair across her lips. “Grown up, i’nt he? It’s the weekend. Probably off having a good time too. Why don’t you go round the corner: there’s an excellent café, does a great weekend fry-up. If you wait twenty minutes, I’ll join you. I’ve been here half an hour, time for a tea-break, innit?” she winked conspiratorially at them.

“Delectable as your company may be,” Albus said, with a sarcasm that he knew would go right over her head, “we’d like you to finish filling in that form, so that SOMEONE WILL BLOODY DO SOMETHING ABOUT OUR DAD!”

“’Ere, mate, keep yer hat on. I don’t have to put up wiv people shoutin’ at me, y’know.”

“Can we just get that form filled in?” James said, glancing across warningly at Albus. “We’re really worried about our Dad. Our friend’s an Auror and he says that there’s signs of a cluster of apparitions outside our door. And Dad left his sock. And his wand.”

“Socks and wand?” she said. “You tryin’ to be funny, mate?”

James and Albus exchanged another glance of shared frustration.

“I’m not trying to be funny,” James leant forward, “I’m trying to give you the facts, and let you know why we’re concerned.”

“You’re concerned that your Dad left ‘is socks lyin’ around? Get an ‘ouse-elf, that’ll soon sort that out.” She chuckled at her own joke.

“The sock was left outside the front door. Where the apparitions happened,” James said patiently. “Don’t you think that’s a little odd?”

“Never ‘eard of someone apparatin’ and leaving their socks behind ‘em. It’s usually a foot, or som’at,” she shook her head, still smiling.

“He didn’t apparate, he didn’t have his wand,” Albus bit out. “We think he was taken.”

“Y’know,” that doesn’t really happen with adult wizards,” she said. “Kids sometimes, if the parents are having a marital, custody stuff, y’know?” She seemed to think. “Where’s yer Mum? Split going on there, is there? Perhaps he’s gone to see her: lost track o’time with a good bit of make-up s – makin’ up,” she amended quickly, realising perhaps, that she was actually about to express
“Our mother is dead,” James said, “so I think we can rule out the ‘make-up sex’ scenario, thanks for that.”

“Oops?”

“Look – ” James rubbed his hand through his hair.

“Maybe he’s feeling a bit down then,” she said brightly, and then followed along her thought trail. “You don’t think he’s gone to top himself, do ya?”

“Have you had any training at all?” snapped Albus.

“Yeah, I ‘ave,” the girl said, “and what you don’t realise is how many missing person calls we get, and then they turn up the next day. It’s always the weekend, it is, someone buggers off for a good time and then comes creeping back on the Sunday night or Monday morning. And we’ve wasted hours of my time writin’ out these bleedin’ forms. So why doncha get a bit of perspective, mate, let your Dad enjoy hisself, and if he’s not back tomorrow, we can try this again?”

Albus leant over the desk. “I’ve got plenty of perspective, Suzi,” he said, reading off her lopsided name badge. “And this is what I’m seeing. My mother’s just been murdered. Her killers are still on the loose. And MY FATHER IS FUCKING MISSING, WITHOUT HIS WAND. So would you please, do your bloody job, which my sodding taxes are paying for, and take down the details, so that someone can start bloody DOING SOMETHING!”

Suzi leant back in her chair, still chewing her gum. “Keep your damn hair on,” she said mildly. She picked up her quill. “Look, I’m sorry to hear about yer Mum. We’ll fill in this form, yeah, but I’ll be honest wiv yer, they ain’t gonna do anyfink until tomorrow. Only two duty officers on this weekend, and they’ve already gone out on a kid wot’s disappeared when his magic went wild. No-one’s got any idea where he’s gone, and ‘e’s only eight. No chance of him getting’ hisself back wivout a wand. Spontaneous magic’s a bugger, innit?”

She duly filled in the forms.

When they named their father, she said, “‘E should be able to manage alright, doncha think? Topped that Dark Lord guy, didn’t he?”

“He’s not got his wand,” James repeated.

“You found that, did you? Near where you think he disappeared?”

“He left it in his bedroom.”

She shook her head, as if to suggest what could one expect if one wandered around without one’s wand.

They gave the rest of the details.

“Right,” she said. “Well, I’ll pass this on. Someone’ll be in touch. Stay by the floo, yeah? Sorry about yer Mum, she was a great player. ‘Ad her pic on me wall when I was a kid.”

She stood up, picking up the paperwork. The boys headed to the door. James opened it politely for her.
“Well,” she said, walking rather closer to James than was necessary. She paused, reaching out a finger with a scarlet-tipped nail, and stroked him under the chin. “You surely are a gentleman.” She turned to Albus. “Ever thought of anger management lessons?” she added, and sauntered out of the room.

Hermione woke early. After a quick breakfast, she fire-called James and Albus, hating to wipe the hope from their faces, but giving them a quick update. James reported that Lily now knew; that she was upset; that she’d been persuaded to stay at Hogwarts for the moment. Hermione wondered how she would ever manage to sit her exams.

She offered to accompany the boys to the Ministry, to report Harry missing, but they said they’d be ok. She called Draco; he’d already got the news from Scorpius and promised to do all he could.

She contacted George and Neville and as many friends as she could: the boys seemed to have already got round most of them the night before.

By late morning, she felt she’d achieved nothing at all apart from a lot of talking. She made herself some coffee, and settled down to write a list of spells that would be useful for the younger generation. Each word on the parchment reminded her of the situations for which they’d needed to learn them previously. She didn’t want her own children to have the fear and worries that had surrounded her teenage years, but it looked like all she could do was arm them to deal with them.

She hated that there was nothing that she could do to find Harry.

On top of that, she was due in court the next day. The case had only started the previous week, having been put off once, at her request, because of Ginny’s death. There was no way that the judge would allow further delays, especially now that it had started. She really needed to do some work on it.

She felt absolutely torn. How come it had been so much easier when they were kids? It had seemed such a momentous decision to walk away from her last year at Hogwarts at the time, and yet, no one else, apart from Harry and Ron, had depended on her. If she didn’t see this case through, Lucy West could end up in Azkaban. She’d never survive.

And frankly, there was nothing she could do to find Harry, was there? Kingsley and Ron had already tried various versions of ‘point-me’ spells the previous night, with no effect. Although, she could look up if there was any way to track someone using DNA – hairs from Harry’s comb, for example.

She floo-ed off to the library at the Ministry, to do some research.

Ron was wet, cold and fed up. They’d spent two days staking out a farmhouse in the back of beyond in rural Wicklow, watching an obviously wizarding family coming and going, with no evidence apart from the fact that they seemed to be bringing in an excessive amount of provisions for the number of people in the house. When the woman had taken the children out one day, Ron had disguised himself and knocked on the door. It was always one of the exciting parts, walking into danger, but he’d turned up nothing more than an illegal still making wizarding poteen. He’d
checked out the premises thoroughly and there wasn’t a whisker of a hint of other wizards having been using the place. Just as they were about to go, another owl arrived telling him Rowle and Nott had been sighted near the Giant’s Causeway.

They apparated to the wild northern coast, lashed now by the sea wind rather than the soft rain of the south. The Giant’s Causeway was a phenomenon imbued with history and legend, and a hidden wizarding community had existed on the headland nearby for hundreds of years. Posing as wizarding tourists, Ron and Jemima booked in to the local inn, while Hugh, accompanied by David, who’d been on his team for several years, booked into a local bed and breakfast.

They quickly heard that there had been unknown wizards performing strange rites down on the basalt columns two nights earlier. Ron cursed that the information had taken so long to get to them.

He and his team transfigured their outfits to Muggle clothing, waterproof jackets, hiking boots and rucksacks, and headed down the winding path to the stones. None of them had ever been there before.

“This place must raise a lot of magical power,” Hugh said, looking around. “I wonder what the hell they were up to.”

As Suzi had predicted, it was twenty four hours before anyone from the department called on James and Albus. Even then, they weren’t Aurors, as they had expected, given that they feared that ex-Death Eaters or some of the new people were responsible. Instead, they were from a unit called CLAM, which their card showed stood for Customer Liaison and Management, which immediately set their backs up. The men listened, but were very dismissive of the idea of ex-Death Eaters having kidnapped their father, disbelieving that any new group even existed, let alone had taken him, and seemed much more inclined to take the same view as Suzi had done, that Mr Potter might be suicidal.

They did a cursory check of the house: the traces of apparition outside had disappeared in the forty eight hours that had elapsed. They picked up Harry’s worn and weathered wand, and seeming to think that it looked somewhat wanting, asked if he had another. They asked if Harry had a place where he usually went to when he was sad. Had they checked their mother’s grave? Having told the men that there wasn’t one, the two shook their heads, as if that was a bad indication, asked where Harry’s parents were buried, and said they’d check it out, to not worry too much, and that they’d be in touch.

They left the boys feeling furious, frustrated and miserable.

George came round, and joined them for lunch. The story of CLAM’s visit poured out of them.

“You don’t think Dad would have done anything, do you?” Albus asked, as they sat at the kitchen table.

Mitty was on her chair at the cooker, stirring a large pan of soup. At least the smell was delicious.

“Don’t be daft,” George said, smiling a thanks to Mitty as she passed him a bowlful.

“He’d never have done something like that after that argument with me, would he?” James said. “I
mean, to kill himself after I’d upset him? If he’d done that, he would have known I would be absolutely gutted. Permanently. I feel guilty as shit anyway.”

“You’re right, even if Dad had been suicidal – which he wasn’t - that argument would have stopped him. Dad would never have let you have that worry.”

“He called after me to walk – he was even worried about me splinching. He wouldn’t have done that and then hurt us by topping himself the next day.”

“Exactly. Don’t sweat it,” Albus said.

“Not to mention the doorbell, apparitions and sock. He was taken,” George said firmly. “Just wish we could bloody do something to find him. At least with the Death Eaters, we knew who some of them were, we had some locations they used, and of course, we had Snape.”

“We could do with a spy with this new lot,” Albus said, “except how can you even start when you’ve no idea who the enemy is? And,” he paused.

“What?” James said, round a mouthful of soup.

“Well, I was just thinking, we don’t really know if they’re an enemy. I mean, we don’t even know what they stand for. Not clearly. It would be bigoted of us to be against something without knowing exactly what it stood for.”

“Interesting points,” George said, glad that the need to comment on spy activity had passed.

“And talking of being bigoted, what exactly was your problem with Scorp and Andy?” Albus said pointedly to his brother.

“Look, they’re alright normally, they behave in company –”

“They behave in company?”

“Come on, you know what I mean! No one wants to see guys kissing in public.”

“I’m not keen on seeing you all over one of your girls either, slobbering on the sofa, but I don’t care what the hell you do in your bedroom.”

“George, back me up on this! It’s not the same, is it?” James turned to his uncle. “Bill agrees with me!”

George tore off a hunk from the loaf in the middle of the table, and dipped it in his soup. “I can’t answer for Bill,” he shrugged, “but,” he popped the bread into his mouth and chewed.

The boys grinned, waiting.

“Look, Angelina’s Mum’s sister, Daphne, married a Muggle. A white Muggle.”

“Yeah?” James said. “And?”

“Angelina says people used to treat Auntie Daphne like shit.”

“They knew she was a witch?”

“No.”
“Then what?” James said, confused.

“She was black.”

“What?” Albus said.

George shrugged. “Muggles back then found what they called ‘mixed marriages’ offensive. When one person was white and the other black.”

“But that’s crazy! What the hell difference does the colour of your skin make?”

“None at all. It’s just prejudice,” George said pointedly.

“That’s what I don’t get,” Albus said after a minute. “I mean, I know the wizarding world looks down on gay people, but Dad’s always gone on about having an open mind.”

“Well, that’s because his relatives treated him like shit,” George said. “Absolutely hated wizards. He knows what it’s like to be on the wrong end of irrational hatred.”

“Yeah, well,” James said, getting up with a loud clatter of his chair. “I’m not Dad. And maybe I have got an open mind. Maybe I’ve looked at it openly and decided I damn well don’t like it!” And he stormed across the room. “I’m going looking for Dad,” he snapped, and moments later, they heard the floo flaring.

“I’m sorry,” Albus said, in embarrassment.

“I expect he needed to let off steam one way or another,” George said easily, standing up and taking his dishes to the sink. “I don’t remember Bill being like that years ago, though. Being savaged by Greyback changed him. Well, the war changed us all,” he said, heavily. “Where’s James gone?”

“We wrote a list yesterday of places to go looking. Not that we’ve much hope of Dad being at any of them, but we need to do something. We’re taking turns, one going off, one staying in the house, so Dad or anyone can contact us.”

Mitty set a washing spell to work, and then came over. “Master Albus? “she said, anxiously.

“What is it, Mitty? Thank you for the lovely soup, by the way.”

The elf blushed and bobbed. “Mitty is doing her best with the manky vegetables, and making soup, but we is not having much food to -”

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t think of food. I’ll make some owl orders. Do you know what we need?”

“I’ll leave you to it,” George grinned, gripping Albus briefly on the shoulder in solidarity as he stepped past.

Severus could see that James and Albus Potter were wilting at the evening meeting on Monday night. He had a few words with Kingsley, when Hermione took the younger generation off to practice new spells, then stood quietly in the doorway for several minutes, assessing the young people and their teacher.
He headed over to the boys whilst they were practicing their *Patronus* charms in the training room, which had been converted for spellcraft practice.

“Gentlemen, I wonder if I might have a word.”

“Sure,” Albus said. “I’m useless at this.”

“The happy thought bit is impossible,” James growled in frustration.

“It is very difficult to master under pressure,” Snape agreed.

They headed away from the other young people back into the kitchen. The other adults had already left.

“I want to work on an experimental potion that might help trace your father.”

“That sounds great!”

Snape held up his hand. “When I say experimental, I mean exactly that. If I had something that I thought would work, I would have brewed it and used it by now.”

“So – what does that mean, exactly?” Albus asked.

“It means that I want to try something new, with very little chance of success,” Snape said bluntly.

“Because we haven’t anything else,” James surmised.

“As you say,” Snape inclined his head.

“So, do you need something from us? Our blood, or something?”

“That might be a variation I will try at a later stage,” Snape said. “For the present, I need some of your father’s hair, or toenail clippings – something of that sort.”

“We can check his comb,” Albus nodded. “Or his pillow.”

“I will also need his wand.”

Severus was very pleased to see James stiffen.

“You can’t seriously expect us to give you Dad’s wand,” he said.

“I have to agree with him on that one,” Albus said, resting his rear on the kitchen table. “You’ll have the potential for Polyjuice Potion, and his wand. I’m sorry, but we’d be daft to give it to you! I know Dad trusts you, but we don’t know you very much at all, and everything I’ve read about you – I know you fought on Dad’s side on the quiet, but – well, you’ve a history of being somewhat sneaky.”

Severus’ eyes gleamed. “I’m very heartened to see you being so cautious,” he said. “What I’m proposing, therefore, is something of an imposition, but seems the logical way around the matter. The potion takes thirty hours to brew. I suggest that I stay here. You are perfectly welcome to supervise every minute of the process. You can monitor all the ingredients.”

“That would be alright, I suppose,” James said cautiously. “What do you need Dad’s wand for?”

“I’ll stir the potion with it for a small portion of the process.”
“Won’t that damage the wand?” Albus asked.

“Not if the potion is sufficiently cooled,” Severus said.

“One of us could be with him whilst the other is out,” James said to Albus. “We haven’t got a lab: can you brew in the kitchen?”

“I can,” Snape said. “But that brings me to my other point. I think you’re wasting your efforts going out searching for your father.”

“I know it’s like looking for a needle in a haystack,” James bit out, “but what the hell else are we supposed to do?”

“There will be long periods of inactivity during the brewing,” Severus said, ignoring the temper. “Mrs Weasley is teaching some useful spells, but it strikes me that you need to learn some – more.”

“More?” James queried.

“Your mother has been killed and your father taken. Forgive my bluntness, but it seems to me that your lives might also be in danger. You need some – stronger – spells in your armoury.”

“And you’d be willing to teach us?” James queried.

Severus could see the interest in his eyes, firing his face up, washing out the pallor of his skin.

“I would.”

“Are you talking about dark spells?” Albus asked.

“Who taught you defence?” Severus raised his eyebrows. “Surely you know that spells are neither dark nor light. It is the intent that shapes them.”

“But – we could – hurt or injure someone with these spells?”

“Yes.” Severus let that sink in, watching the boy’s reactions. James was obviously feeling out for blood, Albus more cautious. “Of course, you could kill someone with a simple household spell, if you chose. It’s worth considering how to make best use of what is already familiar to you. A simple *alohamora* charm, perfectly timed, can be very effective, for example. The freezing charms you use on your cool cupboards can be fatal.”

“What would Dad think?” Albus bit a finger nail.

“Your father ran Dumbledore’s Army, did he not? A secret organisation within Hogwarts to teach students the spells that they needed to protect themselves and fight. He may have already taught you any number of useful spells, for all I know.”

James shook his head.

“I think he didn’t want us to have to cope with the sort of thing he did,” Albus said.

“Commendable, but unfortunate,” Severus commented. “It is up to you.”

“I’m in,” James said at once.

“Yeah, me too,” Albus agreed. “I can’t stand this – this – uselessness.”
“Very well. If you will be kind enough to allow me to start tonight, we can get the process in motion. I have all I need with me.”

“You’d planned this?”

“I’d every intention of asking you, yes. I believe in being prepared. If you had said no, I would have returned home. Now, let us get started. Setting up the base is a minimal task, but it needs ten hours to reach the correct viscosity. I suggest an early night once it is made: tomorrow will be busy.”

On Tuesday morning, as agreed with Draco, The Prophet ran Harry Potter: Kidnapped? as its front page feature. That night, Draco reported that hundreds of people had owled in with sightings, which he had passed on to the CLAM team. He handed a list over to Kingsley as well.

“I have to say, CLAM were furious that we’d run the article,” he said. “Apparently, having leads makes their job very difficult.”

“They really aren’t taking this seriously, are they?” Teddy said. “Why not?”

“To be fair,” Hermione said, “people do go missing all the time. Same goes for Muggles. They’ll look for missing kids, but adults are a different matter, really. And with wizards it’s worse – I mean, they can apparate anywhere. And you can see their reasoning. Harry could have gone off to grieve, or anything. Bereavement is a known reason that causes people to go off for a bit.”

“They might complain about the press, then,” George said, “but given how well known Harry’s face is, even now, the publicity should do their job for them, shouldn’t it?”

“If he’s out in the open,” Snape said. “But I don’t think any of us believe that Harry has just ‘wandered off’ for a bit of ‘alone time’. He is being kept somewhere, against his will. If he is alive.”

“Professor!” Neville Longbottom protested.

“How can you say that in front of –” Angelina burst out angrily.

Albus held up his hand. “He’s only saying the truth,” he said. “We’re all – scared – that – that - but we can’t pretend that that might not be the case.”

“I believe if they wanted to kill him they would have done so by now,” Kingsley said. He looked around the table. “And they would have made a big thing of delivering his body. And taking credit.”

Silence.

“So we can assume Dad’s alive,” James said at last. “But we’re no further on than we were. We know absolutely bloody nothing! What if – what if – I mean, look at what they did to Mum. They could be torturing him!”

Another, horrified silence.

“If he’s hidden away, how are we ever going to find him?” Rose asked.
“We’re working on it,” Kingsley said, “but we’re not there yet. I’m sorry.”

The next morning, several things happened all at once.

Ron almost had a heart attack when he was awoken by a wand poking into his jugular.

“Shhsh!”

He kept perfectly still.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” the voice whispered. “I’m an Auror.”

Ron did not feel reassured.

“I don’t know if I can trust your team,” the voice continued.

“I trust them,” Ron bit out. Carefully.

“Yeah? I don’t know who to trust any more.”

Ron’s eyes moved to the side, trying to get a look at the man. His hand moved infinitesimally towards his wand.

“I can feel that, you know,” the man said. He knelt back on his haunches, allowing Ron access. “You’ll feel better with it in your hand.”

“You do know how pervy that sounds,” Ron asked, sitting up and reaching for it. He slithered out of his sleeping bag and stood up. He’d been on duty all night, and had only had a couple of hours sleep. Nothing excused being caught so easily, though. “My team?” he asked sharply.

“One’s just moved away up the road. I’ve been waiting for him to head off. I’ve not hurt any of them, if that’s what you’re asking.”

Ron nodded, relieved. It was gloomy in the deserted cottage that they had used as their base for the last thirty six hours, but a beam of light shone through a hole in the cracked glass of the small window. It was enough for Ron to get an idea of the man facing him. He noted the open stance, the fact that the man allowed himself to be seen.

“I’m Filius Stubbington,” he said. “You don’t know me.”

“No. New, are you?”

“Couple of years.”

“Nice to have a chit-chat, but why are you here?” Ron asked. They had a small primus stove set on the old wooden sink drainer in the corner, and he headed across, lifted the kettle to check whether it was full enough, lit the gas and put it on.

“Harry Potter.”

Ron turned around sharply. “What about him?”
“You’re his friend, right?”

“Always have been, always will be.”

“Then why aren’t you looking for him?”

“Who the hell are you to question me?” Ron swore. Because he’d been asking himself pretty much the same thing.

Stubbington didn’t say anything.

“Two ex-Death Eaters sighted. We’d been looking for them for ages. No sign of them in the south where we were sent first. Then there were other sightings up here, reports of a covered third person; I was going to head back, but it could be Harry, couldn’t it? Somebody’s got him. There’s been magic performed down on The Causeway. It’s the full moon in two days: a prime time for some rituals. With no other information, what the hell else could I be doing?”

“Searching closer to home.”

“What do you know?” Ron strode across the floor, about to grab the man when he realised that he wasn’t making any defence: his wand was held loosely in his hand.

He slowed. “What do you know?” he asked again, his tone much more reasonable.

“I heard an Auror laughing about the report in the paper yesterday. Said what idiots people were, with all the sightings everywhere. When he was under everybody’s noses.”

“Fucking Merlin! What do you think he meant?”

“I assumed he meant in the Ministry. I checked the records – ”

“I’d done that already –”

“There was nothing, I agree,” Stubbington nodded. He looked at Ron. “I don’t believe it.”

Ron sat down. The single chair wobbled and squeaked. He rubbed his hands on his knees.

“If the Ministry has Harry…and they’ve been hiding it…I’ve been an Auror for more than half my life. Has it all been a bloody waste?” He stood up. “What’s your role in this, Stubbington? Why do you care?”

“I’ve only met Mr Potter once, when he came to see Mr Malfoy. He seems a good man. But more to the point, no-one should be held without record, without legal representation. We’re Aurors.”

Ron strode to the door. “We bloody well are. You’ve no idea where in the Ministry he is?”

“I did happen to just check down in the cells. He wasn’t there.”

“I know someone who might have an idea,” Ron said. He held the door knob in his hand. “You’re going back to the Ministry?”

Stubbington nodded. “I did five apparition hops to get here. I don’t think anyone suspects me. Yet.”

“Ye gods. What have we come to?” Ron shook his head. He looked up, and slapped Stubbington on the arm. “Thanks, mate.” He eyed him carefully. “We’ll talk again.”
Ten minutes later, Ron was back in Grimmauld Place. The kitchen was empty, and he headed through to the training room. Snape whirled, wand extended, as did James, who he was apparently duelling with.

“Ron! Have you news?” Albus demanded.

“Maybe. Snape, can you get Kingsley? Harry might be hidden in the Ministry: if anyone knows any secret places it’ll be him.”

At that moment, a fist-sized stag almost fell through the wall. It lumbered over to Snape.

As silence fell, it pawed the ground, and gasped, in Harry’s voice, “Snape…bezoar…sunshine,” and then collapsed onto its front knees, and dissolved.
“Morning, Steven,” Ron said breezily as they strode up to the security desk at the Ministry. “Just bringing some old friends through.”

Steven Wainwright nearly fell off of his stool. “Minister Shacklebolt!”

“Nice to see you again,” Kingsley shook the man’s hand briefly. “You know Master Snape, of course.”

“Of course,” Wainwright said, eyeing his old Professor with apprehension.

Snape did not extend his hand. “Mr Wainwright,” he inclined his head.

The expected demeanour seemed to calm the man.

“I’m afraid I’ll need to check your wands,” he said apologetically.

“Of course,” Kingsley agreed, handing his over without fuss.

In a few moments, all had been dealt with and they walked through the golden gates. Ron could feel the buzz of attention as people recognised his companions.

“Not that one,” Kingsley said, taking hold of his arm, as Ron headed towards a lift that was just opening.

Moments later they were all in the end lift, sliding the cage door shut before anyone else could enter.

Kingsley made a small gesture with his wand over the control panel, and to Ron’s amazement, several extra buttons appeared. Kingsley pressed one.

The lift shot back and down, and shortly after, they found themselves opening the gate onto a dimly lit passage.

All of them had their wands at the ready, creeping stealthily forward.

They rounded the corner to find two guards, one with his feet up on the desk, playing a card game. Their chairs clattered as they leapt to their feet.

Ron strolled forward, Auror robes swirling, wand concealed. “Stand easy, we’ve just come to have a word with the prisoner,” he said, in commanding but relaxed tones.

Snape and Kingsley also had their wands held down at their sides, covered by the folds of their robes.

The guards looked at the men, and then at each other.

“You aren’t on our list of registered visitors,” one said.

“Really?” Ron sounded surprised. “Let’s see that list.” He held out his hand.

Again, the men looked at each other. “I don’t know who you are –” one began.
“That’s easy,” Kingsley said. “I’m Kingsley Shacklebolt -”

“Formerly Minister for Magic,” Ron inserted.

“Potions Master Severus Snape,” Kingsley indicated the forbidding form of his lover, “And Senior Auror Ron Weasley. Now, if you’d show us to Mr Potter –”

“Mr Potter ain’t receivin’ visitors,” one of the guards said, belligerently. “We’ve got our orders –”

His words were cut off as Ron cast *Petrificus Totalus*. As the other reached for his wand, Kingsley did the same.

“He’s definitely here,” Ron said, his voice registering his shock. He removed the keys from the warder’s belt. “I can’t believe it.”

“We won’t have much time,” Kingsley urged him. “Using that lift button will have alerted the Minister.”

“You mean that Benningdean will have known that Harry was here?”

“Not necessarily,” Kingsley shook his head, as they strode along the corridor. “He might have been told this level was being cleaned out, used for storage…”

“Sounds dodgy to me,” Ron said, then thrust his arm across his face. “Fucking Merlin! What’s that smell? Do the sewers empty into this floor?”

The reason for the smell became apparent all too quickly.

“Dear God,” Ron whispered.

Every cell they’d walked past had been empty. Except this one. A body lay face down on the floor.

There was no way to know whether it was alive or dead.

Only one thing was certain.

It was Harry.

Ron’s hands shook as he fumbled the key into the lock.

“There are phenomenal wards,” Snape said, assessing the cell with his wand.

“How the hell did he manage to send a *Patronus*?” Kingsley wondered. “No wand, and with magic-prevention wards?”

“Desperation,” Ron said, gruffly.

After they had spent half a minute trying to unravel the wards, Ron said, “Bugger this! Will there be any repercussions to using force, Kingsley?”

“No idea,” Kingsley said. “I’ll shield us, you two blast.”

“Don’t go for the door, go for the side,” Snape suggested. “Here. I suggest a melting spell to burn through the steel.”

Within moments, they were climbing through. The smell of hot metal was a refreshing
counterpoint to the stench of the cell.

Ron dropped to the floor beside Harry, hesitating only for a moment at the vile fluids in which his friend was lying, and gently rolled him over.

“He’s dead,” he croaked. “Cold. We’re too late.”

Snape had knelt on the other side. One hand went to Harry’s jugular.

“There’s a pulse. Erratic.” His hand cupped Harry’s face, uncaring of the vomit that was crusted across it, turning it towards him.

“Are you sure?” Ron gulped.

“Yes. Hold him steady, Ron.”

Snape tried to cast a diagnostic spell. Nothing happened.

“The anti-magic wards,” Kingsley said. He was prowling around the room.

“We need to get him out of here,” Snape said. “Get me some water, Kingsley. I want to get this bezoar into him first.”

Kingsley strode back to the basin and turned on the tap.

Nothing.

He took another look at the disgusting toilet, and pushed the flush.

Nothing.

“They’ve cut off the water.”

“Bastards! With him like this?” Ron snapped.

“There’s bottled,” Kingsley picked up a bottle from the far side of the cell. It was almost empty.

“Let me see that,” Snape held out a hand.

A moment later, having sniffed it, he screwed the bottle shut and put it into his robes. “It’s poisoned,” he said grimly. “That’s why he asked for the bezoar.”

“Fucking hell!”

“Let’s get him out of here,” Kingsley said.

Ron put his hands underneath Harry, and scooped up the limp body. “He’s completely soaking,” he said, as he stood and adjusted the weight against him.

“The bed too, and there’s puddles in the corners. He’s been hosed down and just left. The whole cell,” Kingsley said. “If the poison didn’t kill him, hypothermia would have.”

“He’s close enough,” Snape said quietly. “I don’t think we’ve any time to waste.”

They had barely walked three paces down the corridor when round the corner came a phalanx of Aurors. At the head, was Benningdean and Felton.
“We need to treat him first, argue after,” Snape said quickly to Ron. “He will die if we prevaricate.”

Ron nodded.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Benningdean snapped.

The Aurors all had their wands out.

“Getting this man to a place where he can be treated,” Ron said, continuing to walk forward.

“What in Hades is that smell?” The Minister held his hand in front of his face.

“The smell of a prisoner with severe diarrhoea and vomiting in a cell without any clean water,” Snape answered bluntly. “Pray summon your mediwizard at once.”

“We don’t give special treatment to celebrities,” Felton said curtly.

“Is that so? I am assuming, Minister, that you don’t endorse killing prisoners without trial?” Kingsley stepped out of the shadows.

There were gasps.

“Minister Shacklebolt?” Benningdean spoke.

“I am Kingsley Shacklebolt. May I suggest we delay the pleasantries until you have sent for medical assistance for Mr Potter?”

“Mr - Harry Potter?” There was no mistaking the Minister’s shock, or the way he turned to Felton, or the slight movement that Felton made, as if he was steeling himself.

“If you wouldn’t mind,” Ron said through gritted teeth, “Harry might weigh several stone less since you locked him up and poisoned him, but I am still holding a grown man here,” and he made to push through them.

“Poison?” Benningdean said sharply.

“Nonsense! This is just an escape ploy,” Felton said abruptly, stepping in front of Ron. “He’s been arrested on suspicion of murdering his wife. Your sister, I believe, Auror Weasley.”

Ron stepped to the side, deliberately bumping into Felton. Harry’s robe, soaking wet and contaminated with vomit and diarrhoea, if Ron was any judge, just happened to slap against the man. Felton recoiled in disgust. Ron carefully laid Harry on the floor.

“What the hell are you doing, Auror?” Felton demanded.

“He’ll be dead if he doesn’t get help soon.” Ron looked around. “Master Snape?” he said in an entirely different tone. He glanced at their audience. “Take a look in the cell, and tell me if that’s how we keep prisoners. If that’s what we’ve come to, you can have my resignation now, Minister.”

Snape had hunched down beside Harry and cast his wand over him. Then he slapped Harry’s face.

“What are you doing?” Benningdean screeched.

Harry’s head had just rolled to the side.
Snape repeated the movement. “Potter!” he barked.

Harry’s eyelids fluttered.

“Wake up this minute!” Snape ordered.

A small noise emitted from Harry’s throat, then he cramped inwards. Ron, who’d been kneeling beside him, supporting his upper body, almost dropped him.

The next moment, Harry turned his head to the side and retched.

Benningdean and Felton leapt back, but only a tiny dribble came forth.

“It’s more blood than anything,” Ron said grimly.

Benningdean turned to one of his men, and said, “Go and fetch a mediwizard at once,” and then strode past them towards the cell.

“Potter,” Snape prompted quietly.

Harry’s head wobbled.

“I’ve got you,” Ron said.

Harry laid his head back. “Ron?”

“Yeah, ‘course.” Ron gripped him tighter.

“Can’t see prop’ly. Thought…Snape…”

“I’m here,” Snape said. He took hold of Harry’s wrist, as if feeling for a pulse.

“Dream?” Harry asked. His tongue roved his lips. It was swollen. His lip split under the movement, a dot of blood blooming.

The rustle of Aurors around them was ignored.

“Nightmare, more like,” Ron retorted. “Who’s got some water on them?” he demanded, looking at his fellow Aurors. There was a moment’s silence, and then one passed over a canteen from within his robes.

“Take a swig,” Ron demanded. The Auror bristled, but did so.

“Thanks,” Ron nodded, taking the container. “Standard issue? Order yourself a new one, this’ll be nasty after.” He handed it to Snape.

“Potter, I need you to swallow this bezoar,” Snape said, taking hold of Harry’s chin and turning his face towards him.


“You’re rambling, Potter,” Snape said. “Have a sip of water.”

Harry turned his head away. Snape took a sniff into the canteen, and a sip. “If it’s going to kill you, it’ll get us both,” he said. “Now.”

Ron hoisted Harry, who took a sip, then another, and another.
Harry licked his lips again, as if the taste of his blood helped him hold onto reality. It was unsuccessful: his eyelids slid down, and his head slipped to the side.

“Potter! Wake up this instant!” Snape gripped his chin, forcing Harry to look at him.

The eyes flickered. “S-Snape?”

“Indeed. Now, pay attention. “

He pressed something into Harry’s hand. The fingers instinctively clutched it, the fingertips feeling the shape.

“That’s it,” Snape said encouragingly. “It’s a bezoar. You need to swallow it. I know your throat is raw but it will help counteract the poison.”

“Like Ron,” Harry mumbled, his fingers slowly turning the bezoar in his palm.

“That’s it, mate,” Ron agreed. “You saved my life with one, yeah? Now, get it down you.”

Harry’s hand slowly came up to his face. He squinted at the bezoar, then slipped it between his lips. He tried to swallow, and retched again. The stone fell into his palm, in a pool of bloody water.

“Try doing it with a drink,” Ron said gently.

Harry tried again, with the same result. He flopped forward, consciousness slipping away.

“Potter! Listen to me!” Snape said firmly, raising his face in his hand once again.

Ron hoisted him back against him.

“That’s it, Ron,” he said, “hold him like that. Harry, I want you to relax. I’m going to push this down your throat. You’ll want to retch and it will hurt. I want you just to look at me all the time, alright?”

“Can’t see you,” Harry mumbled.

“His glasses are missing,” Ron said. He looked up at the Aurors that were still surrounding them, watching with awful fascination. Their wands were still out, but mostly held at their sides. Ron recognised Franklin and Hencliffe, who were on his sister’s case. There was Beecham and Dowling, who were always around Felton, like his private guard. The warders, who’d appeared briefly at the back of the group, had scuttled off. “Any of you bastards know where they are?”

“I’ll check in the cell,” Dowling said, and moved away.

“Worse than that,” Harry whispered.

“It can be a result of the poisoning,” Snape said quietly. “We can sort that out. Look at my outline, feel my hand on your neck, squeeze my arm if it’ll help. Relax your throat, Harry.” He slipped one hand behind Harry’s neck, tipping his head back. “I’m going to give you a little bit of water. Hold it in your mouth, swallow when I say. Alright?”

A tiny smile quirked Harry’s lip. “Jus’ brilliant,” he agreed.

Snape’s lip turned a fraction in response. “You will be. Here’s the water, take a sip. Right, here we go.” He slipped his fingers into Potter’s mouth, and pushed the bezoar. “Swallow.”
Snape felt Harry’s fingers scrabbling against his thigh, his throat convulsing, as he fought the urge to gag.

“Easy,” he said gently, his other hand on the back of Potter’s neck tightening a little. As Potter craned his neck into the pressure, he pushed the bezoar again. “Swallow,” he repeated, face almost against Potter’s. The green eyes were wild. He could feel the fight rising in him. “Trust me,” he said, and could feel the warmth of his breath bouncing back at him from Potter’s skin. Something seemed to release in Potter; as he started to swallow, Snape pushed, Harry swallowed again, wincing. Snape withdrew his fingers, stroking them down Harry’s throat, gently, gently.

“Well done,” he said, pulling back from the strange intimacy. “Drink a little more, it will ease the pain in your throat a little.”

Harry was lying back against Ron, soft panting breaths coming from him.

“That’s it,” Ron said gently, a hand stroking Harry’s forearm. “Well done, mate.” He held the canteen to Harry’s mouth.

Harry’s hand was shaking as he steadied the can, taking a small sip. His body tensed, as if expecting it to come straight back up, then relaxed back as it seemed to hold.

Ron looked up. “So, any chance we can move him to a bed now? Or are you all just enjoying the view?”

In the cell, Kingsley stood beside Benningdean. Two more Aurors – Kingsley supposed they were Benningdean’s guards – stood in the doorway. Felton stood just outside in the corridor, where he could see Harry, Ron and Snape, as well as listen to Shacklebolt and Benningdean.

Kingsley just waited. He needed to know what sort of man Benningdean was.

The Minister seemed to pull himself together, and then stepped carefully across to the bed, avoiding as best as he could the worst excesses on the floor. He fingered the blanket, and pressed the mattress. It squelched. He went across to the toilet and basin, giving a cursory glance. The lack of water in the toilet bowl was unmissable. It was impossible to say whether the stench there was created entirely by Harry’s ill health, or was the foul fumes arising from the sewers due to the lack of water in the U-bend. The man pulled a handkerchief out of his pocket and tried to turn on the tap.

“The Auror carrying him said he was poisoned,” he said, turning to Kingsley.

“There was a single bottle of water when we entered the cell – no other available water, as you can see,” Kingsley responded. “Potions Master Snape will be analysing the contents, but his preliminary inspection – not to mention the state of Mr Potter - leads us to believe that it is poisoned.”

“When was he arrested?”

“Mr Potter’s family has never been informed that he had been arrested. They reported him missing – to the MLE – on Sunday morning. I’ve been assisting his sons in looking for him. The papers had reported him missing on Monday. At no point has any information ever been given that he was being held here under arrest.”
There were noises in the corridor, and Kingsley turned to see Felton disappearing from view.

“Thank you, Mr Shacklebolt, for your clear summary,” Benningdean said. “I’ll look into what has happened here.”

“Thank you,” Kingsley inclined his head.

They headed out to investigate, to find that the mediwizard had arrived.

“Ramsay, perhaps we could leave the mediwizard to his work and go and discuss this upstairs,” Benningdean said, coming up beside his colleague.

The mediwizard looked up, face serious. “I need to take him to St Mungo’s – ”

“No,” Felton said abruptly.

Everyone stared at him.

“This man is very ill,” the mediwizard said. “I need to – ”

“Whatever you need to do, you’ll do it here,” Felton said unequivocally. “He is a dangerous suspect. I will not allow him to put other patients at risk at the hospital. This department will not be blamed –”

“We’re talking about Harry Potter,” Kingsley said mildly. “As far as I remember, he saved our world. When did he become this huge security risk?”

“When he murdered his wife in cold blood and rigged the blame onto an innocent man,” Felton responded.

There was silence.

“Allegedly,” Snape said. “Or is innocent until proven guilty still an alien concept in Wizarding Britain?”

“Well, I can’t treat him on the floor,” the mediwizard protested. “This is quite ridiculous!”

“You can use the cell behind you,” Felton said.

“Do all the cells on this floor have magic-dampening wards?” Snape asked.

“Yes,” Felton said uncompromisingly. “There is no way that I am going to have Harry Potter in a cell without magical warding.”

“How on earth do you expect me to carry out my duties without magic?” the mediwizard blustered.

“Improvise,” Felton snapped, and turned to Benningdean. “Let’s go to my office, shall we?”

“I’ll join you,” Kingsley said. He glanced at Snape, who stood up gracefully.

“I’ll remain here for the moment,” Snape said.

“That’s not necessary – ” Felton started.

“Oh, I think it is,” Snape said, and turned his back on them, moving into the cell, and going to check very obviously whether there was water in the pipes.
Ron once again lifted Harry, and carried him to the bed.

Benningdean, Felton and Kingsley swept off, followed by all except the mediwizard, Dowling and Beecham.

The mediwizard sent Beecham off to get a long list of equipment that he needed, muttering all the while at the absurdity of expecting him to work without magic, especially when the patient was so ill. Harry had lapsed into unconsciousness again.

The mediwizard was horrified at the thought of removing Harry’s clothes without magic, of having to touch them or him in his filthy state.

Snape looked over at Ron, who began to undo the buttons of Harry’s prison robe himself.

The mediwizard rifled through the bag he had brought with him, and extracted two potions.

“What are those?” Snape demanded.

“His temperature is too low, and he’s dehydrated.” Mediwizard Thompson said superciliously. “I can’t warm him with magic, but a dose of Liquid Heat and Rehydration Elixir – ”

“Will kill him,” Snape growled.

Ron looked up.

“I don’t know who you think you are – ”

“You obviously haven’t a clue,” Ron said, straightening and crossing his arms.

“I beg your pardon? Are you both preventing me from treating my patient?” Thompson looked outraged.

“Liquid Heat will not only destroy the bezoar that Mr Potter has ingested – a bezoar that you have already been informed he has consumed within the last thirty minutes – but will cause a reaction with said bezoar which will eat through his stomach,” Snape said.

Thompson looked confused. “I don’t know why you would think that –”

“Perhaps because I’ve read Parsimmon’s Practical Guide to Usage and Contra-Indications of Medicinal Potions?” Snape sneered. “A text that is required reading for all first year trainee mediwizards, and yet seems to have slipped your notice.”

“I don’t know who you think you are!” the man blustered.

Snape ignored him and moved over to Harry. He and Ron made short work of the rest of the buttons between them.

“He’s Potions Master Severus Snape,” Ron said, over Harry’s shoulder. “Order of Merlin, First Class, creator of – ”

“Thank you, Ron,” Snape cut in, “I think you’ve cleared my credentials sufficiently.”
“You realise I get paid an absolute pittance for being on call to these prisoners?” Thompson complained.

“So it’s alright that you’re rubbish?” Ron snapped. “The people in the holding cells here are all innocent until trial proves otherwise, you know.”

“Let’s be honest, Auror, they wouldn’t be here if they weren’t guilty, now would they?” the man said smugly.

Ron had to bite back his fury, because it was mingled with guilt: how often had he thought much the same? If they’d arrested someone, then surely they were guilty?

But here was Harry, and Snape too had probably been held in the cells here.

Harry’s robe was now open. He was naked underneath. Ron took a breath.

“Lift him,” Snape said, and Ron turned Harry to the side while Snape pulled the robe away. Snape put a blanket over him quickly.

“Well, I suppose you have no objection to me using a Rehydration Elixir,” Thompson said, without a hint of regret about the fatal use of the warming potion that he had been proposing.

“I have every objection,” Snape straightened. “What equipment have you ordered? I assumed you had sent for a Muggle drip.”

“A – a Muggle – well I never! And what could be wrong with –?”

“There are magic dampening wards on this cell.”

At the blank look on the man’s face, Snape prompted, “Without magic to draw fluid to the patient, how do you suppose rehydration will occur?”

Thompson opened and shut his mouth.

“No, I thought you had no idea. The potion will attract all the fluid in the patient’s body, Mediwizard. It will come into his stomach from his cells, and from his blood. Coronary failure and massive organ damage will ensue. The patient will die. Well done.”

“There’s no need to take that tone with me - !”

“There’s every reason. It’s years since I encountered such incompetence. I do not believe that you can have passed your Potions’ OWL, let alone NEWT. Now, do you know how to set up a Muggle drip or not?”

“Of course I know – ”

“Then go away, get what you need, and return as soon as you may. I will hold you accountable should anything happen to Mr Potter.”

Amidst further blustering, the man left.

“Jesus, he’s an idiot,” Ron said. “But we do need to get Harry warm. We need a fire – ” He strode over to Dowling with some orders, and Snape added his own.

Shortly after, they had a brazier in the cell, heating up with a smokeless fuel, and a bucket of hot water and washcloths and towels.
Snape peeled back the blanket, leaving Harry’s lower half covered, and Ron began to wash him down, Snape drying him as he went.

“Can you slip a clean towel under him whilst I turn him?” Snape asked.

“I’ll turn, you slip it in,” Ron said.

They worked as a team, moving on to wash Harry’s back.

Harry remained unconscious.

“Is this normal?” Ron whispered. “How can he sleep through this?”

“He’s very ill,” Snape said. He covered Harry’s back with a towel, then peeled the blanket from his lower regions.

Ron took a deep breath, then almost gagged on the smell.

Snape glanced up at him. “Why don’t you try and clean some of the vomit from his hair, whilst I deal with this?”

“You shouldn’t have to – ”

“It is a task neither of us would wish,” Snape agreed. “I think he might find it easier to have someone less familiar with him deal with this, rather than his best friend.”

“Right,” Ron nodded, relieved. He took up a flannel and tried to ease some of the mess from Harry’s hair.

Snape took up his flannel and methodically cleaned Harry’s legs, rinsing the cloth and then wiping over the curves of Harry’s arse. Ron’s intake of breath as Snape moved Harry’s legs apart was audible.

“I’m sorry, it’s essential,” he looked up at Ron, before wiping the clean flannel very gently down the crack.

Harry stirred, and Ron jumped.

“Alright, there mate?” He bent down to Harry’s level.

“Hurts,” Harry said, drawing his legs together.

Ron found his hand and gripped it. “Yeah, I bet,” Ron said. “Must be worse than the antidote to U-No-Poo. My arse was on fire for a week after the twins had tested those two on me. It hurts just remembering it.”

A smile vied with a frown of pain on Harry’s face.

“If you would just part your legs, Mr Potter, I will be done in a trice,” Snape said soothingly. “I have some healing salve that will ease the pain a little, and will not be affected by the magical dampening.”

Harry’s eyes tried to flutter open.

“Just let him do it,” Ron said.
“Cold,” Harry whispered.

“Yeah, we’ll wrap you up nice and warm and clean in a mo,” Ron said. “Open up, now, mate.”

Harry opened his mouth.

“You’re really not with it, are you?” Ron tried to smile. “Legs, you twit.”

Harry moved his legs. Snape did what was needed in a couple of moments. Harry bit his lip, which dripped blood onto the towel.

“Can you turn over?” Ron asked. “We can give you a flannel to finish yourself off.”

Snape had moved across the room, tipping the bucket contents down the toilet, and rinsing the flannel under the tap. He refilled the bucket, took it out of the cell, applied a heat spell and an anti-bacterial charm to both water and flannel, and returned.

Dowling’s cheeks were bright red as he stood with his back to the cell.

Snape handed Harry the flannel. He wrapped his hands round it, as if to enjoy the heat.

“Can you wash yourself, Mr Potter?” He leant over Harry.

Harry slowly lifted the flannel and started to wipe his face.

“I’ve done there,” Ron protested. “It’s for your bits, ‘cos I don’t fancy touching you down there, mate, and I’m sure Snape’s not interested either. Come on, get it done, and you can get back to sleep.”

It was obvious that Harry was barely conscious, but his hand slipped under the towel and moved around.

“Feel like I’m wanking in public,” Harry said, eyes shut.

“Yeah, well, don’t go getting ideas on that score,” Ron said, turning bright red.

Harry snorted, and his hand came out of the cover, flannel dangling. “Too tired,” he said, and the flannel fell from his hand as he once again slipped into unconsciousness.

Snape quickly folded the towel, covering Harry’s groin but exposing his legs, and washed and dried him.

“A clean blanket,” he said, and they whipped out the dirty one from underneath and slid in a new one.

Ron suddenly stripped off his robe and pulled off his shirt.

Snape had wrapped a blanket around Harry, but he now lifted Harry up so that they could slip the body-warmed garment over his head. It reached down Harry’s thighs, giving him some pretence of modesty. Then they re-wrapped him in blankets.

“Well done,” Snape said.

Ron looked washed out, but relieved. “How long before he’s better?”

Snape looked at him carefully. “He is still very ill. And he is very dehydrated. Unfortunately, the
poison has had time to take hold. He will have to eliminate the assimilated toxins from his body. There is likely to be more diarrhoea, and fever. I cannot give him any pain potions.”

“Oh god. I thought he’d be alright now.” Ron was pale.

“The Muggle rehydration should help.”

“That tosser will probably kill him,” Ron bit out.

“I’ll stay with him, do not fear on that score,” Snape said. “We can establish a rota, if need be. I cannot see them refusing us, given this shambles. The Minister has to think of what the press could do with this. Trust Kingsley to sort it out.”

“What can I do now?” Ron asked, as he put his Auror robe back on.

“You ought to go and tell the boys,” Snape suggested. “They need to know that he’s alive.”

“And accused of murdering their mother,” Ron said, as the reality of it hit him.

“We know he’s innocent,” Snape said gently.

“They don’t trust me,” Ron said, thinking things through. “I knew nothing about this. I didn’t even know they had cells down here. I didn’t know they could hold someone without the arrest registering –”

“There is much to think of,” Snape agreed, “but go and let everyone know that at least he’s been found.”

Ron nodded, and was gone.
Kingsley Shacklebolt watched with interest as Benningdean and Felton faced off. It was funny, really, because he’d been in both of their positions. Benningdean had moved the meeting to his own office, not conceding territory to Felton. He would have done the same.

Benningdean had softened the tone a little by calling for tea. They all sat there, holding saucers awkwardly and cups that had lilac flowers on and were too small for their large hands.

“So, Ramsay,” Benningdean said, “care to tell me why we have Harry Potter practically dead in the dungeon?”

Kingsley just avoided snorting into his tea. It seemed the Minister had a way with words. Not that there was anything to laugh about, given the condition Harry was in.

“I decided that the high security cells were the most appropriate place for him,” Felton said unapologetically.

“Really?”

“Yes, Sir. He killed Voldemort, didn’t he? And he survived the killing curse twice. He can’t be normal. I wasn’t prepared to risk placing him in the regular holding cells.”

“Are you telling me you have concerns about the security of our cells?”

“No Sir, not in the usual way. But for Harry Potter, I regard the magical-dampening as essential.”

“I don’t quite see – ”

“Mr Potter manipulates space in his work. We couldn’t risk his skills being used to allow his escape – ”

“Surely without his wand – ”

Felton shook his head. “We’ve been observing Mr Potter for some time. We have every reason to believe that he’s able to use wandless magic. He answered the door without his wand, for Merlin’s sake! How many wizards do that?”

“Then I appreciate your reasons for placing him in those cells, but we still have some problems.”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Firstly, Mr Potter’s arrest. It appears that his family and solicitor weren’t informed, and more than that, that the family reported him missing and weren’t told that he was here. Secondly, there is the condition Mr Potter is in, and the condition of his cell.”

“I agree, I’m very concerned about those aspects,” Felton said.

Interesting, Kingsley thought.

“I was present when Mr Potter was brought in and witnessed the paperwork being completed by the warder on duty,” Felton continued. “Unfortunately, as you know, I’ve been to a conference in Canada, and it seems in my absence that the normal routines have been - delayed.”
Benningdean leant forward. “Are you trying to tell me that your staff are incompetent?”

“No –”

“Then what?”

Felton shifted a little. “I will need to investigate what has happened. I only returned to work this morning and haven’t had time –”

“Make time.”

“Yes, Sir. As for the condition Mr Potter appeared to be in –”

“Appeared?”

“I’ll wait for the report from the Mediwizard, if you don’t mind, Sir. Prisoners have been known to pull a fast one –”

“You have had your yearly medical, Felton?”

“Sir?”

“Your eyes and ears and nose are functioning properly? Mr Potter and the cell were – plastered – in human – well, I don’t need to be explicit. Are you saying that wasn’t the case? Or that Mr Potter poisoned himself?”

Felton’s mouth opened and shut.

“Precisely. A man arrested unexpectedly on his doorstep, if what you’re saying is correct, was able to take a poison into prison, or somehow get hold of one, and chose to use it ‘to pull a fast one’. I’m not quite following your logic.”

Felton brushed a hand over his face. “I’ll need to talk to some people, but it’s possible that one of the warders may have done it.”

“It seems inevitable that the warders either did it or were complicit, certainly,” Benningdean said. “Someone turned the water off too.”

“Potter put in an official complaint about the treatment of Draco Malfoy,” Felton said. “I can’t say for sure, but it could be that the warder responsible may have – got his own back.”

Benningdean leant back in his chair. “I’m not an idiot, Felton. This is looking very bad for your department. Potter’s lawyer will inevitably put in a complaint. And it’s bound to be Mrs Weasley, who is one of the best legal minds in the country. The whole Ministry is going to come under fire for this. I’m assuming that you had very good grounds for making the arrest?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Benningdean continued to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” Felton glanced at Kingsley. “Meaning no personal offence, Mr Shacklebolt, but you mentioned that you were helping the family. Obviously, it would not be appropriate to discuss the matter in front of you.”

“I presume the grounds for arrest are on the official documents, which are, of course, a public record,” Kingsley said. “Not that they have been recorded, because I’m sure CLAM would have
checked and told the family where their father was, even if the arresting officers failed to do so.”

The two men sized each other up.

“I’m just wondering,” Felton said, “how you came to know where Potter was, given the – oversight – with his paperwork.”

“As you said yourself,” Kingsley drawled, “I really don’t think it would be – appropriate – to discuss that in front of you.”

Felton stood up. “Unless you need me for anything else, Sir, I’ll start looking into this matter at once.”

“What are your plans as regards Harry?” Kingsley asked. “I presume you’re going to refuse bail, as you won’t even allow him to move to a standard holding cell?”

“There is never a question of bail in a murder case, you know that.”

Kingsley inclined his head. “I understand that. However, the conditions in which we found Mr Potter are unacceptable.”

“I don’t think your views are of particular relevance –”

The Minister coughed loudly. “I think we can find a –happy understanding – gentlemen, can’t we? Head Auror Felton obviously feels he has good grounds for keeping Mr Potter in custody. I too was shocked at what I saw, and I’m sure you were too, Ramsay,” he added diplomatically. “I appreciate your reasons for ruling out the usual holding cells: nevertheless, Mr Potter is obviously seriously ill, and must have medical attention. We need to ensure that the warders who are in charge of him are not – holding grudges, shall we say.”

“I’d like someone to be with him 24 hours a day,” Kingsley said.

“That’s not possible –” Felton began.

“Nobody can use magic in his cell,” Benningdean said.

“We accept that,” Kingsley agreed.

“Minister! Making concessions –”

“If Mr Potter dies, Felton, I will hold you personally responsible,” Benningdean said sharply. “Someone has obviously tried to kill him, whilst in custody. I am seriously having doubts about your own department at this point, so don’t push me. Mr Shacklebolt, let me be blunt. If we concede to his having – company – in the cell, will the family hold off from going to the press?”

Kingsley looked shrewdly at the man, trying to work out exactly what he wanted to gain. “Mr Potter will be allowed medical help, unrestricted access to his lawyer, food provided by us, and a companion to ensure his protection at all times. If these simple requests are acceptable, then I think it likely that the family will hold off going to the press - unless Mr Potter’s condition deteriorates.”

“Done.” Benningdean looked across at Felton. “See to it. And I await your report on this shambles within twenty four hours.”

Felton left the room, with a curt nod at the Minister and at Shacklebolt, barely able to contain his fury.
Benningdean looked across at Kingsley. “Might I ask how you come to be involved in this?”

“I fought in the war with Harry Potter.”

“That doesn’t really answer my question.”

Kingsley laughed. “It doesn’t.”

“More tea?”

“I wouldn’t say no,” Kingsley said. “Perhaps you could arrange to have some sent down to Master Snape, as well. A biscuit or two wouldn’t go amiss.”

“Of course.” Benningdean summoned an elf and gave instructions.

“Master Snape assisted Potter in his defence of Malfoy,” Benningdean fished.

“He did, yes.”

Benningdean rubbed his nose. “Is everyone as tight as a jarvey’s arse? Once upon a time, I felt I had my finger on the pulse.”

Kingsley laughed. “What do you want to know?”

“You and Master Snape and Potter have been friends all these years?”

“We’ve only just made contact with Harry recently. Nevertheless, I have every faith in him. He’s a good man. I’m astonished that your Aurors believe they can pin his wife’s murder on him.”

“Felton is usually very thorough,” Benningdean said meditatively. “I’m as surprised by the turn of events as you are.”

“You weren’t briefed, I take it?” Kingsley said delicately.

Benningdean looked at him sharply. “I take it you were, if you had – controversial – cases?”

“It was after the war. I’d gone from being Head Auror to being Minister. I suspect I insisted on knowing what was going on. And a lot of well-known wizards were brought to trial: I had a daily report.”

“I came into this for more political reasons; I’ve never been involved with the MLE,” he sighed. “To be honest, I’ve always felt that it was better for the Minister not to be involved.”

“Well, that’s understandable,” Kingsley said. “Things are different now – we were coming out of a war then. You’ve had experience in the Ministry, though?”

“Yes, I was involved in international trading standards – part of the Department of International Magical Co-operation, as you probably know. My background is business and finance.”

“Very useful, I’d say,” Kingsley nodded. “You speak other languages?”

“French, Spanish and Chinese.”

“Exceptionally useful,” Kingsley said. “Translation spells are a bugger, aren’t they?”

“Dire,” Benningdean laughed.
Kingsley took a decision.

“Minister,” he said formally, “perhaps I ought to clarify my position.”

“Yes?”

The tea arrived, along with biscuits and small sandwiches.

Kingsley ate three before continuing, but didn’t change his mind.

“I work for the European Wizarding Alliance.”

“Really? I’ve heard of them, of course.”

“Well, few have, but I’m glad to hear it.”

“I’d heard of the EWA before I became Minister, but then, I was dealing with other European nations quite a bit then.”

“Well, that’s good.”

“They’re interested in Mr Potter?”

“Actually. It was the death of Ginevra Potter that attracted our attention,” Kingsley said, with complete honesty, if some discombobulation.


“The Veritaserox evidence showed three men dressed in garb that we’ve seen before.”

There was no mistaking the seriousness of Kingsley’s tone.

“What is your role in this?” Benningdean got straight to the point.

“My team investigates new threats to the stability of the wizarding world.”

“And you think these people – ?”

“We don’t know what they’re doing yet, or who they are, but their actions are certainly destabilizing things, quietly but steadily. And now they’re working in England.”

“Bugger. I could do without this!” Benningdean looked weary, rather than shocked.

“We all could,” Kingsley agreed sympathetically.

“You think Potter has been set up?”

“It’s looking like it. And Malfoy, for that matter.”

Benningdean got up and started pacing his room.

“I can’t just release Mr Potter. There are due processes…”

“Of course,” Kingsley said.

Benningdean looked mollified. “You think they’ve targeted Potter to decrease stability here? I appreciate his past actions, of course, but he is hardly a figure that I would have thought to be a
“I’m still feeling my way round this,” Kingsley said, “but so far this murder has affected the world
of sport and entertainment, through Mrs Potter, the press and business, through Draco Malfoy, our
— cultural history and heroes, through Mr Potter, and this latest — the treatment of Mr Potter — could
destroy you, frankly.”

“Me?”

“Depends where the press assign the responsibility,” Kingsley said honestly, “but if it’s not you,
it’s the MLE, probably both, and the bottom line is that the Ministry is going to be damaged.”

Benningdean stopped pacing, and stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Is that the real reason why
you’re holding off on going to the press?”

“Partly,” Kingsley said, “although frankly, I’m utterly disgusted by what I saw down there. You
deserve that the press has a field day about it. I’m trusting you to make sure that that sort of
treatment of detainees never happens again.”

Benningdean nodded. “Agreed.”

Kingsley got up to go.

They shook hands.

As Kingsley reached the door, Benningdean asked, “Would you trust Felton?”

Kingsley turned and leant back against the door. He appreciated that it must have been difficult for
the Minister to ask. But he, if anyone, understood the isolation of the Minister’s position. He
answered frankly. “Difficult one, that. Obviously, he’s made a right mess of things. How long has
he been in post?”

“Three or four years?”

“This shouldn’t have happened, then. On the other hand, if he was genuinely at a conference,
things could have got out of hand in his absence. It doesn’t speak well of his leadership. He’s either
incompetent, unlucky, or a bad egg. Who’s the Head of MLE?”

“Dorothy Atkins. Been in charge for eighteen months, two years. Popular.”

“Popular doesn’t mean anything,” Kingsley shook his head. “I would have expected her to oversee
the matter in Felton’s absence, especially with a detainee of Harry’s calibre. Maybe that needs
looking into.”

Benningdean nodded. “Thanks, I’m grateful for your opinion. You’re more generous than I would
have been.”

“I’m not feeling generous, I’m feeling angry,” Kingsley said. “Fair treatment, fair trial.”

Benningdean nodded.

Harry could smell a fire. His eyes cracked open a little. He didn’t have his glasses on. Everything
was blurred. He could tell, though, from the shifting patterns, that flames were flickering.

He felt too hot. Or did he feel cold? He could feel sweat dripping down his back. He shifted a little, conscious that his front was clammy too.

“Do you need anything?”

The voice was deep, familiar. Unthreatening. His brain was sluggish, unable to grasp who it was. He opened his eyes wider, but could see barely a dark shape….

“Sna-pe?” his voice broke mid-word.

“It sounds like you could do with some water. Hold on a moment.”

Harry wondered where they were. He was wrapped up in a bed. He was definitely too hot. He started pushing the covers back. A mug was held to his lips. He remembered he shouldn’t drink. He couldn’t remember why –

“It’s clean,” Snape said quietly. “This water is clean, Harry.”

He was so thirsty. His mouth felt thick and furry. His breath must be foul. He ran his tongue around it slowly. He could taste vomit.

The shape loomed over him, and he felt a hand under his shoulders, lifting him. It was solid, and comforting. The mug prodded his lip.

“Snape?” he said again.

“Who else?”

Harry drank.

“Not too much,” the voice warned.

Harry allowed the hand to lower him back on the bed. He appeared to have pillows.

Instantly, his guts convulsed.

“You poisoned me!” he gasped, fumbling to get out of the bed. Restraints of some sort seemed to be getting in his way, yanking on his arm.

“No. Toilet?”

Harry nodded.

A strong arm steered him over to the lavatory bowl. He only just made it in time. Sweat poured off him as he sat there, elbows resting on shaky knees.

A hand behind him pushed the flush after a moment or two, washing away some of the foul smell.

Water!

He felt Snape squatting in front of him.

“It’s going to take a few more bouts to clear the poison from your system,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry that I can’t do anything to ease your discomfort, but you have ingested a bezoar, and we do
now have clean water.”

“I’m still in prison,” Harry said.

“Yes. How much can you see?”

“Your shape, just. Has someone smashed my glasses?”

Harry felt them being poked into his hand, and put them on. It wasn’t a great improvement. Fear swelled in him.

“The blindness is as a result of the poisoning; it should get better,” Snape said.

Harry found his voice ridiculously soothing.

He reached round, to see what was dragging at his arm, and realised that he wasn’t manacled. But – he lifted his hand in front of his eyes, and could just make out the needle inserted in the back. “A drip?”

“Yes, the cell is warded against magic, and we needed to get fluids into you.”

“Did you do it?” Harry asked in wonder.

“No. A mediwizard has been.”

“You don’t think much of him,” Harry said, judging from the tone of Snape’s voice.

“Correct. But I think you’ll be alright now. One of us will be with you at all times, do not fear.”

“They think I murdered Ginny.”

“So I gather. Hermione has the matter in hand. They failed to put out notice of your arrest, and even failed to tell your children when they reported you missing. Kingsley has had words with the Minister.”

“I’ve caused you a lot of trouble,” Harry said.

Snape snorted. “Brings back the old days.”

Harry started to smile, but his stomach convulsed again. Shivering set in. A moment or two later, a blanket was thrown over his shoulders.

“It is horrid, I know, but the sooner it’s all out of your system, the better.”

“I can’t believe I’m shitting in front of you,” Harry bit out, as his stomach cramped and clenched. A hand landed on his shoulder. “Do not let it trouble you. We all have to go.”

“Not in front of others!”

“Do you want me to go? I’m reluctant to leave you: you may pass out again.”

“Got a book or something you can read? And I’m really sorry about the smell.”

Time passed. Harry seemed to be in a half-world, staggering from the bed to the loo and back again. Snape was quietly there in the background.

Finally, he slept.

When he woke, he was surprised to find Albus, rather than Snape, in the chair by the bed. To his relief, once he’d grabbed his glasses, he could actually see his son.

“All right, Dad?” Albus hovered.

Harry took stock. Things seemed quiet in the stomach department.

“Might be,” he said cautiously.

He sat up, and was surprised to feel the room swimming.

Albus was beside him, supporting him at once.

“Ooh-er. Sorry about that,” Harry said, world still reeling.

“Severus said that you ought to eat something, if you could.”

“Severus?”

“He told us to call him that. He’s been staying over for a couple of days. Brewing a potion to help us find you. And helping us learn stuff.”

“I think you’re right, I need to eat before I hear all that.”

“You do,” Snape said, entering the cell.

Albus looked round and grinned at the Potions Master. “Told you I wouldn’t kill him.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“He’s been like a mother hen,” Albus teased, much to Harry’s amazement. “He’s been stuck by your side for the last eighteen hours. Kingsley – well, all of us - insisted that he go home and get a couple of hours’ sleep.”

“I’m so sorry – ” Harry said, and didn’t know whether to be mortified or pleased. Shocked, certainly.

“I don’t need much sleep,” Snape dismissed his efforts. “And I was able to catch up with my reading. Your son seems to have done a good job in my absence.”

“Haven’t done anything at all, he’s been fast asleep till the moment before you arrived,” Albus admitted cheerfully.

Snape took something out of the cell, cast a spell under the eye of yet another Auror, and returned. It appeared to be a flask of something. Severus poured it out.

“Gran’s chicken broth,” Albus said. “Apparently you need something very light for your stomach.”

Harry drank the soup with pleasure, and found himself exhausted at the end, his hand starting to shake.
“That is probably enough,” Snape said. “Don’t force it. You may find it starts you cramping again ...”

“Oh no…” Harry moaned.

“But the worst should be through your system. I take it your sight has returned?”

“Yeah, thank god for that,” Harry said.

“Did you go blind?” Albus asked in amazement. He obviously hadn’t known.

“A temporary effect of one of the ingredients in the poison,” Snape said. “I don’t expect the poisoner had any idea that would occur.”

“Do they know who did it?” Harry whispered, lying back against his pillows.

“Sole responsibility falls on one of the warders, apparently. I gather you pissed him off in regard to Draco.”

“Yup. Wasn’t sure if he was acting alone or on orders,” Harry looked hard at Snape.

“It appears that he is taking the full brunt of the recriminations,” Snape said, sitting down. “He has been dismissed. Given his liking for revenge, you will need to look out when you come out of here, or if he was set up, then I suspect someone else in the organisation will be getting their just deserts.”

Harry was quiet. “Do we know what their case is against me? You know I wouldn’t hurt – ” he started saying to Albus, who interrupted at once.

“Don’t be daft, Dad! I don’t know what they can be thinking, but according to Mione, they don’t need to tell us in advance of the trial exactly what evidence they think they have.”

Harry looked at Snape. “You said before that they’d suspect me, if Draco was innocent.”

“The husband is the usual culprit,” Snape said. “That was all I was saying.”

Harry nodded. After a moment, he turned to look at Albus. “How’re James and Lily?”

“James has gone into work today – I think they were getting a bit shirty with him missing so much time, as if he can help it! He was here before he went in, and he’ll be along after.”

“Good,” Harry said. “You – did you tell Lily?”

“Of course we did! It was all over the papers – how could we not? Anyway, she’s fine.”

“She’s not been here?”

“The Headmaster isn’t very keen on her missing any more school, what with the NEWTS coming up, but she says she’s coming this weekend – ”

“He’s right, she needs to concentrate on her work. God, her year’s been really messed up – ” Harry ran a shaky hand over his face.

“Potter, every year of your education was messed up, and yet you haven’t done so badly,” Snape said.
Harry looked at him. Snape looked very tall and very distinguished in his robes. “Yeah, here I am, in prison accused of murder,” he quipped.

Albus snorted.

Snape’s lips twitched. “I must admit, I was rather thinking of your earlier achievements –”

“You’re not thinking of running your own business, and bringing up three children who appear to have a modicum of good sense and manners,” Snape said, glancing at Albus.

“Good lord, what have you done to earn Snape’s approval?” Harry gawked.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Snape murmured.

Albus grinned, unbothered.

Harry couldn’t believe the easy manner between the two of them.

Ramsey Felton sat facing Dorothy Atkins. She was his superior, as Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Department, but as she had no experience in the practicalities of Auror work, she had pretty much left him to his own devices since she joined MLE getting on for two years earlier. Her background was in law, and she had prosecuted many cases for the Wizengamot before her appointment. She was highly regarded by the other division heads – he suspected that Daltry, who was in charge of the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office, had a crush on her – from all he’d seen of her, she was fair, and could be witty and amusing when she chose to be.

“Well, Ramsey, this is the biggest balls-up I’ve seen in this department, and that, frankly, is saying something. I’d always thought you were a safe pair of hands,” she said, her voice tinged with a disappointment that she made sound personal. The threat – that she could no longer think him trustworthy – hung in the air. She was a woman famed in court for being good with words. Everything she said was nuanced.

“I’ve interviewed the warders under Veritaserum. As I thought, Peters, who if you remember, we reprimanded after Mr Potter put in that complaint, was responsible for poisoning firstly Mr Potter’s food, and then his water. He cut off the water supply too, after he found Potter trying to get fresh water from the toilet. Khan didn’t actually do anything, but didn’t stop it either: his daughter is married to Peters’ son, and he didn’t want to cause any ‘family trouble’, as he put it. I intend to dismiss them both, if you’ll approve it.”

“Is that all?”

“Sorry?”

“Why are you not considering prosecution?” She sat forward and studied him. “You put him up to it.”

“No!”

“No?”
Felton was sweating. He could feel it, clammy, under his arms.

“You did something,” she said, shrewdly. She sat back. “You’d better tell me. Unless I have a good reason, I’ll over-ride you on this. I won’t accept this sort of behaviour from our staff.”

Felton gritted his teeth.

The moment stretched.

“Right.” She leant forward once again, her elbows on the desk, fingers steepling. “This changes things. I think you know that I can no longer trust you after this. We’ll have to work out what’s best for the future of the department.”

Felton weighed up losing his job with the possibility that she might decide to prosecute him too. He decided to put his side.

“I may have given him a little leeway. I specifically said no broken bones or visible damage, which I thought he’d take to mean that I didn’t think it would hurt if he was a little mean with privileges. I was trying to give the warders a little bit of support! It’s not the best of jobs, stuck down in the bowels of the Ministry day in and day out. How the hell was I to imagine that he’d poison him?”

“And you deliberately didn’t submit the paperwork, so that no-one could interfere.”

“I said it was okay to hold it back till Monday morning! It was the weekend!”

“You’re being disingenuous. Potter has family, and he’s high profile. It didn’t occur to you that it would be essential to do everything by the book? I hope to bloody hell that you’ve got a good case against him, Felton!”

“We have.”

“I want all the paperwork on my desk within the hour. Have you talked to the Wizengamot Administration Service about a court date?”

“Not yet.”

“You’ll need to make sure he’s in perfect health before the case. I’m not having him appearing in The Prophet looking like he’s been badly treated. The Minister is furious, and I’ve taken the shit for you on this one. Don’t let me down again, Felton.”

“No, Ma’am.” He left the room, heading down to his office, and ignoring his secretary, shut the door and then kicked his filing cabinet.

For Harry, the next forty eight hours passed in a trail of visitors. He seemed to have someone with him all the time. At first, he was in and out of sleep, but in a surprisingly short time, he felt considerably better, and was out of his bed and up.

It was then that he found it exhausting to have so many people dropping in.

Not that any of them had been unwelcome, but his head was buzzing with thoughts and not everyone was like Snape, able to sit and read and just be, without expecting him to be talking all the time.
Snape was with him on Saturday evening, quietly reading a book. He had brought several in for Harry, who’d been surprised how relaxing it was to just get lost in someone else’s world for a couple of hours. It was late, and he saw Snape looking at his watch.

“Is someone else coming?” he asked.

“James.”

“Why don’t you go now and tell him not to, would you?”

Snape looked across at him assessingly. “Had enough of us all?”

“I’m just going to go to sleep. If they murder me in my bed, we’ll know who to blame.”

Snape looked thoughtful. “Walsingham is on, I believe. He seems trustworthy.”

“Yeah, he was alright in school too. Been okay here. Frankly, I don’t think any of them would dare harm me now that everyone knows where I am.”

“And you’re feeling alright?”

“Just tired. What happens with that bezoar, by the way? Is it still in my stomach? Protecting me?”

“If it were so easy, anyone at risk would just swallow one and be done with it,” Snape answered.

“So. I’ve passed it, then, or something?”

“It will be slowly dissolving in your stomach, so it will still have some protection. They’ve usually completely dissolved within a week, depending on the initial size.”

“Okay. I wondered,” Harry said.

Snape got up, closing his book. “Neville will be along in the morning.”

Harry reached out his hand, closing it over Snape’s wrist to get him to look at him.

“I don’t need people all the time now,” he said. “I’ll be alright.”

“I’ll tell him not to come?”

“If you would.”

Snape swung his cloak over his shoulders. “You don’t get on?”

“Yeah, we do, but I saw him yesterday. There’s only so much conversation you can dig up, isn’t there, however much you like a person?”

“Thanks.”

“Oh, I don’t mean you,” Harry said, with a grin.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“You’re happy to read. And let me read, or think. You’re surprisingly restful, Snape,” Harry said, a hint of surprise in his voice, as if realising it for the first time.

“And you need rest?”
“Sort of. All this coming and going – everyone’s very kind – but – I mean, my brain’s - ”

“Struggling? What’s new?”

“Yeah, yeah, I know. Two cells to rub together and it’s hard work for them to do even that. ” Harry took Snape’s ribbing with a slight smile, and was pleased to see Snape’s lips curl in response. He added seriously, “I need time to think. I can’t do it with all of them in and out, lovely though it is - ”

“You don’t have to do the whole gratitude thing, this is me you’re talking to,” Snape said.

“Well, I am grateful – I’m more grateful to you than anyone else,” Harry added, “and I haven’t even said thank you –”

“Stop right there.”

Harry snorted. “Thank you. I mean it. And I won’t say another word. But tell them to leave off the rota, or whatever’s going on, will you?”

“Albus and James will still come. And Molly wants to check how her meals are suiting you.”

“Can’t sort out Molly Weasley? Join the gang,” Harry grinned.

Snape walked over to the door. “I will drop by tomorrow evening.” He held up his hand. “If you don’t want company, I won’t stay. But you might want someone to bounce your thoughts off of, assuming you have had any. And I might suggest you see Hermione again, while it’s the weekend. She will have to go into work on Monday, and clear her other cases to take yours, and it may not be as easy as she would wish.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, his face turning serious. “Would you ask her – ”

“She was due to come anyway. I’ll tell the others to go and enjoy themselves. The weather has been very pleasant this weekend.”

“It has?” Harry said wistfully.

Snape looked at him, thinking of Harry’s patronus, and its strange request for him, the bezoar and sunshine. He would ask about that another day.

“Sleep well now,” and he was gone.

Harry shut the book in front of him and thought of Hermione. And Ron. Both had been in several times to see him. Hermione had been horribly apologetic that she had continued to work on her case, but Ron had said how she’d been researching, and teaching the kids in the evenings. Harry had nodded and consoled her: it must be an impossible task, after all, to find someone missing. And I might suggest you see Hermione again, while it’s the weekend. She will have to go into work on Monday, and clear her other cases to take yours, and it may not be as easy as she would wish.”

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Harry understood that they had both needed to do what they did. He did, really. And yet…it hurt a bit, thinking of them going on with their normal lives whilst he was effectively kidnapped. He knew, logically, that there was nothing else they could do, that finding him was like looking for a needle in a haystack. That he would have hated it if Hermione’s client had ended up incarcerated. And yet….

He went through his night time ablutions – he only had cold water, but he did have water and a towel. It was the first time without someone in the cell with him, although there was still an Auror
outside, who had thankfully turned his back.

Tucked under his blankets five minutes later, with the cell lit only from the light in the corridor, he put his hands behind his head and started thinking of the various conversations that he had had over the last couple of days.

The boys had been regular visitors, of course, although he had told Albus that he too should get back to work. The goblins had been more willing to accept Albus’ absence, on the simple basis that they didn’t pay him if he didn’t come in, but Albus agreed that with more time off needed when Harry’s trial came up, he ought to show in the meantime that he was indeed a dedicated employee - though as he said to his father, he wasn’t feeling that dedicated at the moment.

Harry didn’t want him to be spending his days lurking around a prison cell either.

As for Lily, she’d written to him as soon as she’d heard from the boys that he was alive. He’d written back and told her not to visit, that he’d write every day instead.

James had come in for the second time on Friday, waving a letter in his hand, from the Headmaster at Hogwarts.

Harry reached over to the table, and re-read the letter, squinting in the dim light:

---

Dear Mr (James) Potter

I am writing to you as the de facto head of the Potter household, given your father’s current situation.

Lily has requested leave this weekend to visit her father in the holding cells at the Ministry.

I have considered this matter very gravely, and taken advice from her Head of House and the Board of Governors.

As you know, Lily is in her final year and will shortly be facing the rigours of her NEWTS. She was expected to do very well, but her teachers report that the unfortunate events of this year have affected her marks. This was perhaps inevitable, but I am very anxious that this further situation not be allowed to damage her future prospects.

Lily feels that as it is the weekend, such a visit will not interfere with her studies. However, I feel that a visit to what is, in effect, a prison, and seeing her father incarcerated, cannot but affect her state of mind and her ability to concentrate on her studies. Furthermore, she is due to play this weekend in an inter-house quidditch match, and her absence would sorely let down her teammates. Whilst I am sure they would endeavour to be understanding, your father’s arrest has been something of an embarrassment to the school, and her absence can only provoke further comment. I feel she would benefit from the exercise and team spirit by participating in the match.

I would therefore like your support for the school’s decision to refuse Lily permission to visit her father.

Yours sincerely
James had been absolutely outraged by the letter, and completely taken aback when Harry had said, “He’s right.”

“Dad!” his son had expostulated. “He’s called you an embarrassment! You! And to deny Lily –”

“Well, it is an embarrassment to have one of your pupils’ parents arrested for murder. And he’s right about it affecting Lily: this year is hard enough for her. It’d be terrible if she didn’t get the results she needs to get into the University in Paris: she’ll be gutted. And anyway, she’d be much better off playing quidditch than stuck in the gloom in here.”

Harry hated the cells. It was weird, because he’d spent years in the cupboard under the stairs at the Dursley’s, which was a far smaller space than his current accommodation. And yet…he hadn’t seen natural light for over a week. It itched at him, making him tense. He wondered if he would ever see it again.

What case did they have against him? Snape had said that the husband was the usual suspect, but what evidence did they have? They’d need evidence, wouldn’t they?

Hermione had gone through possible scenarios, writing them down so that they couldn’t be overheard. She’d asked for his alibi – where was he at the time of the murder?

It brought it all into suddenly sharp focus – he had been so disbelieving at being arrested that the fact that he was actually going to be tried for Ginny’s murder hadn’t really registered. It still seemed unreal. How could anyone think that he would murder her? Did they think he was one of the three attackers? Who did they think he’d roped in to assist? Or did they suppose that he’d paid someone to do it? The whole idea was unbelievable. And once again, he was coming up against the ridiculous system of justice. Until the trial, he would have no idea of the grounds on which the Aurors had based the warrant for his arrest. No wonder Hermione had declined to become a school governor when she’d been asked – she’d been spending years whittling her way through a whole series of amendments to the justice system. Unfortunately, none that would be of much help to him.

He slept fitfully, and woke on his own. Albus came in around eleven, and he was surprised how long the time stretched out when he was alone.

They played a game of chess, though neither were particularly good at it, and it was strange to see the pieces standing stationary and solid, instead of thwacking their opponents to pieces. Just before one, Molly Weasley arrived, bearing food.

“And this needs to be eaten now,” she said, “while it’s still hot.”

“Yes, Mum,” Harry teased, though he was profoundly glad that the Weasleys had stood by him.

“Go on with you,” she said, laying the table with a checked tablecloth and a napkin. “No need not to do it properly,” she commented, as she sniffed at the plastic cutlery that he was forced to use.

Strange what things from the Muggle world that wizards had accepted, Harry thought. Who would
ever have supposed that plastic cutlery would feature?

“Aren’t you going to the football this afternoon with Fred and Teddy?” Molly asked Albus.

“I don’t need to go yet –”

“I’d forgotten all about the match!” Harry said. “You weren’t going to miss it for me, were you? Don’t be daft, Albus! I want to hear all about it when you next come! But you go out with the boys afterwards – I don’t want to see you till tomorrow, alright? And no missing work.”

Albus grinned. “Are you sure, Dad? I don’t mind –”

“Well I do,” Harry said, “those tickets are like gold dust. Go and enjoy.”

Albus gave his Dad a kiss and was on his way with a smile.

“Thanks for that, Molly,” Harry said. “I’d completely forgotten about the match.”

“I don’t understand this football at all, but the boys seem to like it,” Molly said. “Can you believe it, *The Prophet* even has a section on it nowadays? Eat up now: I brought you something a bit more wholesome today, and some crumble and custard for pudding. I know you like it.”

“I do,” Harry agreed. “Thank you so much –”

“None of that,” Molly said, sitting in the other seat.

“Have you eaten?” Harry said, looking at her as he was about to dive into the stewed beef and vegetables filling his plate.

“I’ll have some later, dear,” Molly said.

Harry pushed the plate into the middle. “Want to share? I’m sure it’s delicious, but it’s a bit too much for me, Molly: my stomach’s still a bit delicate.”

“Should I have brought something else?” she said worriedly.

“It looks great. I just need to restrain myself from having too much. Dig in,” he urged.

Molly hesitated, and then picked up a fork. They ate in silence for a while. Harry didn’t have much room for the pudding, but said he’d be glad to eat it for his tea later.

“Well, I brought you some sandwiches for that,” Molly said, indicating her basket.

“You’re an absolute darling, Molly. Thank you,” Harry said with a smile.

“Tush.” Molly packed away the dishes and got out a flask of tea.

“You don’t have to get back to Arthur? Not that your company isn’t wonderful –” Harry said awkwardly.

“Bill and Charlie are home today. I think they’re planning on calling by later.”

“It would be lovely to see them, but people really don’t need to feel they have to come by,” Harry said, as tactfully as he could.

“Don’t you even think that people don’t want to come,” Molly said.
They sat sipping tea. Molly seemed in no hurry to leave. Harry realised that she was fidgeting a bit. His heart sank. Was there something dreadful she was going to say to him about what had happened?

“Is something on your mind, Molly?” he asked.

“What? I mean pardon?” Molly said, blushing.

“You’ve been twiddling your rings for the last five minutes,” Harry said gently. “It’s not like you to beat about the bush if you have something to say. What is it?”

Molly was bright red. “Well, there was something I was wondering about asking you, but I really shouldn’t – I mean, it isn’t really appropriate, and –”

“Just ask,” Harry reached out and touched her hand.

Molly fidgeted again, not looking at him, and Harry wondered what on earth was bothering her.

“I wanted to ask you about sex!” she burst out at last.

Harry reeled back. “What?”

“You said,” Molly quietened her voice, having seen the Auror spin round to look at them, and then grimace in horror, “that you and Ginny – that you didn’t – that there wasn’t anyone else –”

“There wasn’t,” Harry said firmly. “I never cheated on Ginny, I promise.”

Molly twiddled some more. “I don’t understand then,” she said, raising confused eyes to him, before glancing down again.

“What don’t you understand? I didn’t want anyone else –”

Harry cut off because Molly was shaking her head.

“About the magic,” she whispered, leaning forward. “How come your magic isn’t affected?”

“That’s just an old wives’ tale,” Harry said, realising that probably wasn’t the best phrase to use the minute it was out of his mouth. “People believe it without any evidence. It isn’t true.”

“It is,” Molly said firmly.

“No –”

Harry looked carefully at Molly, trying to think why she was so convinced.

Why she’d brought it up.

“Are – are you having trouble with your magic?” he asked. He fumbled, thinking. Fortunately, Molly started speaking again.

“Since Arthur’s stroke. We – he – he can’t, you see,” she said, red-faced again. “Of course, his magic is all wonky with the stroke, it’s probably best that it’s diminishing, but how am I supposed to cope without my magic?” Her voice had risen, causing the Auror to look round again, and then decide that it might be time to wander down the corridor.

Harry’s mind was whirling. “You’re having problems with your magic?”
Molly nodded.

“Have you talked to anyone about it?”

“I don’t want to upset Arthur. It’s not his fault he can’t…”

“Oh Molly,” Harry said sympathetically, taking hold of her hands. She gripped his tight. “Tell me when you first noticed it, and what’s giving you problems.”

Molly poured her heart out.

Harry tried to make sense of it. “You really ought to see a Mediwitch,” he said at last.

“I can’t do that! I’d have to tell Arthur or the children if I wanted to go out, and Teddy might see me at St Mungo’s –”

Harry suddenly realised how Arthur’s illness had led to Molly almost being a prisoner in her own home. She’d only been able to visit him because her sons were there with Arthur.

He got up and walked over to the railings. The Auror came stomping back to stand in front of him.

“Can I have a word with the warder, please?” Harry asked politely.

Harry had seen that Stephen Walsingham was on duty again, and soon he came up to see what Harry wanted.

“I’ve got a pain in my chest,” Harry said, holding his hand to it. “Could you owl Susan Bones – she’s Susan Boniface now – and ask her if she can come at once?”

Walsingham looked him over. “I should call our duty Mediwizard –”

“We both know he’s rubbish,” Harry interrupted. “Please?”

Walsingham nodded. “Better lie down then. Is Mrs Weasley going to keep an eye on you?”

“Yup,” Harry said.

He went and laid on the bed.

“What are you up to, young man?” Molly demanded, pulling up the chair to sit beside him.

“Being an idiot, probably. Don’t kill me, Molly.”

Fifteen minutes later, Susan Bones appeared.

“Harry?” she said, coming over to the bed with a worried look on her face. “The note said you had chest pains?”

“Not really,” Harry replied. “I’m really sorry to have tricked you,” he whispered, “but can you just take Molly into the corridor, where you can use magic, or go into the ladies together on your way out, and do a scan on her? She says she’s been losing her magic since Arthur’s stroke.”

Susan looked hard at the red-faced matriarch.

“I haven’t had sex in years and I haven’t lost any power,” Harry added quietly.

“If you think I can just do a scan in the corridor and diagnose –” Susan began crossly.
Harry reached out and took her hand. “She doesn’t want to hurt Arthur, and she barely gets out of the house, and can’t do it without having to tell everyone where she is. Please, Susan.”

“You’ve got more cheek than a prize pig,” she said to Harry. She leant over and started undoing his buttons, whipping out her stethoscope.

“Hey!”

“Hey yourself,” she said. “I’ll have to check you over – the Muggle way – now I’m here. If you died a sudden death and it came to court – ”

“I think I’ve nearly done that bit already,” Harry commented, but submitted to the investigation.

“Hmm,” she said, after listening to his heart, prodding his stomach and taking his blood pressure.

“Is there something wrong?” Mrs Weasley asked worriedly.

“Dyspepsia,” Susan said.

“Oh dear! That sounds serious!”


Harry grinned, and sat up as she made some notes.

The witches left shortly after, Molly thanking and berating him in equal measure, and Susan telling him that if there was anything she could do, he only had to ask, but if he could give her a bit of notice it would make her life a bit easier. Although she had been quite pleased to leave the lancing of a series of curse-engorged boils that she had been about to undertake to another mediwizard.

That afternoon, Draco Malfoy had appeared. He looked a bit green about the gills coming into the cell, as if they might not let him out again.

“You didn’t have to come,” Harry said, getting to his feet. He wasn’t sure whether to shake Draco’s hand, or what, and ended up sort of lurking, instead. He was relieved to see that Draco seemed just as awkward.

“I can’t understand why they’ve arrested you after the memory was shown,” Draco said, sitting down in the chair that Harry had waved him to.

Draco fingered the tablecloth that Molly had left behind inadvertently.

“Better conditions than I had,” he said.

“At least you had water,” Harry retorted. “And weren’t poisoned. Molly came by with lunch today and left this.”

“I heard about that,” Malfoy said. He looked at Harry. “You still look a bit frail.”

“About a thousand percent better than I did earlier in the week,” Harry shrugged. “Death by diarrhoea is not a good way to go.”
Malfoy’s nose twitched in disgust.

Harry grinned.

“Shacklebolt said not to put it in the paper,” he questioned. “Surely it would get the public on your side if they knew how poorly you’d been treated.”

Harry’s head tilted as he studied Malfoy. “I trust him. Don’t you?”

“Yes, but it’s hard to see how silence is in your interest. All I’ve put in is that you’ve been arrested. I couldn’t ignore the story, but I’ve tried to keep it low-key.”

“Thanks.”

“I’m not after your thanks – Merlin, Harry, I owe you my bloody life!”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m safe now, which I wasn’t before; I have access to Hermione, and any other visitors, and my own food – ”

“A person ought to be safe in prison anyway, and have access to their lawyer, and healthy food and some visiting rights.”

“Yeah,” Harry agreed.

“We could run an article about holding conditions in the Ministry without specific reference to you – ”

“I trust Kingsley,” Harry said again, “but in general, I agree, there’re things that need to be addressed on a permanent basis. If you print something, run it by him first.”

Draco nodded. “So, any idea when your trial is?”

“Nope. Probably when they think I look well enough not to show them up.”

Draco snorted.

Harry looked at him. “How are you holding up, Draco?” he asked gently.

“I can’t believe you’re asking me that! You were her husband – ”

“And you were the wicked lover. But you did love her. I know that.”

Draco rubbed a hand over his face.


“You have Scorpius – ”

“I don’t think he’s forgiven me for being willing to leave him.” He shook his head, and rubbed his hands on his knees. “This’ll make you laugh,” he said, evidently trying to change the tone. “Father seems to have a new lease on life – he’s been flitting off to the continent willy-nilly, and he looks a hundred times better than I’ve seen him in years. I think he must have found a Spanish senorita, or a French mademoiselle.” He gave a tight smile. “I hope she’s older than me – can you imagine if he was gallivanting with some teenager?”

Harry knew why Lucius was traipsing round Europe, and hoped he was having some success. He
was surprised that Malfoy hadn’t mentioned the shop. “Does it bother you? That he might marry again?”

“Hell, no. He can do what he bloody well likes. We don’t see each other,” he added. “He’s going in to business, too, apparently. Bought a shop in Italy. Managed, of course,” he smirked. “Spent all his life telling me that Malfoy’s didn’t ‘do’ trade. I heard rumours that he’s thinking of renting out one of the Paris properties. I don’t believe that one, he’s always liked that house.”

Interesting, thought Harry. Buying a shop in Italy was good – made his introduction into the commercial world not quite so surprising.

“Maybe he needs the money,” Harry said.

“I don’t know what for. Enough about my father. Can I do anything for you, Harry? For the family?”

It was profoundly weird, this almost-camaraderie between them. He’d tried to get used to Malfoy before, when he thought that he’d become step-father to his kids, but the very reason that would no longer happen seemed to have brought them closer together.

He shook his head. “Thanks, but there’s nothing.”

Draco stood up. “Well, owl me if you change your mind. And let your kids know they can ask me for anything.”

Harry stood too, and this time they shook hands.

That night, Snape appeared and handed Harry a new book.

“I haven’t finished the old one yet,” Harry said. “Thanks, though.”

“It’s a travel book, by Bill Bryson,” Snape said. “I thought you might like something about wandering the world outside, and with a bit of humour.”

“Thanks,” Harry said again. He flipped the volume over to read the back. Something was sticking out of the top of the book. Harry pulled it out.

“I thought a bookmark would prevent you damaging any more of the spines,” Snape said severely.

Harry looked at it.

It was a photo of Kingsley’s and Snape’s courtyard, with the hammock, and the vines, and bursting bougainvillea, and the hills in the background, and the whole of it bathed in golden sunshine.
Talking...

Snape scrubbed himself down under the spray of the shower. He always felt tainted after visiting the cells, as if they still held the memories of his own incarceration in them all those years ago. He knew it was ridiculous, but he needed to wash off the fear, the overwhelming dread, the guilt and the horror that echoed still from the walls of those dank dungeons.

He dried his hair and rubbed down his body, slinging a towel round his hips as he walked through into the bedroom. He’d heard Kingsley using the loo whilst he was in the shower, but Kingsley knew when he needed to be left alone, and hadn’t joined him under the water. Now his lover was sitting up in bed, reading glasses perched on his nose, thriller open in his lap.

It always amused him to see Kingsley peering at him over the frames. He’d thought that they’d both become less attractive as age took its hold, but Kingsley just looked incredible lying there, white sheets framing his rich skin, his belly still taut and muscled. Snape watched as his biceps bunched as he turned to put the book on the bedside table. The muscles down his ribs rippled in the glow of the lamps.

Kingsley lifted the sheet, and Severus dropped his towel, his body already responding, and slid into bed.

Much later, sweaty and sated, he was lying back getting his breath, when Kingsley propped himself up beside him on his elbow.

“You like him, don’t you?”

It took a lot of control to prevent his body from tensing. “Who?”

Kingsley laid his large hand flat on his chest. “You know who,” he said gently.

“Do you object to me visiting? I’ve spent far too much of my life saving him, and it’s become a habit –”

Kingsley’s palm stroked over Severus’ chest. Severus felt his nipple tightening in response, and swallowed.

“I don’t object to you visiting. I do object to you telling me you’re doing it because of some old habit. You hadn’t seen him for nearly thirty years, Severus! He’s not a boy any more.”

Snape was trying not to clutch the covers. “I know.”

“You find him attractive.”

Snape swung his eyes up to Kingsley’s. “I don’t think of him like that!”

Kingsley’s hand made another gentle swoop. “Liar.”

“Kingsley, where are you going with this?” Snape tried to sound haughty, which wasn’t easy given the position he was in.

“Just talking,” Kingsley said.

Snape turned over, wrapping the sheet round him as he went. “He’s well enough now. No need for me to –”
Kingsley hauled him back, driving past Snape’s resistance, and kissed him fiercely. After a moment’s hesitation, Snape kissed back, hard and aggressive.

“Now, let’s start again,” Kingsley said. “You like him. He’s a nice guy.”

Snape opened his mouth to interrupt, but Kingsley slapped a hand over it. “I like him,” he added. Snape bit the edge of Kingsley’s hand, then gentled it with his tongue.

“Mmmm,” Kingsley responded. He slid his body closer to Snape’s, tight against his side. Snape could feel his renewed interest poking against him.

“You’re insatiable!”

“I like you riled and feisty.”

“I’m not riled.”

“You are. You’re over-thinking everything. You like Harry. I like Harry. No one’s committed a dreadful sin here.”

“I’d ask if you were getting bored with me, but evidence,” Snape rolled his hip so that his thigh brushed against Kingsley’s firming length, “is to the contrary.”

“I can’t imagine ever being bored with you, you cantankerous old fart,” Kingsley said, stretching down a hand and cupping Snape’s balls.

“So what was the point of this conversation?” Snape sucked in a deep breath, letting his legs drop further apart.

“Establishing facts.” Kingsley’s words were muffled as his mouth moved down Snape’s stomach.

“Here’s a fact,” Snape said. “He’s half our age, and straight as a quill.”

Kingsley had wriggled right down the bed, exposing Severus. The brush of cool air over his skin was deliciously erotic. Kingsley licked a stripe up one if his balls. “That’s two. Here’s two more,” he said. “He isn’t half our age, and how do you know?”

“He’s got three children! Aah, yes, just there!”

“And was unhappy in his marriage.”

The next couple of minutes were punctuated with sighs and groans. Eventually, Kingsley moved away to remove a hair from his teeth.

“So where are you going with this?” Snape asked, pulling himself up the bed a bit.

“Nowhere. Just saying, I wouldn’t be averse.” He lunged down, swallowing Snape’s cock, which he’d been ignoring, in one fell swoop.

“Fucking hell,” Snape groaned. “God! You’re so fucking good at – Kingsley!”

Kingsley proceeded to render Snape into a babbling state that would have been unthinkable to any who hadn’t witnessed it. As Snape’s orgasm drew near, he felt Kingsley reaching down, tugging on his own cock. The thought that his lover was so aroused just from what he was doing to him was more than enough to send him over into his second orgasm of the night.
They were both drifting off to sleep, Kingsley tucked up behind him, his hand held in Snape’s against his chest, when Snape asked, “Not averse to what?”

Kingsley snuggled in, untroubled. “Friendship. Sex. Love. Any or all. Don’t you think?”

Once again, Snape had his breath taken away with the ease with which Kingsley would approach the most outrageous ideas. They had never taken another lover into their bed, nor, as far as he knew, had either of them dallied with other lovers out of it. It was just like Kingsley to think that it would be easy to change things.

And yet….he could see Harry dozing in the hammock, and chopping veg in the kitchen, laughing.

He thought of Kingsley’s solid, muscular frame, his own long and lanky one, and Potter’s small, whippet-lean body.

“Perhaps,” he answered.
Worries

Albus came bouncing in the next day.

“You won’t believe everything that’s going on, Dad!”

What’s happened?” Harry asked, pulling back from hugging his son.

“Gran’s in hospital, Grandad is going to stay with Ron and Hermione – Ron’s giving up work - ”

“What?”

“Yup, don’t worry, Gran’ll be alright – and – can you believe this? George is renting a property off Lucius Malfoy and giving him a cut of the sales! Lucius Malfoy! The whole family’s going bananas, asking if he should be in hospital instead of Gran!”

“Sit down, Albus, and start at the beginning,” Harry said, kicking out the chair for his son. “What’s the matter with Gran?”

“She’s got some rare disease,” Albus said. “I’ve never heard of it before. Hermione says it sounds a bit like osteoporosis – that bone-thinning thing that her mum has – except it’s the magic that gets thinner. Only affects older witches, apparently, and Gran is a bit young to have it. It was lucky they caught it while they can still treat it.”

“They can treat it?” Harry said with relief.

“Yeah, but it takes time because her magical core is really depleted and they have to do it really slowly, or her body might go into shock. So she has to stay in St Mungo’s for at least a month – Bill said she was going off her rocker until they calmed her down – and bloody hell, Dad! It was all coincidence that they even found out! She could have been a squib within six months, they say!”

“What happened?” Harry asked, wondering what had been said.

“Well, Gran bumped into Mrs Boniface – you know, Andy’s Mum, the Mediwitch – in the toilet after she’d brought you your lunch yesterday, and it all came out of that, somehow. I think Mrs Boniface said she looked a bit peaky, or something. Don’t you feel awful? None of us even noticed!”

“We’re just so used to Gran managing everything,” Harry parried.

“Yeah.” Albus looked meditative. “It’s really interesting stuff, the medical side. Never really thought about Mediwizardry before. I mean, I know Teddy’s a nurse, but he only ever tells us the crazy things that happen on the ward.”

Harry was surprised. He’d sensed Albus’ enthusiasm for working at Gringotts had waned, but they hadn’t discussed it, or any other career. “Not that bothered about Gringotts?” he fished.

“I suppose it wasn’t quite what I was expecting.” Albus shrugged, and made a face. “I don’t know what I expected really. It’s a bit dull,” he admitted.

“I expect Mediwizardry has its dull days,” Harry said. “Every job does, you know?”

“You enjoy yours.”
“Yeah, but I don’t really like the selling part.”

“You’ve got an assistant for that.”

“Well, I do now, but I didn’t have anyone at the beginning. Talking of which, have you heard from Janine?”

Albus nodded. “Last week, she floo-called when you didn’t turn up: we told her to keep the shop open, and deal with anyone’s queries. When she saw in the paper that you’d been arrested for murder, she came to see us.”

“Yes?” Harry said, then seeing the embarrassment on his son’s face, deduced, “She handed in her notice?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry, Dad. James got really cross with her –”

“No, it’s understandable. She only started a couple of months before all this happened, and apart from thinking her employer is a murderer, there’s nothing for her to do if I’m not producing work, apart from dealing with angry customers. Not fun for anyone. Let me scribble you a note – I should have done this anyway – so you can draw on my account. Can you pay her till the end of the month?”

“Okay, no problem. Though I don’t know where she lives.”

“It’s in the filing cabinet in the shop. You’ll have to break past my wards, but I expect you could manage it,” Harry said, eyes twinkling.

“Bloody hell, Dad, they’ll be rock solid, won’t they?”

“Use a bit of family magic,” Harry whispered, leaning forward.

Albus grinned. That meant his Dad had incorporated a blood ward, which would make it much easier for him, and practically impossible for anyone who wasn’t related. “What about the shop?”

“There’s not much I can do about it at the moment. Do you think you could ask Toby if he wouldn’t mind coming out of retirement for a couple of days? He’s brilliant with the customers, and several of them are repeat clients, so they’ll know him. He’ll do whatever’s needed. Tell him anyone who wants to cancel their order – that’s fine. I don’t take deposits, so no-one will be demanding their money back.”

Albus nodded. “Okay.” He glanced at his watch. “I’ve got to get to work,” he said apologetically, and put the bag on the table. “Mitty made your food as Gran –”

“Oh my God, Mitty! I’d forgotten all about her! She must be beside herself.”

“Well, we’ve explained the situation to her and that you’ll sort it out when you come out. And we’ve been making sure that she gets plenty of sleep and eats properly.”

“Thanks, Albus,” Harry said. He ran his hands through his hair. “We need to sort something out, though. Do you think you or James could go and see Dinky’s owner? See if you can buy Dinky from him?”

“How much should we offer?” Albus asked dubiously.

“God, no idea,” Harry puffed out a breath. “Whatever it takes?”
“Really?”

“Well, if it’s utterly outrageous come back and talk to me, but otherwise, I trust your judgement.”

“Okay. I’ve really got to dash now. I’ll be back later, Dad,” and he gave him a peck on the cheek. “I want to tell you all about Ron, and George!” he called through the bars, as he was let out.

Harry wanted to hear all about them too.

As it happened, Hermione arrived early that afternoon.

“Mione!” Harry leapt up and hugged his friend. “How’s Molly?”

“She’s going to be fine, they say,” Hermione said. “Though I haven’t heard anything much since last night, to be fair. I’ve just sorted away my other work, had a quick floo call with Ron, and came straight to see you.”

“Thanks,” Harry smiled. “I’ve only heard bits – Albus came in on his way to work. Is Arthur really going to come and live with you?”

“Ron says he’s going to take a leave of absence and look after him,” Hermione said, reaching into her briefcase for some papers.

“And?”

“And what?” She opened up her notebook.

“Alright, don’t tell me. I just wondered how you felt about it, is all.”

Hermione smiled at him. “Actually, I think it’s a great idea.”

“Really?”

Hermione nodded. “He could do with a break,” she said. In her notebook, she wrote, *He’s REALLY pissed off with work.*

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I suppose so. But Arthur’s coming to you rather than the other way round?”

“I think he was horrified at the thought of being at the Burrow without Molly. And we have quite a few Muggle gadgets that he’s looking forward to tinkering with,” she smiled.

“How do you feel about it?” Harry asked.

“I’d be a liar if I didn’t admit I was a bit anxious. But hey! Ron might get some of the things he’s been meaning to do for ages done if he’s at home, so who knows, it might work out really well.” She lowered her voice and leant forward. “And at least I wasn’t the one expected to drop everything and stay home.”

“Is that because you’re defending me?”

She laughed. “I hadn’t really thought of that! You’re probably right. Talking of which, I’ve got a few questions written down here that I want you to look at.”
Later, James appeared after work, and was joined after a few minutes by Albus.

“So, what do you think?” Albus said, after they’d babbled on for five minutes. “Is George nuts, or what? Lucius Malfoy!”

“What was he like, Dad?” James asked. “I mean, I know he was in Azkaban for years, but he didn’t look that bad at the court. At Draco’s trial. Old fashioned and haughty, maybe, but not really scary. Is it a big thing that George is going into business with him? I mean, isn’t the idea that the ex-Death Eaters are integrated back into society? ‘Cos someone has to give them a chance if it’s really going to work.”

Harry was always being surprised by his children: it was one of the delights of having them, of course, although on the other hand, you could get some unpleasant ones too, as he had about James’ attitude to Scorpius. Funny that the Malfoy men were causing all of it. How odd was it that James could be so disparaging of Scorpius’ lifestyle, and yet show some sympathy towards Lucius? And how was he to answer? He had to actually help this thing along.

“What can I say?” he prevaricated. “To be honest, he was one of the most powerful and terrifying wizards I ever knew when I was a teenager. He had his finger in practically everything bad that happened to me. And – and to your Mum. But at the end, Voldemort didn’t trust him, and his wife Narcissa saved my life. I suppose he believed in something, and committed himself to it, and I was on the side that disagreed with him. We weren’t exactly going to be bosom buddies. From the other side’s point of view, he was doing a good job: until the end, he was really powerful in Voldemort’s Death Eaters. Who knows, maybe he was – trapped – by that Wizard’s promise thing that Kingsley was talking about, and only at the end tried to wiggle out of it a bit.”

Harry took a breath. Both boys were looking at him raptly. Harry usually avoided talking about the war, about his past.

“So he doesn’t look like he did then?” James asked.

“No, it’s like he’s shrunk, or something. Maybe I just got taller,” Harry grinned.

“You can’t have been much shorter than you are now as a teenager, surely Dad?” Albus teased.

“You’d have been mistaken for a dwarf.”

“Cheeky.” Harry cuffed his son. “I expect Professor Flitwick would have been most offended if people thought someone as scrawny as me was a dwarf.” He looked more serious. “I agree, James, if we want to reintegrate these people back into society, we have to make the first move, so I really applaud George for that. If he wasn’t known as rich and eccentric and as straight up as he is, he might come under a hell of a lot of flack. But George is also known as an astute businessman, and I guess people will see this as a really good business move. It’s not as if Malfoy is likely to be working on the shop floor! As it is, I’d say George was doing a good thing, but I’d also say, Lucius Malfoy is dangerous, and never, ever, forget it.”

“Funny to think that he would have been like, our step-grandfather, or something,” Albus grinned. “How weird is that? He might have been bringing us presents at Christmas –”

“No,” said Harry, because he couldn’t let that one go. “Draco didn’t invite him into his own home, and I was quite adamant that I didn’t want a scenario where he had any influence over you.”

The boys stared at him. “Blimey, Dad, that’s unlike you. You’re usually very forgiving.”
Harry shrugged. “He’s dangerous.”

“But why wouldn’t Draco let him visit?”

Harry wondered what to say. “He was away for most of Scorpius’ childhood: maybe he just felt that he wasn’t an appropriate influence.”

“Maybe he didn’t want his Dad to see that his son was a woofter,” James muttered.

Harry sucked in a breath. “You saw the letter Draco wrote about his son: he was completely and utterly proud of him. As I am mostly with you two, but you really get up my nose with this nastiness, James. Why have you got such a big thing against gay people? I don’t understand where it’s come from.”

James had on that truculent face that he’d often had as a child. That too got on Harry’s goat. The good thing about the last couple of days was how happy they’d all been together, how positive. He supposed it wasn’t normal life.

He almost snorted at the thought: no, being in prison and almost dying wasn’t in any way normal!

“I don’t know why you’re so unbothered,” James argued back. “It’s not acceptable in wizarding society.”

“It’s acceptable to me, and I’m a wizard,” Harry answered.

“But you’re not even gay!”

“Neither am I, and I don’t give a shit,” Albus said. “More women for the rest of us if the likes of Scorpius fancies blokes, isn’t there? I mean, it’s a double whammy - him and Andy both out of the market – that’s two women not getting snapped up.”

Harry laughed, and James gave a tiny grin. “I concede that that’s a good thing, but it still doesn’t make it right.”

“Well, I don’t really understand why you think it’s wrong,” Harry said. “Apart from the ‘wizarding society doesn’t like it’, what reasons have you got?”

James leant back in his chair, arms folded aggressively across his chest. “Gay people force themselves on you.”

Harry restrained his shock. “Has someone forced themselves on you?” he asked carefully.

“Of course not!”

“Do you know someone who’s been raped by another man?” Albus leaned forward, elbows on the table.

James looked flustered. “I don’t know any details! That’s just what I’ve heard, is all.”

“Who from?” Harry asked. “It sounds a bit of an unsubstantiated claim –”

“Yeah, well I trust him!”

Harry leant back. “This is from Bill again, I take it.”

“I like Bill!”
“Don’t be a dork, James,” Albus said in exasperation, “we all like Bill. What difference does that make?”

Footsteps could be heard in the corridor, and then the guard was opening the door for Snape.

“I apologise: I should have come later,” Snape said, realising that the conversation had stopped. “Would you prefer me to leave?”

“Not at all,” Harry began.

Walsingham was on duty again; he gave a small smile of acknowledgement, and tramped off down the corridor.

“We were in the middle of an argument: you can help us out on this one,” James invited, giving up his seat for Snape and going to sit on the bed.

“I will endeavour to do my best,” Snape answered.

“Just, Dad thinks Scorpius being a shirtlifter is perfectly normal, and okay, and I’m telling him it isn’t.”

Harry was horrified. At the same moment, he saw Albus glance quickly at Snape, look away, and start to speak.

“I’m sorry – ” Harry began, but Snape just shook his head.

“It’s a reasonable argument.”

“See!” James said gleefully.

“There are two parts to it,” Snape went on, folding his robe carefully over his knee. At their enquiring faces, he continued, “Whether it is normal, and whether it is okay. And of course, there’s the question of a person’s right to hold whatever opinion they choose.”

Harry’s mouth fell open as Snape continued, “Of course, it isn’t normal.”

“Yes!” hissed James, his arm pulling down in a victory move.

“If by ‘normal’ you mean usual, or typical. Most wizards, and witches are undeniably heterosexual: there can be no argument on that score. But what does that mean for how we act as a society? In terms of the population of the world, or the population of England, wizards and witches are not ‘normal’. They exist in a far tinier minority of the general population than homosexuals do.”

“Right,” Harry said. He looked at James. “Maybe you think it’s right that the Dursley’s treated me like shit because I was a wizard?”

“No, of course not!”

“Well, that’s the sort of argument you’re making, surely? That just because not everyone does it, it’s got to be wrong.”

“But homos are predators – ”

“I expect there’s the odd bad gay wizard, just like there’s the odd bad straight wizard,” Albus said. “You can’t judge everyone based on one person.”
“Well, Bill is pretty definite about it,” James said mulishly.

“Was Scorpius ever ‘a predator’, as you put it, at school?” Harry asked. “I thought he’d been with Andy for ages.”

“Well, yeah, but he’s young. You just can’t tell what he’ll be like as he gets older.”

“Any more than I can tell that you’re going to be a bigoted, ill-mannered twat,” Albus snapped.

“Hey!” James argued. “I can see why you think I’m bigoted, and I disagree, but where’s the ill-mannered bit coming in? I haven’t said anything in front of Scorpius. Much.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I think,” Snape said, “Albus is alluding to the fact that you are making your feelings plain in front of me.”

“What?” James looked at Snape, then at his father and Albus.

“I’m sorry,” Albus began, looking at Snape.

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

“What?” James looked totally confused.

“I am homosexual,” Snape said simply.

Silence. Then:

“You can’t be!”

“Why ever not?” Harry said. “I’m sorry, Snape –”

“And you don’t need to apologise either,” Snape shook his head.

“But… but… you’ve stayed with us!”

“Perhaps I should be apologising to you. I didn’t realise you felt so strongly on the matter,” Snape said.

“But… but…” James’ brain was whirring. “But you live with Kingsley! Does he know?”

Albus laughed. “You’re a complete idiot, James! Kingsley’s his partner.”

“What? Don’t be daft! Just because two men live together doesn’t mean -”

“James,” Harry sighed.

“No,” James said, shaking his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Why not?” Harry asked.

“Kingsley was an Auror! Head Auror! Minister for Magic!”

“He was,” Snape said.

“But… but…”
“You do realise that it’s prejudice like this that made Kingsley and Snape leave? That this country lost such fantastic men for such a stupid reason?”

James got up and started pacing around the cell. It was rather too small to allow it to be an impressive activity. He turned to face Snape. “Is that why you left?”

“It’s certainly why Kingsley left, and why we didn’t come back,” Snape answered.

“But you’re back now.”

“Your father asked for my help,” Snape said. He picked a speck of lint from his sleeve. “Seeing Scorpius’ bravery made me feel that I had let him down – let down the many witches and wizards who are facing – unpleasantness - because of their perfectly natural inclinations. We both thought it was time to show our faces again.”

“But – you’ve never said anything.”

“We didn’t come back to preach, we came back to help – good lord, I almost said ‘make the world a better place’. Kill me now.”

Albus and Harry laughed, and even James cracked a grin.

“We are gay,” Snape went on. “We don’t plan on shoving it in anyone’s faces, but neither will we deny it.”

James rocked back and forward on his heels. He glanced up at Snape, and away again.

“If there is something you want to say, or ask, stop dithering and do it.”

“It’s different with you,” he said, chin jutting again. “I mean, no offence, but you’re older.”

“What?” Albus looked puzzled.

Harry sniggered. “I think my son is implying you’re over the hill, Snape.”

“If you’re thinking we don’t have sex, and therefore it’s alright, I’m sorry to disappoint you,” Snape said, face straight.

James turned bright red.

“You think it would be alright if they weren’t doing anything?” Harry asked, when his grin died down. “That reminds me of the Church of England back at the turn of the century.”

“A history lesson? From you, Potter? What is the world coming to?” Snape murmured.

“Historical context can be a very useful thing,” Harry said to him. “Hermione taught me that,” he added, causing Snape’s eyes to crease in amusement, much to Harry’s delight. “Anyway, the role of a father is to teach his kids about life. One of them, anyway,” he added. “What I was going to say was, the Church got its knickers in a twist about homosexuals, not just in the congregation, but there were vicars as well. So what with Christian charity and all that, they decided it was alright for them to be homosexuals, as long as they weren’t ‘practising’. They could live with another man, but not sleep with him – or if they did sleep with him, not actually do anything except sleep. I’ve never heard of anything so ridiculous.”

James had his arms crossed over his chest. He shrugged. “I don’t have to like it.”
“Of course you don’t,” Harry said. “No one’s asking you to like it; just to accept that other people are different from you, and they have a right to do their thing too.”

James pulled a face.

Harry sighed.

“Potter, leave it,” Snape said.

“I’m sorry, but it just comes back to me thinking of how the Dursley’s treated me,” Harry said. “I can’t let it go. They hated me for being different. They hated all wizards. In some ways, that’s easier to understand, because in theory, wizards were a lot more dangerous to them than gay people are to you, James. Don’t let yourself be frightened of what you don’t know.”

“I’m not frightened!”

“Okay, wrong word,” Harry said. “Why don’t you ask Bill why he’s so averse? At least then there might be some reason to it.”

Snape shifted in his seat. Harry turned to look at him. “Do you know why Bill’s got a thing?”

“Bill has been fine with me, but it occurs to me that he too might not have realised that I am in a relationship with Kingsley. I can only speculate,” he said, tailing off.

“What?” Albus asked.

“I make Wolfsbane for many werewolves, and whilst appreciating that Bill did not become fully infected, it’s quite obvious that the assault he suffered has led to the development of some features of the condition.”

“Well, that’s true,” James said. “He told me his sense of smell is loads better, and his sight at night.”

“He’s really muscle-y too,” Albus commented. “Is that because of being bitten?”

“Very possibly,” Snape agreed.

“So? What are you saying?” James asked.

“It is only supposition,” Snape said. “Several werewolves have asked me for a potion to counteract the increase in libido they feel as the full moon approaches. They feel that it makes them behave in a manner that they would not have chosen to otherwise.”

“Are you saying that it turns them into quee- homosexuals?” James’ eyebrows were a fierce line.

“No. What they tell me is it makes them hyper-aware of anyone sexually, and they find it very difficult to control their own desires. More than one has made a witch pregnant, outside of their marriages, and one, in fact, tried to commit suicide because he was very much in love with his wife, and appalled that he had betrayed her. With her own mother.”

“Oh my god!”

“That’s awful,” Harry said. “Had he had a secret attraction for her?”

Snape shook his head. “He’d hated her guts for years. She couldn’t stand him either, and yet agreed that he hadn’t forced her. The wife was devastated. As a consequence of his confession, I
started a research project, and found that werewolves – whilst still in their human form in the days running up to the full moon – excrete a pheromone. To cut a long story short, humans of either sex are likely to respond to it, and the werewolf himself finds it almost impossible to restrain his ardour.” He crossed his legs at the ankle. “Of course, I have no idea the exact effects the bite has had on Bill, but if he suffers from the production of the pheromone, it is quite possible that he has found himself in situations that he has regretted afterwards.”

“You think he might have had gay sex?” James shuddered.

“I have no idea. It’s possible that before he knew all the details of what he had to contend with and how to cope with his condition, he found himself in a situation where his pheromones attracted others of either sex. Judging from the comments from the men and women who I’ve spoken to, it would be torturous to attempt to control one’s urges in such a situation, however much out of the norm for their behaviour they might be.”

“And you’d end up blaming the other person,” Albus deduced.

“Well, that’s quite possible,” Snape said. “This is only supposition, as I said.”

“So, do all werewolves now take this suppressant?” Albus asked.

“Not at all,” Snape smiled.

“Why on earth not?” James demanded. “Surely they should be forced to –”

Snape held up his hand. “You may be surprised to hear that many werewolves are in stable and loving relationships. They have their condition under control, and they take their Wolfsbane. But the condition does take its toll on their bodies. They feel that there’s no way that they’re going to deprive themselves of one of the few advantages of the condition –”

“By taking advantage of strangers?” James exclaimed in disgust.

“By keeping themselves away from strangers, and devoting the pre-full moon window to an exceptionally passionate and thrilling period of sexual activity with their partners.”

“Blimey,” Albus said, wide-eyed. “Really?”

“Really,” Snape agreed.

“So do you think Bill and Fleur –?”

“I suspect Mrs Weasley’s heritage makes her an ideal companion for Bill,” Snape said, “given that Veelas too affect others by their pheromone output.”

“I think we should change the subject,” Harry said. They all looked at him.

“This is an invasion of their privacy,” he explained. “If you can imagine asking Bill about this, James, that’s up to you, but I think – well, we know what it’s like having people talk about us behind our backs.”

The boys nodded in understanding.

“Yeah, I know,” Harry agreed, smiling at him.

“Now, one last thing before you go, boys. Snape, if you’ll forgive us for a moment, the boys and I just need to talk about Mitty; I mentioned this to Albus this morning.”

Snape reached into his bag and fetched out his book.

“James,” Harry continued, “would you go round and ask Mr Wilkes whether he would allow us to buy Dinky? I think you ought to go, as the next in line. Sorry, Albus – no offence, but it seems to matter to people.”

Snape made a sound. They all turned to look at him.

“You disagree?” Harry asked.

“I – I may be entirely wrong, and I hate to add to your troubles –”

“Oh god, it must be bad if you’re beating about the bush.”

Snape’s lips twitched, but his face was serious when he went on: “Obviously I don’t know this gentleman, but it’s quite possible that he will refuse to sell his elf to you.”

“I can see it would be a huge inconvenience,” Harry admitted, “but how do we get round that?”

“You misunderstand me,” Snape said. “He might not consider you a fit person as an owner for his elf.” At the blank looks staring back at him, he added, in exasperated tones, “You’re on a murder charge, Potter!”

“Oh! Blimey, I hadn’t even thought of that.”

“But Dad’s innocent!” Albus exclaimed. “And when we prove that –”

“No, he’s right,” Harry said. He thought for a moment. “James, could you ask him for yourself? Mitty will have to come and live with you, for the meantime, but I expect you’d find her pretty handy – what?”

James seemed to be searching for words.

“I don’t think the baby is going to be too much trouble –” Harry began.

“It’s not that. Well, it is,” James said, rubbing his hand round the back of his head. He looked up. “The thing is, Millie’s around a lot, and - well, she’s met Mitty when she came over to the house with me the other day, and she’s – well, it wouldn’t work.”

“But having a house elf would give you more time. And Mitty’s very discreet, if that’s what’s worrying her,” Harry said.

“I – the thing is, Dad, I think she’s a bit horrified by a house-elf pregnancy. And I don’t think she’s used to house-elves much. I wouldn’t be happy about them being around each other. We can think of another way around this, yeah?”

Thoughts of James being selfish flitted unwelcomed into Harry’s head, before he took stock of the last comments again. Maybe James was worried that his girlfriend wouldn’t treat Mitty properly.

“Sure,” he said. “Yeah, we’ll think about that. So,” he rubbed his legs, “you know I’m going to ask you about Millie another time, don’t you? But you’d both better be getting off right now, get some food into you, see your friends, relax. Okay?”
He stood up. The boys did too, and soon they were hugging and they’d banged on the railings to get Walsingham to come to let them out.

Snape sat reading his book, having said a quiet goodbye.

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets, and wandered around the cell.

“What is it?” Snape said at last, looking up.

Harry sat down on the end of the table.

“Snape, what if they find me guilty?”
George looked around his new shop. The fittings were all in place, the shelves stacked. The marble floor gleamed dully. Tomorrow it would echo with the sounds of hundreds of feet.

Assuming all went well.

It was funny to think that it didn't really matter. It was the first time he'd opened a shop and felt so laid back. There was no buzz of nervous tension, no anxiety about whether he'd made the right decisions. It was weird.

Of course, he'd had hell from the family on going into business with Lucius Malfoy. He hadn't been to visit Harry yet, because he couldn't face fending off the apologies that he was sure Harry would try to make. Dammit, it wasn't as if Harry wasn't suffering enough! He could stand his bit of discomfort if it led to Ginny's murderers being caught. Whether Malfoy was the man to help he really didn't know. They'd put their faith in Harry in the war, and he just had to trust him to know what he was doing now. Just as Harry trusted him to know that Lucius was a slippery customer.

He glanced at his watch and headed along to the office. Malfoy was due to floo in.

Ron crawled into bed next to Hermione.

"You look absolutely exhausted," she said, turning towards him, her hand moving to rest against him.

"Don't know when I last felt so knackered," Ron agreed. "Probably when Hugo had that flu thing years ago."

"Poor thing," Hermione stroked gently down his chest.

Ron settled in to enjoy it. Although Hermione hadn't held out that long after the sex-magic confrontation, he'd been aware that she was still a bit withdrawn and hurt. He hadn't known how to make it up to her. She hadn't initiated things much, so although his first inclination had been to fall straight asleep, there was no way he was going to nod off when she was in this mood.

"Are you regretting it?"

"Having Dad here?"

"Mmmm."

"Well, no denying I'm flat out, but no, not really." He shifted. "I haven't thought about work once today. I can't remember a day without thinking about it for years."

"Is that a good thing?" Hermione leant forward and placed a kiss into the sensitive skin under his jaw.

Ron spread himself a bit to give her more access. He was glad he hadn't put on a t-shirt.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "I think it is."

"Good," Hermione said, and her hand slipped down into his boxers.
There wasn't much more conversation after that.

Harry decided that he wasn't ever going to sit on the Wizengamot again, if he was released after this case. His memories of being on trial as a teenager had risen up in his throat as he found himself bound in the chair in the centre of the court.

That time, whatever he'd thought of the man afterwards, Dumbledore had come to rescue him. This time, Hermione stood between him and death, or the Dementor's Kiss.

He'd told her last night, that if he was found guilty, he wanted her to ask for execution.

He could not have his children spending their lives knowing that their father lived as a dribbling wreck, locked away on that island prison.

If she didn't succeed, he had his own plans.

He hadn't really thought, when he'd sat as a juror, about the fact that the accused didn’t have any knowledge beforehand of the evidence to be laid against him, no chance to hunt out witnesses that might be able to refute the matter.

He wondered how many people he had condemned who were as innocent as he was.

He looked around the courtroom. Up in the gallery, Albus and James sat with Lily between them. Harry smiled at them, because he couldn’t raise his arms to wave back. There were lots of Weasleys, and Draco Malfoy, and Neville. Snape too sat in the row behind.

“Mr Potter,” Harcourt said.

Harry could not believe that the smug prat was prosecuting him as well, but it appeared that the Wizengamot administration had decided that it was logical to use the same Judge, Prosecutor and members of the Wizengamot as had been present for the trial of Draco Malfoy, on the basis that they knew the case already.

Hermione had only found out when he had, on entering the court, and had made strong representations to the Judge already, on the basis that this was a fresh trial and should be started as such.

The Wizarding World took a different view, and Hermione had already ruffled a few feathers by suggesting that the Wizarding system was inferior to the Muggle one in this respect.

Harry was pretty sure, too, that many of the members of the Wizengamot would be unhappy at losing yet more of their own time by being forced back to yet another trial, when their period of service had already been completed.

It was not an auspicious start.

“Mr Potter,” Harcourt said again, with an exaggerated sigh.

“Yes?” Harry answered. There was no way that he was giving that bastard the satisfaction of calling him “Sir”.

Harcourt raised an eyebrow. “You have pleaded not guilty to the charges laid before the court,”
Harcourt said. He looked around the room. “It is my duty to prove that Mr Potter did, in fact, kill
his wife. That this wasn’t a crime of passion, a death that occurred in the heat of the moment, but
that he deliberately, wilfully and consciously plotted to kill her, and that he carried out that deed
without remorse, without a care for his children –”

“How dare you?” Harry bellowed, trying to rise from the chair. The chains clanked and rattled,
startling in the hushed room.

“Oh, I dare, Mr Potter,” Harcourt said. “Just as you dared to murder your wife in cold blood, and
then attempted to lay the blame for it on your rival to Mrs Potter’s affections –”.

The Prosecutor paused, as if hoping that Harry would again shout out, but Harry had got himself
under control. That remark about the children had got to him, but it had been foolish to let Harcourt
get under his skin. Hermione threw him a look of approval at his restraint.

“Your Honour,” Harcourt addressed the Judge, “I realise that the Wizengamot have already seen
this evidence, but I would like the court to view again the Veritaserox evidence shown at the trial
of Draco Malfoy, so that the exact nature, the violence, of the crime that we are dealing with is not
underestimated or forgotten.”

Harry hung his head. So there was going to be no reprieve from seeing it after all. And it was
obvious that this had been agreed before the trial, because the teleconverter was wheeled in once
again. A man wearing the robes of a Potions’ Master stood beside the machine.

“You have all seen this evidence before,” Harcourt looked around the court, “and will therefore
understand that the seal on the bottle of memories about to be poured into the machine is not the
original seal applied by Master Snape, but the seal of our court Potions’ Master, who rebottled the
memories for retention in our evidence store after the trial of Mr Malfoy. Master Davis, can you
confirm that your seal is undamaged?”

Master Davis seemed to enjoy his court role, making a drama of the small task. “The seal is intact,
Your Honour,” he said to the Judge with a bow.

The memories were poured into the machine, and once again played.

“I would ask you to pay particular attention,” Harcourt said loudly, as the three men arrived on the
scene, “to the stature and behaviour of the smallest of the attackers.”

Harry’s heart seemed to jump in his chest. So this was their case? That he hadn’t just set it up, but
had actually been there? Had actually killed Ginny? He swallowed the bile in his throat, and found
himself watching the smallest figure closely.

He heard a gasp from the gallery as the first blow was struck, and then looked up, horrified,
realising that it was Lily, watching this for the first time. He could see James putting his arm
around her, but she didn’t turn away. He hadn’t known beforehand that Lily would be there.
There’d been only twenty four hours’ notice of the trial, and Harry had written to her, telling her
not to come, that he would see her afterward.

In the quiet of his cell, he had written further notes to all three children, and given them to Snape,
who had arrived in the evening as he usually did. He’d been relieved that Snape had not tried to
jolly him along, but had pocketed the notes without a word. It was only when Harry had tried to
thank him for his help that Snape had told him to shut up and use his time for something more
useful. Harry hadn’t had any idea what else he could do: he felt he’d tidied up everything he could;
the boys and his friends had all been in and out all day, until he’d shoed them away, ostensibly to
give him a little peace, in reality so that he could write his letters.

“Remember your lessons in fifth year when you irritated me so much?” Snape had said, his eyes full of the things he could not say for fear of being overheard. “Are you able to find the wherewithal to do the same? There is something I want to show you.”

Surprised, Harry had sat opposite Snape. He hadn’t known whether he would be able to perform Legilimency in the magic dampened cell. On the other hand, he knew he had managed to send a Patronus, and if Snape were actively allowing the invasion, the effort ought to be minimal. He was nervous too about invading his privacy, but Snape had merely said, “There is but one thing I want you to see. Watch it several times, if you think it might be helpful. I only do this, because knowing this has been a comfort to me in my own life.”

Not knowing what to expect, Harry had wordlessly and wandlessly cast the spell. Nothing had happened, until he had pulled and pulled on his power, and then he was in.

A man stood in front of Voldemort. He was probably in his seventies, and he was a Death Eater. In front of them all, and there were many Death Eaters there, were a family of Muggles. The woman was screaming, and Harry thought that she must be deafening and terrifying the child she was holding against her shoulder, until the woman slipped onto her knees, and the girl slithered to the ground. She was dead. The other children were crying, holding onto her skirts, and the father had wet himself.

Harry couldn’t understand why Snape would choose this time to show him this memory.

“Wokingham, it’s your turn,” Voldemort said, and Harry’s stomach turned at the sound of that voice after all these years. “Which one would you like?”

Wokingham stepped forward. Harry didn’t recognise him, nor had he ever heard of him.

Harry could feel Snape’s fear as the events unfolded.

“My Lord, I do not understand the purpose of this,” Wokingham said. “These Muggles can be no threat to us.”

“Are you questioning my judgement?” Voldemort’s voice seemed almost gleeful.

“My Lord, as you know, I believe entirely in the superiority of wizards,” Wokingham said.

“Then you must understand that it is our duty to eradicate these vermin,” Voldemort responded.

“I’m sorry, My Lord, but I don’t see that we ought to allow them to affect us at all. If we kill them, it will only draw attention to us, and that, surely, is something that we’ve avoided throughout the centuries.”

“Sir, you seem to misunderstand what I am offering you. We,” and Voldemort looked around the group, “are not a debating society.”

There were sniggers.

“We all believe these Muggles are inferior, spineless creatures. Wizards have a duty to eliminate them, to prevent them breeding.”

“I must disagree,” Wokingham said. “They are inferior, and it is our duty to show mercy and pity to those less fortunate than ourselves –”
“As the Muggles showed me?” Voldemort screeched, and outside the memory, he could feel Snape’s hand closing briefly over his, as he jumped.

Wokingham looked around the group, and back at Voldemort. He straightened his shoulders. “I believe that I may have mistaken your philosophy. I will bid you good evening –”

“No one leaves without my permission!” Voldemort roared. “Did you not make a promise to me? Did you not?” And he applied his wand to the Dark Mark on his arm.

Wokingham gasped and fell to his knees, clasping his own arm in agony.

“Do you see now who you are dealing with?” Voldemort started walking towards him. “Do you reconsider these foolish ideas?”

“I do not,” hissed Wokingham, reaching for his wand.

“Accio! How dare you! How dare you draw your wand on me! Crucio!”

Voldemort cast the spell over and over. Harry watched in horror as it began to dawn on everyone, including Wokingham, that Voldemort was going to torture him to death. Behind him, the Muggle had quickly taken out a knife, and slit the throats of his two remaining children. There was a roar from the nearest Death Eater, who was sprayed with blood.

As Voldemort turned, distracted, Wokingham lifted his head from the floor, and cast a spell, wandlessly, on himself.

Snape’s memory seemed to pause.

Harry nudged it. He knew now what Snape was offering him. Snape repeated the last seconds several times, until Harry slowly withdrew.

“You never used it,” Harry said, voice wondering.

Snape swallowed, and looked away. “Knowing it gave me - courage,” he said, “to keep going when things seemed - .”

Harry nodded. There were things that people who had never fought a war would never understand. His teenage years had been full of fear, full of the horrors of Voldemort’s actions that were transmitted down the link they had shared. Harry had seen so many different reactions to Voldemort’s cruelties, and had feared in his heart whether he would have been able to be as brave as some of his victims had been.

Now, more than ever, he understood that death, as Dumbledore had once said, was ‘the next great adventure’ – hadn’t he met the man himself in that twilight after death? He didn’t fear it, but he did fear the effect on his family of being a soulless ghoul in Azkaban, and he would be forever grateful to Snape for sharing the means of avoiding that.

Ginny’s scream, in the teleconverter scene, seemed to mingle with Lily’s gasp in his mind. His head dropped, but he forced himself to look up again, to watch the small man in the image. He was vicious and determined. Did he seem in charge? There was no unnecessary communication between the men, just the spells: it was all thoroughly planned. Harry watched the man who he knew now to be Daniel Poulter, the wizard currently residing on the Janus Thickey Ward. At least, Harry assumed he was still there. The man was obviously much more uncertain about his actions,
about the violence; it was only when he came over to Malfoy to perform the mind magic that implanted the false memories that he came into his own, casting with confidence and ease.

Harry found it impossible to feel any sympathy for him.

Soon, it was over. There was less sniffling in the court this time; Harry thought bitterly how easy it was to become accustomed to violence, to witnessing the worst side of humanity.

“I hope that has refreshed the details in everyone’s minds,” Harcourt said. “I would like now, Your Honour, for Master Davis to administer Veritaserum to Mr Potter. I understand that Mr Potter is able to shrug off the Imperius curse, and I understand that in such a case a double dose of the potion is the appropriate amount.”

Hermione was on her feet at once. “We object, Your Honour! Veritaserum is a dangerous drug – ”

“Do you deny that the defendant is able to withstand Imperio?” Anglehurst cut across her.

Hermione looked at Harry, who shrugged.

“Mr Potter, perhaps you could answer, as your Counsel appears unable to do so,” Anglehurst said in an irritated tone.

“As nobody has tried to put me under the Imperius for thirty years or so, I can’t really say,” Harry answered.

“But you were able to free yourself from the spell as a young man?” Harcourt asked sharply.

“I was,” Harry agreed.

Whispering hissed around the court.

Harry was surprised: had people really forgotten all the things that had been printed about him back then?

“Thank you,” said Harcourt sarcastically. “I think we can assume, then, that as a grown man you will have retained that capacity. Unless,” he coughed delicately, “you have found some decline in your magic over recent years?”

Puzzlement turned to anger: Harry could see that not a stone was going to be left unturned in the assassination of his character. For all the people that believed in the old witch’s tale, if Harry admitted that his magic had not been diminished it would be tantamount to admitting infidelity. Well, damn them to hell!

“I haven’t noticed a decline,” Harry answered.

“Indeed,” Harcourt said, his gaze sweeping over Harry. He turned to the Judge. “Then I think that an increased dose would be essential, Your Honour.”

Anglehurst turned to Master Davis. “Master Davis, your advice on this matter, please.”

“Doubling the dose is likely to cause the patient to suffer palpitations of the heart, sweating and tremors,” Master Davis said seriously. “It is an unpleasant experience. Vomiting is also a known outcome.”

Not more vomiting! Harry thought. He glanced up to the balcony, to see Snape’s reaction, but he couldn’t make out any expression. He thought Snape would probably object – wouldn’t he? – if the
dose was likely to do him serious harm.

Hermione had stood up. “It is quite unreasonable to expect Mr Potter to suffer –”

“I have no objection to taking the dose,” Harry said clearly, cutting her off. It was ridiculous that she wasn’t near enough that he could discuss anything with her, and he hated to contradict her, but this was important. “I am completely innocent, and have no fear of the truth coming out.”

Murmurings of approval ran around the court. Hermione took her seat, her eyes flashing a brief look of acceptance at him.

“These ill-effects are not likely to cause lasting harm to the accused?” Anglehurst asked Davis.

“They should wear off within a couple of hours of the drug leaving the system,” Davis agreed cautiously, “but it is my duty to tell the court that the general feelings of nausea and ill-health experienced by the patient may make the accused appear - distracted – and perhaps less engaged, than one would expect.”

“Thank you, Master Davis, for your advice. Members of the Wizengamot, you are asked to take what you have heard into account. Please administer the potion now; I think we are all ready to proceed.”

The drops were placed on Harry’s tongue. Immediately, he felt the potion taking effect, as it sunk into his body, rushed through his veins, making his heart stutter and then pound in his chest, before it fired itself into his brain. He fought against the feeling, the control, the sweat literally pouring out of him.

“His body weight is quite low,” Davis said worriedly, “perhaps doubling the full adult dose was excessive…”

“Is this reaction...unexpected?” Anglehurst asked.

Through the fuzz of his head, Harry thought he could hear concern. He felt Hermione standing beside him. “Are you alright, Harry?”

“No,” he answered honestly.

“Can you tell us what is wrong?”

“My heart is beating too fast; my head is…wrong…, I’m boiling hot, my skin is cold, I think I need a shit – ” his eyes stared up at her, horrified.

“I think we can assume the potion is working,” Davis said, as sniggers broke out around the court.

“Do you need to go to the toilet now, Harry?” Hermione asked gently.

“No,” Harry said, mortified, but at least his stomach and guts seemed to be settling and allowed him to give a negative answer. Behind the fuzz of the drug, he felt appalled realisation dawn of how badly this could go, if Harcourt chose to try and humiliate him, which he probably would. He had wanted to have the drug, for everyone to know he was innocent, but now he tried to recall how he had thrown off the Imperius curse in the past. More sweat broke out.

“Mr Harcourt, if you would like to begin,” Anglehurst prompted.

“Thank you, Your Honour. I think one or two questions - just to confirm the drug really is working
Harry’s heart began to thump even harder. The only way to test that it was working was to ask something that one wouldn’t otherwise wish to answer.

“Very well, Mr Harcourt. Keep it brief.”

“Yes, of course.” Harcourt turned towards him. “Mr Potter, perhaps you’d like to tell us what you think of Judge Anglehurst?”

“Prejudice!” Hermione leapt up. “The Prosecutor is attempting to prejudice the Judge against my client.”

“Only if he has a negative comment,” Anglehurst, said, with a slight smile. “I assure you, I am able to rise above the views of the accused in my duty to dispense justice within these courts. You may answer, Mr Potter.”

“I wouldn’t,” Harry said.

“You wouldn’t answer?” Anglehurst looked puzzled.

“I wouldn’t want to tell Mr Harcourt what I think.”

“I see I need to improve my phrasing,” Harcourt said, realising Harry had, in fact, answered his question. “And perhaps this will prevent Mrs Weasley of accusing me of trying to set the Judge against you. Mr Potter, do you have one secret thought about Mrs Weasley that you have never told her?”

Sweat broke out on Harry afresh. “Yes.” Oh God, no.

“Please tell the court what it is.”

“This is quite inappropriate –” Hermione was standing again.

“Mrs Weasley, is anything Mr Potter says likely to alienate you?” Harcourt asked.

“Of course not –”

“Then you must appreciate that this is a useful test of the effectiveness of the Veritaserum.”

Harry gave Hermione an apologetic look.

“Very well.” She sat down.

“Mr Potter, tell the court your secret thought about Mrs Weasley.”

“She has big nipples. Sorry, Hermione,” Harry gasped.

The court erupted in guffaws and whispers.

Hermione looked like she was forcing herself not to fold her arms over her breasts.

“I see,” Harcourt said. “And are you familiar with Mrs Weasley’s breasts?”

Harry looked confused, struggling to answer.

“Let me rephrase that. It is a rather intimate area of Mrs Weasley’s body. Are you in an intimate
relationship with Mrs Weasley?"

“Your Honour –” Hermione was furious.

“I’ll allow it,” Anglehurst said. “A relationship between you could indeed have a bearing on the case.”

“Not like that,” Harry bit out in answer.

“Like what?” Harcourt asked.

“Are you saying you do have an intimate relationship with Mrs Weasley?”

“She’s my best friend,” Harry said.

“If I may ask a question?” Hermione asked haughtily.

“Go ahead,” Anglehurst waved an arm.

“Harry, has there ever, on any occasion, been any sexual behaviour between us?”

“No.”

A disappointed mumble went around the court.

“Have you ever, on any occasion, seen me naked?”

“No.”

Harcourt stood up, and at a nod from Anglehurst asked, his face smug, and copying Hermione’s mode of questioning, “Have you ever, on any occasion, had sexual fantasies about Mrs Weasley?”

“No,” Harry said, and could see the relief on Hermione’s face. He glanced up to the gallery, and could see Ron give him a slight thumbs up.

“Perhaps we could now move on?” Anglehurst suggested.

“If I may ask one more question, Your Honour?” Hermione asked, and at his nod, went on, “Harry, when did you see my nipples?”

“You were breast-feeding Rose. I thought they were big. I’d never seen your breasts before or since. I’d forgotten all about it until the question forced me to answer. I’m so sorry.”

“No problem at all, Harry. I’m sure many of the mothers here – and many husbands — might agree that the changes to one’s body at the time can be rather - startling,” Hermione said, looking round the court with a modest smile.

Many of the witches were giving little nods and smiles of agreement, and one or two wizards as well. She had effectively diffused the situation.

“Let us get down to business,” Harcourt said, sweeping his robes around him, all formality once again. “Mr Potter, where were you on the afternoon of March 2nd this year? The afternoon in which your wife was found dead?”

“In my shop,” Harry said.
“I see. And can anyone corroborate your whereabouts?”

“Janine Newton. She’s – she was – my assistant.”

“Your Honour, I’d like to call Janine Newton.”

Janine had obviously been told she would be needed. She came into the court looking terrified. A chair was provided to Harry’s right. She glanced at Harry as she came across the floor, and looked as if she would faint, seeing him there in chains.

“Now, Miss Newton, you work for Mr Potter, is that correct?”

“Well, I did, but I’ve got a new job now,” she said, clutching her bag in her lap.

“You’ve left Mr Potter’s employ? But I understand that you hadn’t worked for him long?”

Janine went bright red. “I started working for Mr Potter in January,” she said. “I work for a baker’s now.”

“That’s quite a change, I imagine. But why would you leave so soon? Was Mr Potter not a good employer?”

“Oh, he was very kind!” Janine said.

“But you left him,” Harcourt prompted.

“Well,” she twisted on her seat. “It’s been a bit – difficult. What with Mrs Potter dying, and then – you know, Mr Potter being arrested. There hasn’t been much for me to do.”

“You sound a very conscientious young lady,” Harcourt said. “Now, can you tell me where you were on the afternoon of March 2nd this year?”

Janine looked blank. “Er-”

“It might prompt your memory if I say that that was the afternoon Mrs Potter was found dead.”

“Oh! Oh, I’m sorry,” Janine was bright red and twisting her handbag strap. “I was at work.”

“In Mr Potter’s shop?”

“That’s right.”

“And could you tell us where Mr Potter was?”

“Oh yes, he was there too,” Janine smiled.

“I see. And just so the court has a clear picture, can you tell us what the shop is like? I’m sure most people here haven’t actually purchased any of Mr Potter’s rather expensive furniture,” he added, raising the odd snigger.

“The cost of Mr Potter’s furniture is not a matter for this court,” Anglehurst intervened. “Keep your comments to the point, Mr Harcourt.”

“Yes Sir,” Harcourt bowed. “If you could explain the layout of the shop, Miss Newton?”

“Well, there’s the shop, of course – you come into it off the street, and behind that is the
workshop, and there’s a little kitchen and obviously, a loo,” she blushed, “and a yard outside where Mr Potter keeps his wood. Oh, and a little flat upstairs, but I don’t go up there.”

“That’s very helpful, thank you, Miss Newton. Would you agree that is an accurate description of your shop, Mr Potter?”

“Yes,” Harry said. It was a huge relief to have an easy question.

“Very good, we can all picture it, I’m sure. So now we just need to go back to the afternoon of March 2nd. You were both in the shop, were you, Miss Newton? Attending to customers, perhaps?”

“Oh, well, I was in the shop, of course, and there were three customers, I can give you the name of one, if you want, but the other couple were just browsing,” she said anxiously.

“These customers talked to Mr Potter, did they? Sought his advice, perhaps?”

“Well no, that’s what I’m there for. Mr Potter can’t be in the shop all the time – he has to make the pieces, doesn’t he?” she laughed nervously.

“Of course he does. So was he making ‘pieces’ that afternoon?”

“Yes, he was working on a trunk order.”

“I see. So he didn’t disturb himself to see the customers?”

“Oh no! The magic is very complicated – he can’t be disturbed when he’s doing the magic. When he’s doing the woodwork, that’s alright, he doesn’t mind leaving it –”

“So was Mr Potter working on the magic that afternoon, or the woodwork?”

“On the magic.”

“Thank you for your nice, clear answers, Miss Newton. Now, just to clarify, Mr Potter’s customers didn’t see him, but I can see you’re a nice, helpful girl. I expect you took Mr Potter some tea, did you?”

“Oh no! Well, I would if he was woodworking, of course, and he makes me tea too, he’s very good, but I don’t disturb him when he’s doing spellwork.”

“I see. But you saw him? Is there, perhaps, a window between the shop and the workshop?”

“There is, but I didn’t see him, because he was doing the trunk.”

“I’m sorry, we’re all rather ignoramuses here. Could you explain why that would prevent you seeing Mr Potter?”

“Well, he was in it.”

“In the trunk?”

Janine nodded, and then realised she needed to speak, and added, “Yes.”

“He was lying in a trunk?”

“No, it’s a magical one,” Janine giggled. “He climbed in. He has a ladder.”
“I see,” Harcourt raised his eyebrows in a way that suggested he didn’t at all. “So, what time did Mr Potter go into the trunk?”

Janine thought. “After lunch, so I’d say about 1.15.”

“And when did you next see Mr Potter?”

“When the Aurors came, and I called him to come out.”

“And what time was that?”

“Just after five, I think. It was nearly time to go home, but I made them some tea.”

“I’m sure they appreciated it –”

“I don’t think they drank it,” Janine said honestly. “The pot was still full the next day.”

“Oh dear,” Harcourt commiserated. “So, can you confirm that between 1.15pm and just after 5pm, you didn’t see Mr Potter at all?”

Janine thought it over, and said, with an apologetic look at Harry, “No, I didn’t.”

“Thank you, Miss Newton. No further questions,” he added, looking at the Judge.

Hermione stood up. “If I may, Your Honour?”

“Go ahead, Mrs Weasley.”

“Miss Newton, thank you for your clear answers. I’m sure everyone here appreciates them. Could you tell me whether you saw Mr Potter leave the shop at any time during that period?”

“No, I didn’t,” she said, shaking her head.

“And did you have any reason to think that there was anything strange about Mr Potter’s behaviour that day?”

Janine thought about it. “Nothing at all. He was just like normal over lunch – he went and got us both a baked potato from Tweedles along the road, because he knew he’d have a long afternoon ahead without a break.”

“So there seemed nothing at all out of the ordinary about Mr Potter that day? No nervousness? Agitation?”

“No, nothing. It was just an ordinary day.”

“Thank you, Miss Newton,” Hermione sat down.

“One last question, Miss Newton, if I may,” Harcourt stood again.

Anglehurst signalled him on.

“You said Mr Potter was still in the trunk when the Aurors arrived, and you called him?”

“Yes?”

“You went into the workshop and looked into the trunk and asked him to come up?”
“Oh no! Mr Potter wears a headset when he’s in the trunk. For emergencies.”

“A headset?”

“Yes, so I can talk to him from the shop. I’ve got a handset. Like a Muggle mobile phone. I can call him on it.”

“So you could, in fact, communicate with Mr Potter whilst he was in the trunk?’

“In an emergency. The Aurors said it was an emergency,” she added, looking worried again.

“Yes, it was,” Harcourt said. “You did the right thing. I’m just intrigued,” he drawled, “as to why Mr Potter should have been expecting an emergency that day.”

“Oh no,” Janine said. “It was really for if he had an emergency, like getting locked in the trunk or something.”

“You can hear Mr Potter on your – handset?”

“Yes, of course.”

“So did you hear anything on the handset that afternoon? Did Mr Potter contact you? Did you speak to him?”

“No, but –”

“Thank you, that is all I needed to know,” Harcourt said, and sat down again.

“Miss Newton,” Hermione asked, “can you usually hear Mr Potter over the handset when he’s working?”

“I don’t know,” Janine said miserably. “It was the first trunk he’d done since I worked there, so it was the first time he’d used it.”

Hermione sat down again, and Harcourt looked ineffably smug as Janine left the court, and he stood up once again to question Harry.

“Mr Potter, do you have your apparition licence?”

“Yes,” Harry answered.

The time whilst Janine was being questioned had allowed Harry the chance to get used to the feeling of the drug in his system. The sweat had dried on him and he felt cold and shuddery, and his heart beat was erratic. He’d concentrated on the feeling in his head, the compulsion. He didn’t know if he could overcome it: he didn’t know if he’d need to. He hoped he would be able to answer everything truthfully, but having his alibi demolished was a horrid shock.

“And do you have wards on your house?”

“Yes.”

“Would you describe them as easily broken?”

“No.”

“And yet, according to you, three strangers were able to enter your house and kill your wife.
Perhaps you dropped your wards to allow them in, Mr Potter?”

“No!”

“No? I put it to you, Mr Potter, that the three men were able to enter your house because you invited them in! That you, Mr Potter, were in fact, one of them.”

“No!”

“How would you explain their presence in your house? Are you going to tell us that your wife invited them in? I think she was rather - tied up – at the time,” Harcourt smirked.

“Objection!” Hermione slammed her hand on the desk, at the same time as Harry shouted, “How dare you!” Then he added, forced by the potion, “My elf let them in. Not Ginny.”

“Mrs Potter is dead: whoever the killer was, and whatever the circumstances, she was done a grievous ill: you will speak with respect of the dead, Mr Harcourt,” Anglehurst reprimanded the Prosecutor.

“A slip of the tongue,” Harcourt said, with a blatant pretence of humility. “My unreserved apologies to Mrs Potter’s family.” He turned to Harry. “Are you saying your house-elf acts without your instruction?”

“No, but –”

“That he is allowed to let strangers into your house?”

“No, she –”

“You do realise that a house-elf who causes the death of a member of its family is automatically despatched?”

“No, I don’t know what you mean.” Harry was looking at Hermione, who had gone terribly pale.

“A house elf whose owner dies as a consequence of their actions is not a house elf worth its name,” Harcourt said.

“Mitty didn’t kill Ginny: you saw the men who did,” Harry said, but the sweat was starting to prick out all over him again.

“If you say your elf let the killers in, against your instructions…”

“She didn’t!”

“You gave permission?”

“No!”

“I’m sorry, Mr Potter, either you did or you did not –”

“Perhaps Mr Harcourt might allow Mr Potter the chance to explain,” Hermione said, “or perhaps he isn’t interested in the truth, merely scoring points against a man whose answers are constrained by the drug administered by this court. A drug Mr Potter agreed to take,” Hermione added, seeing Harcourt opening his mouth, “willingly, in the interests of being given the opportunity for the court to know that what he said was the truth.”
“Mrs Weasley has a point,” Anglehurst said. “However, it is neither here nor there. House-elves are not allowed to give testimony in our courts, and therefore any evidence that Mr Potter wishes to present, by way of his house-elf, has no place here. Unless, Mr Potter, you have other witnesses to the fact that your elf let the people who murdered Ginevra Potter into the house?”

“The killers would be witnesses,” Harry answered truthfully.

“Indeed, but as you are the only one standing accused, that does not help your defence,” the Judge noted. “Perhaps you would like to move on, Mr Harcourt?”

“As you wish, Your Honour,” Harcourt said obsequiously. “At this point, I would like to call Argent Dunhurst.”

A wizard dressed in a beige robe with the buttons slotted into the wrong holes, was ushered into the court. He appeared to be in his early thirties, with bushy brown hair and a beard arranged into three rather frizzy plaits. The court watched expectantly as he shifted around, trying to get comfortable on the hard witnesses’ chair.

Harry looked to Hermione, who shrugged. Harry waited to see what this stranger had to add to the proceedings.

It turned out the Argent Dunhurst had done a lot of work looking at the teleconverter image, and could say, with 99% accuracy, that the shortest man was exactly the same height and build as Harry.

“Having never heard of Mr Dunhurst’s work,” Hermione said, when it was her turn to speak, “I am not in a position to question his judgement, and as Mr Dunhurst has made clear that he is the only expert in his field, neither is anyone else, which of itself, I would regard as rather a dangerous thing.” She allowed that to sink in, rather taking the wind out of the rather self-satisfied little boffin. “Moreover, I would ask the court this: if Mr Potter had really wished to murder his wife in this fashion, would he not have used Polyjuice? I would not argue, that the figure in the teleconverter is, in fact, another wizard polyjuiced into Mr Potter, because had that been the case, I am sure the murderer would have quite deliberately taken off his mask. I would just ask, how many people in this courtroom are five feet seven inches tall, which is the same height as Mr Potter, and of a slender build?” She looked around the room. “I suspect, if we asked everyone here to line up beside Mr Potter, we might find two or three at least, more if we counted females.” She could see people looking at each other, and some nodding going on. “I hope you would agree that it would be inadvisable to place too much weight on such flimsy ‘science’.” And she sat down again.

Harry looked around. It was well done. There were not only a number of people in the room of a similar size, but wizards were almost pathologically allergic to the idea of science.

Dunhurst left, throwing an aggrieved look at Hermione, and Harcourt stood again.

“Learned counsel beside me is of course, wise to suggest caution, but nevertheless, I think we must all agree that Mr Potter is of a noticeably small stature, as was the third murderer, and there are, in fact, few wizards who are of short height. However, even fewer know the spell that was used on Mrs Potter. Sectumsempra, ladies and gentlemen! Have you heard of it? Have you ever used it? I am sure you have not. But Mr Potter here, has certainly used it before, haven’t you, Sir?”

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

“Tell us, Mr Potter, when you used the spell?”
Harry’s brain struggled to answer, until he forced some order on it. “The last time I used it was on Snape, Professor Snape,” he said, to gasps from the audience and glances into the gallery, then unable to hold back, “and on the Inferi, and on Malfoy.” He sucked in a breath. He could see that he had revealed a lot more than Harcourt had expected.

“Well, that certainly shows us a very nasty history,” the Prosecutor said. “However, we will stick to the first time you ever used that spell: tell us what happened, Mr Potter.”

Harry could feel the sweat trickling down his back. It seemed to stand out enormously from all the other sensations, all of them heightened by the *Veritaserum*. The courtroom felt like it was set in one of those fish-bowl mirrors, as if things in it swelled out of it and the edges faded into a multi-coloured jungle. He could hear whispers between the members of the Wizengamot as if they were in his ear. The magic of the cuffs restraining him seemed to smell, a cold, iron smell with sulphur and strangeness to it. The wards all around the court appeared almost visible, like they were flashing in and out of perception. He could feel the various glamours people were wearing; a witch on the second row was hiding a huge, hairy mole, and it felt like it leapt out at him, bulging into his consciousness.

No wonder *Veritaserum* induced nausea.

Once again, it was pressing at his mind, his tongue, and he had to force the words to try and take the shape he wanted. “I was fighting Malfoy.”

“Really? Draco Malfoy?”

“Yes.”

“And when was this, Mr Potter?”

“In sixth year at Hogwarts.”

“Are you telling us, Mr Potter, that when you were a school-boy, you cast a spell that was capable of killing a man?” Harcourt looked around the court, inviting others to share his astonishment.

“Yes,” Harry said.

The court erupted.

Hermione stood up. “I might point out to the court,” she said sharply, “that Mr Potter was a schoolboy when he cast the curse – on behalf of everyone here – that killed Voldemort.”

Into the hush that followed this statement, Harcourt said, “Indeed yes, Mrs Weasley. None of us need doubt that Mr Potter has killed before. What astonishes, is the fact that Mr Potter was, even before facing Voldemort, perfectly capable of throwing a mortal curse at a fellow pupil. And, by his own admission here today, at a teacher.” Harcourt shook his head in feigned incredulity.

Hermione’s face did not reveal her fury at having her defence of Harry twisted into a further nail in his coffin. “And yet,” she said, “I notice Master Snape and Mr Malfoy are here, in the gallery, in support of Mr Potter.”

Harcourt looked up at the gallery, and all eyes followed. “Hmm, that is what you may think, Mrs Weasley, but it occurs to me that perhaps they are here to see justice be done at last, to see Mr Potter finally being found accountable for the many crimes that he has committed.”

Draco stood, raising his hand to speak.
Anglehurst looked to him and shook his head. Instead, he turned to the Prosecutor. “Mr Harcourt, might I remind you that this court is not here to listen to assumption and tittle-tattle. Mr Potter is on trial today for the murder of Ginevra Weasley, nothing more, nothing less.”

“Of course, Your Honour,” Harcourt ceded smoothly. “I was merely drawing attention to Mr Potter’s capacity for violence, and to the fact that he is extremely familiar with the spell that killed his wife, a spell that appears to be a particular favourite of his.”

“Mr Potter has answered under *Veritaserum*,” Hermione said, standing up. “If I may just clarify?” She looked to Anglehurst, who nodded. “Harry, who was the last person you used *Sectumsempra* on?”

“Professor Snape. It didn’t work, he defended himself,” Harry answered honestly.

There were some sniggers in the court.

“I’m sure he did. We all know that you were operating under a mistaken belief about Professor Snape at that time, due to his excellent skill as a spy for the Light. Could you just remind us what year that was, Harry?”

“1997.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said. “I believe it is quite clear – Mr Potter having answered under *Veritaserum* – that he did not kill his wife. I move that the case against him be dismissed, Your Honour.”

Harcourt stood up. “I have further evidence against Mr Potter, Sir, that I believe it is essential for the court to hear. Moreover, Mr Potter has proved himself to be incredibly clever: I believe that he too could have arranged to have false memories implanted that have allowed him to answer as he has under *Veritaserum*, or have arranged for a third wizard, paid as the others were, who did the deed, to be of his stature purely to enable himself to refute this evidence.”

“Harcourt, you’re suggesting such a convoluted situation that I don’t know how you expect any of the Wizengamot to follow it: I certainly can’t,” Anglehurst said, to a tittering of amusement in the room. He looked hard at the Prosecutor. “I will allow you to continue, but the Wizengamot expects the highest standards of evidence, not speculation. Is that understood?”

“Yes indeed,” Harcourt said. He turned back to Harry. “Mr Potter, your wife was a very well loved sporting figure, indeed, a well loved public figure, was she not?”

“She was,” Harry agreed, relieved to be able to answer easily.

“I understand that the Holyhead Harpies – the team for which Mrs Potter played, just in case there is a member of the Wizengamot present who doesn’t follow our favourite sport,” Harcourt said, smiling round at the members watching him, “that the Harpies have arranged a Memorial Match in her honour, to be held every year.”

Harry hadn’t known that. But Harcourt hadn’t asked him a question, so he didn’t have to respond.

“I’m sure many fans will be mourning the sad loss of Ginny Potter from the sport for many years to come, don’t you agree, Mr Potter?”

“I expect so,” Harry said, his chest squeezing. It wasn’t a question he could really know the answer to, only make a supposition.
“And many fans must have been to visit her grave, I’m sure. But I haven’t seen anything in the press about that: I’m sure you’ve had an impressive tomb erected, Mr Potter, to allow fans to pay their respects. Perhaps you’d like to remind us where it is?”

So that’s where this was going. “There isn’t one,” Harry said.

“There isn’t one? Surely you must agree that Ginny Potter was a public figure? Or perhaps you were jealous of your wife’s fame, Mr Potter? Perhaps you’ve prevented her fans from mourning her as an act of spite—”

“Objection, Your Honour!” Hermione stormed.

“Indeed. Are you getting to any point at all, here, Mr Harcourt?”

“I am, Sir. Let me be direct, then. Mr Potter, where is your wife buried?”

“She isn’t,” Harry answered.

Whispers began to run around the court.

“No, Sir, she isn’t, is she? Because when you heard that Mr Malfoy’s trial was about to take place, you became fearful of what evidence would come to light. You asked for the case to be delayed, did you not?”

“Yes, but—”

“And demanded the return of your wife’s body?”

“Yes, because—”

“And access to your home? Where the murder took place?”

“Yes, we—”

“And then, without any permission from anyone, you performed the Full Traditional Rites, did you not?”

“Yes,” said Harry, giving up any attempt to make further explanations.

Harcourt looked around the court. “I’m sure some of you are aware of the form of the Full Traditional Rites, but they are very rarely used these days, which of course makes their use – rather – unusual, one could say, if one were being generous. Suspicious, others might think. In the Full Traditional Rites, Ladies and Gentlemen, the body is completely – gone. Is it not, Mr Potter?”

“It is,” Harry agreed. “The Aurors—”

“Just answer the questions, thank you,” Harcourt said. “And could you tell me where the Rite took place?”

“In Ginny’s bedroom.”

“And what happened to the bedroom? When you did the Rites?”

“It’s - cleansed,” Harry said.

“Cleansed,” Harcourt repeated. “Cleansed.” He looked around the court, then back at Harry.
“Cleansed, as in every scrap of evidence was completely destroyed, just as your wife’s body was. How very convenient.”

Hermione was on her feet. “Mr Harcourt is implying that there was something odd, something devious and manipulative in Mr Potter’s request to bury his wife –”

“But he didn’t bury his wife, Mrs Weasley,” Harcourt interjected smugly, “he Banished her.”

Hermione bit her tongue. “If I may question Mr Potter, Your Honour?”

“Perhaps you might even allow him to answer, Mrs Weasley,” Anglehurst assented, with a stern look at Harcourt.

“Yes, Your Honour,” Hermione gave him a small smile of thanks. “Harry,” she asked, “could you please tell the court whose idea it was to use the Full Traditional Rites?”

“Ginny’s parents,” Harry answered with relief.

Several people in the court whispered to each other.

“And why did they suggest using the Full Rites?”

“Because she’d died a violent death. The input of everyone she loved in the Full Rites would help her to move on.”

There were several older members of the Wizengamot nodding in agreement at this.

“And were the Rites done in a secretive manner, Harry? Just one or two people?”

“No,” Harry was shaking his head. “There was all Ginny’s family, and their partners, and children, and our friends, and all Ginny’s team mates, and –”

“Several dozen people then,” Hermione said.

“Yes,” Harry agreed, with relief. He’d worried that he might have to name them all.

“And did a single person, at any point, suggest to you that the Rites might be inadvisable?”

“No,” Harry said. “A lot of people who were there – those people who loved her – told me they thought it was the very best way to say farewell.”

“Thank you, Harry, I’m sure it was.”

Harry looked around, and was relieved to see approval on many of the faces, especially amongst the older members.

“Now,” she continued, “let us just clear up another matter. Did you demand the return of Ginny’s body?”

“I asked if we could have it back if all the investigations were complete.”

“And who did you ask?”

“Aurors Franklin and Hencliffe.”

“These two Aurors were in charge of your wife’s case, were they not?”
“I think they were in charge,” Harry said, brow furrowing. “They came to tell me she was dead, and they came to tell me at the Burrow – Ginny’s parent’s house – about the trial.”

“Was that when you asked them if you could have your wife’s body? You didn’t go storming off to Auror Headquarters at the Ministry?”

“Yes and no.” Having got the answers out, Harry clarified, “Yes, I asked them then. I didn’t go to the Ministry.”

“And is that when you asked them to delay the trial? Can you tell us why you did that?”

“Yes. I asked because it seemed wrong to even think of that when Ginny was dead. Nothing could bring her back. It was more important for us – for her family, the children, all of us – to do what was right by her.”

“Thank you, Harry. No further questions at this point, Your Honour.”

“Master Davis?” Anglehurst said, seeing the Potions’ Master rising to his feet.

“I thought you might need to know that the Veritaserum will begin to wear off in approximately six minutes, Your Honour.”

“Thank you. May we administer a second dose today?”

Master Davis looked thoughtful. “I recommend that there is a break, Sir. If the subject has an empty stomach the side-effects can be more powerful, and dehydration is also an issue. I suggest a break of 90 minutes to eat and drink before I can administer a further dose.”

“Very well. I call a recess for 95 minutes.” He banged his gavel on the desk in front of him. Everyone except Harry rose as he stood to leave the court.

Hermione shot over to Harry, as the guards used their wands to unstrap him from the chair.

“How’re you holding up?” she asked, squatting down beside him.

“I’m dead,” he answered honestly.
Harry was taken to a holding cell just behind the courtroom.

“Am I allowed to see my family?” he asked Hermione.

“Usually, yes,” she agreed. “I’ll check. Anyone else you want to see?”

Harry thought. “I don’t want it to get miserable for them,” he said. He looked at her openly. “I know you’re doing everything you can, and I wouldn’t want anyone else. But Harcourt’s doing a damn good job, isn’t he?”

“He’s one of the best,” she agreed.

“Then I’ll see anyone who wants to come, as many as they’ll let in,” Harry said. “No, don’t feel this is your fault,” he added, seeing the look on his friend’s face. “You know it isn’t. It isn’t mine either, but someone is certainly playing a clever game here. I don’t think it’s Harcourt, he’s just doing his job, I can see that. Anyway, yeah, I’d love to see the kids. Make sure they bring some food with them, will you? I don’t want them being hungry.”

Hermione kissed him on the cheek and went out.

Harry asked the guard if he could use the loo, and by the time he returned, there was a large mug of hot tea and a plate of shepherds’ pie. Harry’s stomach felt pretty iffy, but bearing in mind Master Davis’ comments, he knew he ought to eat some. Although frankly, if he was going to die, which was seeming increasingly likely, it didn’t really matter. He took a sip of the tea instead, and found it surprisingly good.

Footsteps sounded outside and Harry waited patiently as the door was unlocked. The next moment he had a bundle of daughter in his arms. He held her tight, the red hair pressed against his face. It was so like holding Ginny had been in the early days, and he felt a lump rise in his throat. Would this be the last time he would hold his daughter? He looked up, and his sons were there too. He gestured them forward, and then they were all together, hugging.

Eventually, they broke apart. There was a second seat, so Lily sat down; Albus perched on the edge of the table, James stayed standing.

“You’re supposed to be at school,” Harry smiled at his daughter. He couldn’t be cross with her.

She tossed her hair, and that was like Ginny too. “Well, they didn’t want me to come, but of course I was going to be here,” she said.

Harry knew at once that there was more to that story than met the eye. “Do I dare ask how you got here?”

“Well, you know I’m rubbish at apparition,” she said, “and there wasn’t a chance of using the school floo, so I flew.”

“You flew? All the way? It’s hundreds of miles!”

“I know,” she grinned, “but it was great, Dad! And Hugo came with me, you needn’t worry, we looked after each other, and took breaks and everything.”
“Oh my god, does Hermione know? She’ll kill me, I won’t have to worry about the verdict at all!” he joked.

“Well, Ron knows,” Lily said, “but we arrived pretty late, Hermione was already here having a briefing with you. Anyway, Ron said he was really proud of us.”

“He would,” Harry grinned. “You’ll be serving detention till you leave for this.”

Lily looked a bit mutinous and said airily, “Let’s not worry about that! That Harcourt guy is a git, isn’t he? He’s hateful!”

“He’s good,” Albus said.

Harry looked up at his son. “Yes, he is,” he agreed. He rubbed his hands on his knees, and swallowed. He looked at his dinner, and felt his stomach rising in his mouth.

“No,” James said.

Harry looked up.

“Don’t say it. I can see you’re getting ready to tell us to look after each other, or some rubbish, in case he wins – they win. We’re not going there,” James said firmly.

“But –”

“No buts. You didn’t kill Mum, and they’re not going to pin it on you,” James said fiercely.

Harry didn’t know what to say. He felt choked to hear his son defending him, but the reality of the position he was in had hit home hard.

“I agree,” Lily said firmly. “You’ve already told them you didn’t kill Mum. I don’t know how the trial can still go on.”

“Harcourt’s going to do everything he can to make Dad look horrible,” Albus said. “And then I suppose he’s going to say you arranged some assassins.”

“I think you have to be a politician or something to be killed by an assassin,” Harry said.

“Contract killer, whatever,” Albus shrugged. “That’s where he’s going now. What defence has Mione got?”

“I’m sure she’s working on everything she can, adding to everything she’s already got, as we speak,” Harry said.

“I don’t understand why she isn’t up and shouting him down,” Lily said. “She can argue anyone to death, why is she not doing it?” She glanced round to make sure that Hermione wasn’t in the room.

“Hermione has saved my life more times than I like to think,” Harry said. “I’ve got complete confidence in her. The first part is supposed to be the Prosecution: when they’ve got their case all out, then she can really go to town. That’s what’s happened on the cases when I’ve been a member of the Wizengamot, anyway.”

“Oh. Well, that makes sense, I suppose,” Lily said, mollified. “Do you think it will be finished today?”

“I don’t know,” Harry shook his head. Did he want it to be finished? That depended on the
outcome, of course. Would Ginny’s murderers ever be found, he wondered. All this time and effort spent pursuing the wrong people.

There were more footsteps in the corridor. Harry didn’t understand his disappointment when he saw only Ron, and Neville. There was no reason he should have expected to see Snape, was there? He smiled welcomeingly at his friends.

“Tell the whole court about my wife’s tits, why don’t you?” Ron said, bracingly, by way of greeting. All the men laughed, and then Ron realised Lily was sitting there. “Breasts! Boobs! Ladies’ bits! Merlin no, you haven’t seen her ladies’ bits! Have you? I’m going to shut up now.”

“For which we can all be grateful,” Neville said. He looked at Lily, who blushed. “Professor Brown gave in, did he?” he asked. “I thought he was firmly against you coming.”

“My daughter did a runner,” Harry said, smiling at Lily. “Or rather a flyer.”

Neville’s brows rose.

“She flew all the way here,” he said. “Overnight.”

“I bundled Hugo back to school through the floo,” Ron said. “He came with her,” he added proudly, seeing Neville’s confusion.

“He’ll get detention and lose loads of house points,” Neville said. “Lily –”

“I don’t care,” she interrupted fiercely. “Can’t you be Uncle Neville rather than Professor Longbottom? I know I’ll be expelled. Let’s not worry about that now.”

“Expelled?” Harry exclaimed. “Don’t be silly, no-one would –” And then he saw Lily’s face. “Professor Brown said he’d expel you if you came?”

“You didn’t do your last year and you’ve done fine,” she retorted.

“Apart from the murder charge,” muttered Albus, grinning.

“Oh Lily! You shouldn’t have come,” Harry said, taking his daughter’s hand.

“No, I should have come. It was ridiculous to ban me from being at my father’s trial. Let’s not talk about it: we can sort it out later. You ought to eat some of that dinner, Dad.”

The time flew by, and then the warder was there telling his visitors they had to go if they wanted to get back into the court. There had been some laughs, though Harry could hardly remember what about. His head was aching, and he felt rather like he had flu, but he supposed that was the Veritaserum, and he’d been determined not to let it spoil the time with his children. Neville and Ron both gave him quick hugs, Ron patting him awkwardly on the back at the same time, and then his children were hugging him once again, not too much.

Not as if it was the last time.

Ten minutes later, after a few words with Hermione, Harry was locked down into the chair again, and the fresh dose of Veritaserum was burning through his system.

Harcourt got straight in. “Mr Potter, please tell the court how you felt when you heard that your wife wanted to marry Draco Malfoy, your old school rival?”
“I was relieved.”

“Relieved? That’s a rather odd reaction to knowing another man is – intimate - with one’s wife,” Harcourt suggested.

Harry shrugged. The Veritaserum seemed to be affecting him even more this time round; perhaps it was still built up in his system: but that wasn’t a direct question, so the compulsion just simmered.

“Could you explain why you were relieved?” Harcourt asked.

“She’d found someone proper,” Harry said, “and I didn’t have to feel guilty.”

“Proper? What was proper about Mr Malfoy? And what did you feel guilty about, Mr Potter?”

“One question at a time, Sir,” Master Davis said quickly.

“I’m sorry, what was proper about Mr Malfoy?” Harcourt asked.

“He – she – they wanted a relationship,” Harry said, sweating, trying to answer the question.

“Yes? Surely that was rather improper of Mr Malfoy and your wife?”

“No,” Harry said.

“You don’t think it was improper for them to have sex with each other? You must be very open-minded, Mr Potter.” Harcourt looked around the room, inviting others to share his amazement.

“I don’t think it was improper because they cared about each other.”

“Well, you are indeed very open-minded,” Harcourt said. He twiddled with his pages, and then looked up at Harry. “So, you approved of Mrs Potter sleeping with Mr Malfoy. Did she sleep with anyone you didn’t approve of?”

“Objection!” Hermione shouted, over the uproar in the court.

“Mr Harcourt – ” Anglehurst began.

“Yes,” Harry answered, forced by the drug. His eyes shot up to the gallery, looking apologetically at his children, whilst around them the court was abuzz with excitement.

Vultures, Harry thought. Just waiting to pick over the bones of a dead woman.

“And who would that be?” Harcourt asked.

“Is there a purpose to this line of questioning, Harcourt?”

“Daniel Robbins,” Harry said, naming a player for the Cannons. “Phillip Stubbins, Horst Jurgens.” Harry found himself able to not say, though it wanted to come out, that there were others, but he didn’t know their names. The truth serum forced him to tell actual fact, but maybe because he had answered, it gave him some leeway when there were unclear responses. He filed the idea away through the fug that swamped his thoughts.

Up in the gallery, the Quick Quotes Quills were flashing, and Harry could see one parchment being sent flying out of the room, the report ready to hit the evening press. He wished he hadn’t known the names, all three of them famous quidditch players, although the only one he regretted saying was Stubbins: he was married, and his wife, if she didn’t know already, would be hurt.
“I am just finding out, Your Honour,” Harcourt was saying, “if Mr Potter was angry with his wife. I imagine that you were very angry, weren’t you, Mr Potter?”

“Yes,” Harry said. It felt like something in his chest snapped. He had hardly dared even think of the anger that had eaten away at him at the beginning.

“All that infidelity. Did you lie awake, when your wife was away on tour, wondering who she was sleeping with?”

“Yes,” Harry gritted, at the same time as Hermione leapt up.

“Your Honour! Objection! The Prosecutor is harassing Mr Potter.”

Anglehurst looked around the court, at all the interested faces, at the children in the gallery, and lastly at Harry. “You’d better have a damn good reason for this line of questioning, Harcourt.”

Smoothing down a grin at the tacit permission to continue, Harcourt turned back to Harry. “You say you were relieved about her relationship with Malfoy. Were you never angry about that particular infidelity?”

“I was,” Harry said, biting his lip. “But then when it got serious –”

“You thought it better for her to be with one man than to act like a trollop.”

“Objection!” Hermione barked, whilst everyone turned to stare at the gallery, whispering.

Harry looked up as a huge noise echoed around the room, silencing the court for a moment. Ron stood there, hands gripping the railing, face furious. It sounded as if he had kicked the woodwork. Draco was white, his face showing nothing.

Thankfully Harcourt had made a statement rather than a question. He felt pulled to tell the truth, to respond, but he could resist the urge.

“Objection sustained,” Anglehurst snapped. “You will moderate your language, Mr Harcourt. I will not have this court used to cast aspersions on the victim, which they are unable to answer.”

“My apologies, Sir,” Harcourt gave a small bow. “Let me rephrase that. Mr Potter, were you relieved that Mrs Potter had formed an attachment to Mr Malfoy because it meant she would not be dallying with other men?”

“Yes,” Harry agreed. Again, the rest of the truth was fighting to get out of his mouth. He held it back.

Harcourt had seen it. “And were there other reasons why you were relieved?”

Harry’s fists grasped the arms of the chair. “Yes.”

Harcourt looked steadily at him. “Please tell us the reasons you were relieved, Mr Potter.”

Harry struggled with the words. “He made her happy.”

“And you didn’t?”

He’d tried to get around saying it, but it came out anyway. “Not in bed.”

Harcourt stood looking at him. The court, after the first titters, was hushed, waiting for more.
“You said in the trial of Mr Malfoy, that you hadn’t slept with your wife for nine years. Is that correct?”

“Yes.”

Harcourt picked up a quill and twirled it through his fingers. He stroked along the length. “Had you become…incapable, Mr Potter?” he said, letting the feather droop from his fingers.

More sniggers ran around the court. “Incapable of pleasing her, yes,” Harry gritted.

“You became physically incapable – ”

“Your Honour,” Hermione said in exasperation.

“This is important, Sir,” Harcourt said.

“Hmmf,” the Judge said, but waved him to continue.

“Mr Potter, please tell the court if you are physically incapable of having sex?”

“I am not,” Harry said, glaring.

“So, you chose not to have sex with your wife? To deprive her of the warmth and comfort of a loving relationship, to diminish her magic – ”

“Your Honour, there is no proof whatsoever that magic is diminished by lack of sexual contact,” Hermione interrupted. “Mr Harcourt is seeking to bias the Wizengamot using old wives’ tales to demolish Mr Potter’s character.”

“Objection sustained,” Anglehurst agreed.

“Your Honour,” Harcourt said, “it’s a widely accepted belief – ”

Perhaps you would consider the wisdom of addressing such a belief to a judge who has been a widower for thirty five years, Mr Harcourt,” Anglehurst stared down the Prosecutor.

Harry watched the man’s mouth open and then snap shut quickly. He felt a smile forming and held it back. Around the court, many people were hiding grins behind their hands, others looking speculatively at the Judge.

Harcourt turned back to Harry. “Mr Potter: you did not have sex with your wife despite being capable of it. Is that correct?”

No,” Harry said.

“I’m sorry, I fail to understand you. Were you or were you not capable of having sex with your wife?”

Harry could see that Harcourt wasn’t going to let it go. He found the words to answer as best as he could. “As you saw in the teleconverter image,” he said, his heart beating faster and faster in response to the fact that he wasn’t immediately answering, “my wife liked things a little rough in the bedroom. After my experiences in the War, I was not able to satisfy that need.”

The noise in the courtroom rose. Harry looked up, braving the glare of disapproval he expected, but was surprised to see sympathy on some faces.
“I see. So you were relieved Mr Malfoy was able to see to your wife’s requirements?”

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

“So that you could follow your own interests elsewhere?”

Harry looked puzzled.

“Come, come, Mr Potter. Are you expecting us to believe that you haven’t had your own dalliances? That you haven’t trifled with other interests of your own? Perhaps I should warn you, Sir, that we have had you under watch since your wife’s death. Only days after her funeral, you took yourself to the Leaky Cauldron, and used their floo to go to an unknown destination, did you not, Mr Potter?”

“Too many questions!” Davis barked, sweeping across to put his hand on Harry’s sweating brow.

“I withdraw them,” Harcourt said.

He turned to cast his gaze around the room, addressing himself to the members of the Wizengamot. “Ladies and Gentlemen, I know that you might well feel that I have been harassing Mr Potter, a man known to you all as a hero, a saviour, a loving family man. Of course we don’t want to feel ill of him. He saved us all, didn’t he?” He glanced across at Harry. “He doesn’t look like a murderer, does he?” he said, inviting everyone to stare at Harry. “Even though we all know that he is a murderer,” he added. “Do not let that meek, shy exterior fool you.” He started wandering around the court. “I’m sure, like me, you felt that this case had nowhere to go this morning, when Mr Potter told us that he did not murder his wife. He is, after all, under Veritaserum, isn’t he? A double dose! How could he tell anything but the truth? But I have to tell you, that I have been trying cases in this court for twenty five years, Ladies and Gentlemen. I have seen many people under the influence of the truth serum. I’m sure some of you have witnessed it before too.” He looked around the court, where a number of the members were nodding. “I’m sure you noticed, as I did, that Mr Potter was reacting rather strangely. Usually, the eyes are glazed, and the answers come straight out, do they not? But what do we see with Mr Potter? Sometimes he hesitates. Sometimes he elaborates. Mr Potter was able to cast aside Imperio, one of the three Unforgivable curses, as a school-boy. And I can assure you, that Mr Potter is throwing off the effects of Veritaserum here in this courtroom.”

The court erupted.

Hermione was shouting, people in the gallery were yelling.

Anglehurst banged his gavel down, over and over. “I will not have this noise in my courtroom!” he bellowed. “Mr Harcourt, Mr Potter has answered all of your questions, many of them of a very personal nature. On what do you base your assertion?”

Harcourt bowed. “I have asked the intimate questions you have just heard to test my theory, Your Honour, and to demonstrate to the court that Mr Potter’s answers cannot be accepted as the truth. I do not deny that Mr Potter is feeling coerced by the potion. But I asked Mr Potter whether his wife slept with anyone he did not approve of.”

“And Mr Potter answered,” Hermione argued.

“Indeed, he gave us the names of three famous quidditch players. Any man is bound to disapprove of that, I am sure,” he said.

“What is your point, Harcourt?” Anglehurst asked.
“The point, Your Honour, is that Mr Potter failed to mention the seven other gentlemen with whom Mrs Potter had affairs.”

Roars of anger and disbelief echoed through the room. Harry looked down at his hands. He couldn’t face looking at Lily. And so much for trying to protect Ginny as much as he could.

Anglehurst was banging his gavel again.

“You have evidence, Mr Harcourt?”

“Oh yes, Your Honour.”

“Mr Potter, did you know your wife had had affairs with other men? Apart from the ones you mentioned?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

“And yet you managed not to mention it?”

“Yes.” At the gasp in the court, Harry continued, “I didn’t know their names, or how many. I couldn’t answer.”

“Mr Potter, surely it is true to say that you are not affected by Veritaserum as other men are?”

“I don’t know, I can’t know how it affects anyone else.”

“Mr Potter, are you compelled to tell the truth, or not?” asked Anglehurst.

“I am compelled to tell the truth,” Harry said.

“The whole truth?” Harcourt asked.

“Your Honour,” Hermione stood. “If Mr Potter were able to lie, surely he would have denied knowing that there were other men in his wife’s life? Mr Harcourt was the one who insisted on using Veritaserum. Because he does not like Mr Potter’s answers, because Mr Potter says that he did not kill his wife, Mr Harcourt is trying to create a situation where there is no way that Mr Potter can be perceived to be answering honestly.”

“It is my duty to the court,” Harcourt retorted, “to inform them, that my experience of witnessing the use of Veritaserum leads me to believe that Mr Potter has more control over his responses than should be the case. Mr Potter, as we all know, is a wizard of powers that we can only just imagine. This is the only wizard who has survived the Killing Curse. Not once, but twice. Mr Potter was brought up without a sprinkling of magical knowledge until he went to Hogwarts, at eleven. In that very first year, he became the youngest Seeker ever to play for a house team. He defeated a troll, and if the stories are correct, overcame a whole series of obstacles created by the most able wizards, set to deny access to the worst kind of robbers and thieves, to steal The Philosopher’s Stone. Mr Potter, are these facts correct?”

“Yes,” Harry answered, “but I had help.”

“He had help, Ladies and Gentlemen,” Harcourt looked around the court. “Of course, that would explain it.” There were some laughs at his dry comment. “And you were entered into the TriWizard Tournament, a famously rigorous series of tests that have led to the deaths of several participants, including one in the year in which you won it, Mr Potter. And you weren’t even of age, were you?”
“No,” Harry agreed.

“This is not an ordinary wizard, Ladies and Gentlemen. He may look small of stature, he may live amongst us as an ordinary man, but never forget that he isn’t.” He whipped round and demanded, “Is it true, Mr Potter, that you sent a Patronus charm from your cell here in the Ministry?”

They knew that? “Yes,” Harry said.

There was some muttering. Most wizards could not perform a Patronus charm.

“Without a wand?”

“Yes.”

“From a cell which had been dampened to prevent magic?”

The whole room was holding its breath.

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

There was silence, followed by whispering, people staring at Harry and looking away.

“If I may?” Hermione asked, tight-lipped. “Harry, why did you send that Patronus?”

“I knew I was dying.”

Another collective intake of breath. The journalists who had started folding their parchments ready to send off spread them open again, the Quills hovering at the ready.

“How did you come to be dying?”

“I was poisoned.”

There was uproar.

“Mr Potter,” Harcourt asked, “Are you saying that the Ministry tried to poison you?”

“It was the guard,” Harry said.

“Interesting as this flight of fantasy is,” Harcourt sneered, “here you are, looking hale and hearty and able to impose your will over Veritaserum, which I believe you to be doing now. Such a matter is irrelevant to the purpose of this trial, though I am sure that if Mr Potter wished to make a complaint – he hasn’t done, has he? – the Ministry will employ all their efforts into investigating the matter. What is important, is that Mr Potter does not deny performing incredibly complex magic in an environment where he shouldn’t be able to perform magic at all. This is a dangerous man before you. This is a man who is able to work around all the boundaries of normal magical restrictions. This is a man who, I think we can all agree, had every motive to want to kill his wife. She was repeatedly unfaithful to him, perhaps in an effort to get his attention. We can’t be sure of that. We do know that she certainly succeeded when she settled upon Mr Malfoy, her husband’s old enemy. Little did Mrs Potter know that instead of attracting her husband’s attention back to her, she had created a perfect situation for her own downfall. Mr Potter does not have an alibi, Ladies and Gentlemen. Nobody saw him on the afternoon of the murder. Mr Potter’s wards were not breached. Mr Potter employed his trademark spell, and then, as soon as Mr Malfoy had been set up, he destroyed every scrap of evidence, using his wife’s family and friends as unwitting collaborators to his Machiavellian scheme. This meek and mild man before you, honourable
members of the Wizengamot, is not some weeping widower, but a calculated, violent and
dangerous man.”

Hermione stood up. “Mr Harcourt has worked hard, hasn’t he, to tarnish Mr Potter in our eyes.
He’s working so hard at it, Ladies and Gentlemen, because he has no evidence – not a single scrap
of solid evidence - to convict Mr Potter. He’s hoping that by dirtying his name, by attempting to
frighten you, you’ll convict Mr Potter, but I know that none of you are likely to be fooled by such
tricks.

“Mr Potter was in his workshop when the Aurors came to tell him of his wife’s death. If you doubt
that, Aurors Franklin and Hencliffe are in court, and we can ask them. Now, Mr Harcourt would
argue that just because Mr Potter was there when they arrived, he could have managed to have
returned to the trunk before their arrival. I won’t go into how difficult it would be to apparate into
the confined space of a trunk without a splinter or two!” Hermione looked round, seeing nods of
amusement. “And remember, our Auror force is highly trained. Did either of the Aurors find blood
on Mr Potter? Evidence of cleaning spells? Guilt? Fear? I think we can assume they didn’t – after
all, if that had been the case, you wouldn’t have sat here for the trial of Draco Malfoy, would you?
And who was it who proved Draco Malfoy innocent? Harry Potter. Why, I ask you, would Mr
Potter have gone to the lengths he did to prove a man innocent, if he himself was the murderer, and
had wished to set up Mr Malfoy? Mr Harcourt is suggesting that Mr Potter is playing a complex
game. He suggests that Mr Potter must have been one of the murderers, for how else could they
gained access to the house? I ask, how many of you have children? They all have friends they
want to bring home, don’t they? How many of you have given your house elves the task of making
judgements on who can enter your home? Mr Harcourt threatened Mr Potter with the death of his
house elf, if he mentioned such an arrangement; Harry cares so much for Mitty, the elf in charge of
his home, that he could not allow that. How can anyone think that Mr Potter would kill his own
wife, when he does his all to protect every being in his household?

“Mr Harcourt has had the most enormous gall to call Harry Potter a murderer for killing
Voldemort! Does he remember what Harry had to do to achieve that? Does he not remember that
Harry gave up his own life in order to rid us of the horror that would have been existence under the
Dark Lord’s reign? That the Wizarding World expected a child to do its dirty work? Don’t let us
forget that Harry did exactly what we wanted of him. But has Mr Potter shown any signs of violent
behaviour since? No, he hasn’t. He – ”

“Mrs Weasley, impassioned as your defence is, I do not think Mr Harcourt has yet asked all the
questions for the Prosecution. You will have your time, Madam.”

“Yes, Your Honour, thank you,” Hermione said, sitting down.

The mood in the court had changed. Harry was glad that Hermione had spoken up for him: he
knew she had been biding her time, but he understood Lily’s shock that so far, he seemed to have
been under constant attack. He geared himself for more questions. He was astonishingly tired: he
thought he had more or less recovered from the poisoning. Obviously not. The Veritaserum was
pounding at the edges of his brain, making his stomach lurch. It was hard to concentrate.

“Mr Potter, of course I am grateful, as we all are, for your past endeavours. But I’m sure you
would agree that one good action will not excuse future misdeeds. In the interests of clarity,
perhaps you will tell the court why you went to the Leaky Cauldron and used their floo, rather than
the rather more convenient option, one would have thought, of using your own?”

“I didn’t want my destination to be traced,” Harry felt the words pulled from him. His mind started
panicking about what he could say about Snape and Kingsley.
“Really? That sounds as if you were going somewhere illegal, or illicit. Perhaps you were visiting a lover, Mr Potter?”

“I’m sorry, Your Honour, but Mr Harcourt seems fixated on Mr Potter’s sexual activities,” Hermione objected.

Anglehurst raised an eyebrow at Harcourt.

“Sir, it is well known that when a wife has been murdered, infidelity and sex are often close by.”

“I’ll allow this briefly, Harcourt, but I too am getting impatient,” the Judge warned.

Harry was sweating with the effort of waiting to respond.

“Do let the accused answer!” Davis demanded. “This delay is very unhealthy!”

“Please answer the question,” Harcourt said promptly.

“I was not,” Harry said. Whilst the Prosecutor, Hermione and the Judge had been talking, he had looked up to the gallery to see if Snape could give him any indication. He felt real relief to see him still there, but wasn’t able to glean anything from his face.

“Tell us where you went,” Harcourt asked.

Harry forced himself not to name the floo address. “I went to see Professor - Master Snape.”

“Ah. You’ve stayed with Master Snape too, have you not?”

So he was being watched all this time. “Yes, I was fortunate enough to be invited.”

“And you enjoyed staying with Severus Snape, ex Death Eater, and his homosexual lover, did you?”

Gasps of shock reverberated around the court-room. Many faces turned to look at Snape.

Harry was horrified that Snape should be outing like this. “Yes, I enjoyed myself very much,” he said with dignity. “I named my son after Severus Snape, who is a man I admire and respect, and who worked as a spy for many years to defeat Voldemort.”

“I bet you didn’t know he was queer when you named your son after him, did you?” Harcourt chuckled, giving a limp drop of his hand to illustrate ‘queer’.

“Actually, I did,” Harry said, cutting across the titters around the court.

“Really?” Harcourt turned towards him. “Perhaps we have been looking in the wrong direction. Is Master Snape your lover?”

“Objection!” Hermione shouted.

“He is not,” Harry said, before Anglehurst could respond.

“Are you homosexual, Mr Potter? Is that why you couldn’t satisfy your wife?”

“Objection!” Hermione’s chair screeched on the floor as she leapt out of her seat.

Harry found his mouth opening and closing. To his horror, he could feel his insides churning as he
tried to formulate a response, and knew the feeling only came when the answer wasn’t known. But he had never had a relationship with a man! Then the thought of Scorpius and Andy in his bed came into his mind, and he felt the sweat pouring out of him.

“Are you, Mr Potter?” Harcourt went on.

Harry felt like he might pass out. Everything was swelling and receding in his field of vision. He had to find an answer. “I have never had a homosexual relationship,” he got out.

“No? Not even a kiss?” Harcourt badgered.

“No,” Harry said, relief filling him as he felt able to answer truthfully.

“And in your fantasies, Mr Potter? Who do you see then? Your wife? Mr Snape? Mr Shacklebolt?”

“This is utterly outrageous! Don’t answer, Harry!” Hermione was saying. “People’s fantasies are –”

“He’s had quite enough!” Davis said, waving a wand over Harry to check his vitals. “I had no idea he’d been poisoned, or I would never have permitted the use of –”

“I’m sorry, that question was too complicated, I expect. Let’s make this easy: who did you see in your last fantasy, Mr Potter?” Harcourt demanded.

Harry could not say Scorpius. He could not. He could not say that in front of his children. That he had wanked to the sight of two men young enough to be his sons. He could not...he felt bile rising in his throat, his head pounding as if it would explode, and all he could do was not say one word...

“Malfoy,” he gasped. He could hear the court erupting as he slid with relief into the blackness crowding the edges of his vision.
Harry couldn’t bring himself to look at Hermione.

He was back in his warded cell, with a strong cup of tea steaming on the table in front of him. He picked it up and took a sip, surprised to find that his roiling stomach seemed to find it soothing.

He’d come round in the court to find Davis sticking drops of antidote onto his tongue, Hermione at his side, and the guards not knowing whether to release him from the restraints in the chair or not.

Davis was determined about his job at least, Harry thought. He had laid into the court clerk, making quite clear that he should have been forewarned about Harry’s poisoning, and refusing to administer any more Veritaserum for at least 48 hours. Given that Harry had promptly vomited as Davis was speaking, right over the floor of the courtroom, Anglehurst had decided to suspend proceedings for the day.

Harry had not been able to bring himself to look up into the gallery.

He could not bear to think what his children thought of him.

Hermione sighed, and put down her own cup. “We have to talk about this, Harry. I wouldn’t say anything, normally, but we have to construct some defence here.”

“You would,” he said.

Hermione frowned. “What?”

“Would say something.”

“Well of course I would!” she exploded, making Harry look up at last. “I should have guessed,” she said, shaking her head. “You always had a thing about Malfoy.”

“I did not!” Harry denied.

“You were always following him in sixth year,” Hermione argued.

“Mione, I slashed him in sixth year.”

“Well, there you are then!”

“What? Practically killing him was a sign of my repressed lust?”

Hermione’s lips twitched. “Wasn’t it?”

Harry shook his head. “Oh God, Mione, what am I going to do?” He buried his head in his hands. “I’m so ashamed.”

Harry felt her chair clatter closer and the next minute her arms were around him.

“Wizards are just old-fashioned; we both know there’s nothing wrong with being gay,” she said gently.

“It’s worse,” Harry whispered into her shoulder.
She sat back and looked at him. “Right. Well, you might be surprised, Harry, to know that I hear an awful lot of terrible stuff in this job. But it is my job to defend my clients, and I can’t do that without knowing what’s going on. So you’re going to tell me all about it, alright? However bad it is. And then we’ll work out what we’re going to do.”

This was Mione in work mode. Efficient and no-nonsense.

Harry nodded.

“First, I’m going to ask the guards to not let anyone disturb us. I know your kids will want to see you, but I’ll need to work on this, so the sooner I start the better. I’m sorry —”

“God, Hermione, I don’t want to see anybody! And I can’t imagine James hasn’t run screaming from the courtroom.”

“He’ll get over it —”

Harry shook his head. “He was homophobic to begin with. Anyway, there’s no time for getting over it, is there? I’ll be dead tomorrow. I’ve handed Harcourt my head on a plate.”

Harry had to hand it to Hermione. There was no pretence of placating him.

“You’d better tell me everything, and I’ll see what I can do with it,” Hermione said. “I’m just going to have a word with the warder.”

Harry went and used the loo whilst Hermione was out of the cell. He was ridiculously aware of the water as he washed his hands afterwards, feeling the cold flow of it over his skin. He washed his face, cleaning off the sweat, smelling the harsh prison soap. Soon these things would cease to exist for him. He hadn’t murdered Ginny, but he knew Harcourt had woven an excellent web, and he had added the last strands himself.

Hermione returned and sat down, getting out her notebook. “Right,” she said. “I expect all the monitoring spells are still in place, so we’ll do as before, right? I ask the questions, you write down the answers.” She slapped a couple of pens on the table.

Harry wondered if anyone had been there waiting to see him. Hermione hadn’t said anything. He didn’t have the courage to ask.

“So, let’s get down to basics. How long have you had a thing for Malfoy for?”

Never, Harry wrote.

“Harry, you answered under Veritaserum,” Hermione said. She looked at him. “You must have had. Why would you have said it otherwise?”

Harry just looked at her. This is so awful, he wrote at last.

“Have you had sex with him?” she asked in a whisper. Her eyes widened. “Not in his cell when —”

“NO!”

“Is he interested in you?” Hermione asked.

Harry shook his head.

“So…I don’t know what to ask here,” Hermione sucked the end of her Biro. “You’ve had fantasies
about him, yeah?”

Harry shook his head again.

“But - ”

“Do you remember the day I was taken?” Harry asked. “We had the party the night before?”

Hermione nodded, watching him.

“I was supposed to be sleeping in Ginny’s room.”

“Okay,” Hermione prompted.

Because some of the kids stayed over. Harry’s hand shook as he wrote ‘kids’. God, he was vile.

“You fell asleep on the sofa though, didn’t you?” Hermione was catching on.

Hermione wrote down, Scorpius and Andy told us you’d walked in on them.

“‘They did?’ Harry looked at her in surprise.

It must have been a bit of a shock seeing them in bed together. Hermione looked at him sympathetically.

Harry looked at Hermione, and then wrote, Andy was giving Scorpius a blow-job.

Hermione’s hand flew over her mouth. “Oh, Harry!”

He looked at her, then wrote, I’d never seen anything like that before.

“I’ll say!” Hermione said, a smile beginning to play around her mouth. “It was hot, I take it?”

Harry blushed, then slowly nodded.

Hermione put her hand on his arm. “Harry, I expect I would’ve thought the same.” She looked at him, and wrote down Two beautiful young men. Enjoying themselves. Of course it was.

I feel terrible, Harry wrote.

“Did you say anything?”

“Apologised,” Harry answered. “Practically ran out of the door.”

“Okay, so you didn’t,” touch them? She wrote down the last bit.

“Of course not!” Harry exclaimed.

Hermione’s eyes narrowed. But you had a fantasy about Scorpius. Not Draco at all, Hermione deduced.

Harry nodded miserably.

She put her hand on his arm again. “You’re beating yourself up about nothing –”
He’s the same age as Albus! Harry scribbled. It’s disgusting!

You twit, it would be worrying if it was Albus, but not just someone else his age, Hermione’s pen streaked across the page. He’s young and good looking. Pin-up magazines are full of beautiful young things, not old wrinklies. What’s not to like?

He’s a man? Harry raised an eyebrow at her.

“Well, there is that,” she grinned. “Well.”

I don’t think I’m gay, Harry wrote, and looked up for Hermione’s response.

Hermione studied him.

“Can you see it written in my face, or something?” Harry gave her a twisted smile.

“I think that’s something to come back to,” she said apologetically. “We need to work on your defence. So, let me just get this straight. Umm, the timeline.” She wrote down, You’ve had fantasies about Scorpius in here?

“You’re joking!” Harry said. “This is embarrassing,” he added, and wrote, I went to have a shower afterwards. And a - he looked at Hermione, and blushed, before continuing - a wank. I hadn’t done it since Ginny died. And I was having my regular, heterosexual fantasy when suddenly I was thinking about Scorpius. He kept scribbling. And when Harcourt asked me about the fantasy the girls didn’t even come to mind, weren’t dragging at me at all. Just Scorpius. And I couldn’t say that.

So you were able to over-ride the Veritaserum? Hermione wrote, looking at him with interest.

“I wish,” Harry said. At her confusion, he added, “Fractionally. Not that it helped me.”

“No,” Hermione agreed. “I think it would be best if you told the truth. Clarified it.”

“No.”

“But Harry, you must see –”

Of course I do,” Harry snapped. “But what my children think of me is already bad enough. I’m not having them think that. Know that. And –” he began to write again, I can’t have Scorpius thinking that this horrible old lech was perving on him.

“Harry, you can’t let them kill you because of your pride. It’s worse than Draco doing it for a promise.”

“Mione, this isn’t any reflection on you. But we’re not going to win, are we? They don’t know who killed Ginny. They aren’t looking for anyone else. They haven’t even mentioned Daniel Poulter and we know CAW went to see him. Didn’t they connect what happened to him with this case? Or are they just ignoring it? I don’t know if they’re incompetent or just determined to wipe out both of us. Ginny and me. Ginny and Draco. God knows. It’s ridiculous!” He brushed his hands through his hair, then looked back at Hermione, who looked stricken.

And suddenly, suddenly, Harry felt stricken too.

“I’m going to be dead – or worse than – tomorrow,” he said, his voice wondering. He reached across and grabbed Hermione’s hand. “I don’t want to die.”
“Well, don’t sound so surprised,” Hermione said, her voice thick, as if she was holding back tears.

“I think I am surprised,” Harry said. “When I was poisoned, I thought I was going to die. I didn’t feel like I’d got any control over it. And when I died to get rid of Voldemort…it just seemed inevitable. This – this feels wrong, Mione. I don’t want to leave the kids. Even if they hate me. I don’t want to leave things as they are. With the murderers going free, with whatever’s happening in the wizarding world. I –” and Harry found his thoughts had gone to Snape, and Kingsley, and the warmth of their home and their friendship. “Shit!” he said. “Shit!”

“What is it?” Hermione asked.

“Snape got outed. And…” he glanced round, shutting up. “Oh god. I need to apologise. As if that means anything.”

“I don’t think he’s too bothered –”

“Mione, of course he is! He’s stayed out of England all these years –”

“Well, if he is, he’s waiting to kill you, then.”

“Snape’s waiting? To see me?”

“He was, but I suggested he take Lily and Albus to get something to eat while I talked to you.”

“They came?” Harry swallowed. “James didn’t.”

“He may have gone to the loo, or something,” Hermione said, not looking at Harry.

Harry thought how awful it would be to die with his children hating him. He couldn’t believe how relieved he felt that Albus and Lily were there. What’s more, they were there in Snape’s company, which gave him a bit of hope that they weren’t going to be instantly judgemental.

What he hadn’t expected, when Hermione had hugged him and gone on her way, was Lily flying into his arms, saying, “Dad, I’m so sorry!”

He held her tight, as he had earlier, enjoying the forgiveness and trust and love in that embrace.

“What on earth have you to be sorry for?” he asked, pulling away after a moment.

“You never said anything! Ever! And it must have been awful, wanting Mr Malfoy when Mum had him.”

Harry laughed. It started and wouldn’t stop. He knew it was rather hysterical, but oh! Eventually, he embraced Lily again, gave Albus a quick hug whilst he wiped his eyes, and then they sat down.

“Right,” he said, still chuckling. “Let me put your mind at ease on that one. And I’m sorry if I’m destroying some romantic ideals here, Lils. I haven’t been pining over Malfoy. Not ever.”

“But - ?”

Harry looked at his children, and loved their kindness, their willingness to listen. He rubbed his chin. “Look,” he said, “you know sometimes you have weird dreams and don’t have any control about them?”
They nodded.

“Well, it was a bit like that. Not that I can believe I’m talking to you about this, and I really shouldn’t,” he said, looking at Lily.

“I’m grown up. Almost,” Lily grinned. “You were wanking, then, Dad?”

Harry choked.

“Well, he was asking you about it in court! For the whole world to know!”

“Well, they do say everybody does it,” Albus smirked.

“Right, well, I’m saying this once and that’s it,” Harry said.

Lily and Albus nodded, but they both still had mischievous smiles on their faces.

“I was having a fantasy about…well, about someone else entirely…of the female variety,” Harry blushed. “And then Malfoy just popped into my head for a couple of seconds, completely bizarrely, and there you go. And the drug makes you spill it. Now I’m as gay as a summer’s day, according to the wizarding world.”

“That’s it?” Albus asked.

Harry nodded. He was just praying that he’d get away with just saying ‘Malfoy’. He’d argued with Hermione, in the end, saying that although the court thinking it was Draco would add fuel to the fire, he didn’t think it would really help if he revealed it was Scorpius. They’d think he was a perv anyway, and more so for the object of his fantasy having been a boy. If it got out that Scorpius had been in his house, in his bed, they’d have a field day. And Harry would hardly be able to rely on Draco to keep the Prophet writers under control. Not when it was his son that Harry had thought of. Hermione reluctantly agreed to focus on other parts of the case against him.

“Well, that’s ridiculous!” Lily was furious.

“I know,” Harry shrugged. “I’m just glad you came to see me.”

“James is a dick,” Albus said, the fact that he wasn’t there somehow leaping out of Harry’s comment.

“I’ll tell him what you said. He’ll be sorry then,” Lily swished her hair.

“He’s entitled to feel angry,” Harry defended his son. “He’d made clear how he felt about homosexuality.”

“I wouldn’t care if you were anyway,” Lily said. “In some ways…” she stopped.

“What?” Harry prompted. “You can’t offend me, Lils.”

“In some ways it would make it easier to understand you breaking up with Mum,” she looked at him.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “But I can’t pretend that was the reason, Love. It just wasn’t to be between us.”

Lily nodded.
“What happens now?” Albus asked.

“Now, we go to court again tomorrow, Hermione does her bit for me, and we see what happens.”

Albus nodded, biting his lip.

“I know you don’t want me to say anything, but you’re all grown up, near enough,” Harry said quietly. “If the worst comes to the worst, you’ll all be fine. I want you to enjoy life, not spend it worrying about who did this.”

“We’re not going to leave you unavenged!”

“They’re not going to get you!”

Harry shook his head. “I hope not. But…I don’t want your lives coloured by vengeance. If you want to help sort out this organisation, that’s fine. But don’t waste your lives on revenge, please. I’ve been dead before,” he added. “It’s nothing to be scared of, you know? The only thing that matters to me is knowing you’re happy and safe. Go to Hermione and Ron if you need help. George.”

“Severus has been very good to us,” Albus said.

Harry nodded. “Hermione said he was waiting with you?”

“Yeah, but I think he didn’t want to intrude, so he’s gone.”

Harry tried not to notice the disappointment he felt. Snape had been his constant, quiet support whilst he’d been in the cells.

The next morning found Harry once again strapped in the chair, and Hermione was working steadily through her defence, crushing her way through Harcourt’s arguments. Harry could feel, though, that the mood of the court was against him. He felt the weight of their glances, the feeling that he knew well, of people believing the worst of him.

Up in the gallery, James sat, looking down on him too.

But he was there.

The court broke for lunch.

Harry found not Hermione, or his children, coming into the holding cell off the court, but Snape.

He felt a huge sense of relief.

“I’m so glad you came,” he said, standing and moving towards Snape. “I’m so sorry about you being outed –”

“Sit and eat,” Snape said, waving Harry back to the table in a no-nonsense manner.

Harry did as he was told.

Snape had taken out a small container and was tucking into what appeared to be a cheese and
pickle sandwich himself. Harry’s lips quirked at the domesticity of it.

“I have no anxieties about that,” Snape said, after Harry had eaten several mouthfuls. “As I think I said before, I’ve kept quiet about my inclinations long enough.”

“Still,” Harry said. “I hadn’t expected that. I’m sorry I brought you in to all this.”

“It would have come via Kingsley’s work, had this not happened. Given your current predicament, it might seem you are the only one involved in what is happening in the world, but you know that you are not.”

Harry nodded, and ate a few more mouthfuls. The food tasted surprisingly good. “I’m reluctant to die, this time,” he admitted quietly.

“That is understandable,” Snape said. “You have more to live for.”

Harry nodded, relieved that there weren’t protestations.

“Before you ask, I will keep my eye on your youngsters, and am available to assist them should they ask for it.”


They said nothing else, just sat and ate, drank a cup of tea, and then Snape went, quietly and gracefully, leaving Harry to use the facilities before returning to court.

As the members of the Wizengamot settled in their seats, and Hermione stood to start again, Anglehurst waved a hand at her to sit down.

Harry looked across at her, but Hermione shrugged, as confused, it seemed, as he was.

“I have a witness who would like to make a statement to the court,” the Judge said, creating a buzz of interest in the court-room.

Enough to stave off the urge for a post-prandial nap, Harry thought. He’d been guilty of an inclination to snooze when in those benches himself.

The clerk stood up, and announced, “The court calls Mr Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry stared at Hermione, but again, she shrugged. So she had no idea either. What was Lucius playing at? Was he using this opportunity to get his revenge? If Harry were dead, he would not be free, but perhaps he felt he would be able to manipulate James more easily. Harry steeled himself.

Lucius strolled in, looking every bit the aristocrat he had in the past. He had a fine and elegant robe on, not showy, just beautifully cut, and his hair was neatly dressed.

He sat himself with precision on the witness’s chair, and crossed his ankles, his hands resting on his cane.

“Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst asked. “I received your request to divulge important information to this court barely a half hour ago. Perhaps you’d be good enough to enlighten us?”

“My apologies for disrupting proceedings,” Malfoy said languidly. “I am, at present, residing on
the continent, and only just received yesterday’s edition of the papers.”

“Yes? And what you read there made you realise that you had information that was relevant to this court?”

“I believe so.”

“Might I suggest, Your Honour, that Mr Malfoy be given Veritaserum?” Harcourt asked.

“He is, after all, an ex-convict.”

“I have paid my dues, Sir,” Malfoy said with his old asperity. “I have come, against my better judgement, and knowing the mockery it might lead to, because I believe the court is floundering under a misapprehension. I have a statement to give, if the court wishes to hear it, but I am here entirely voluntarily, and I will not take Veritaserum, nor will I answer any questions. It is up to the court to decide whether they wish to hear me, or not. I would certainly prefer it if you decline, but, since my incarceration and rehabilitation, it has been brought home to me that each citizen has a civic duty, and I am here only to fulfil it.”

Harry could see that everyone was intrigued. He was intrigued!

“I accept your offer to speak without Veritaserum,” Anglehurst said, “but it is more than likely that the court might like to ask you questions on your statement.”

“It is a statement of opinion only, Your Honour. Perhaps we can reach a compromise. I will answer if I am able. I have no desire to be badgered about events or anything about which I do not know the answer.”

“Very well,” Anglehurst nodded, giving Harcourt, who had sighed loudly and deliberately, a very impatient look.

“I just wish to clarify,” Malfoy said, in his clear tones, “that I am Lucius Malfoy, father of Draco Malfoy, who had been secretly engaged to wed Ginevra Potter, nee Weasley, and was then accused of her murder.”

“Did you know of the secret engagement?” Harcourt stood up and asked.

Malfoy looked to the Judge. “I hope I am to be allowed to finish my statement uninterrupted, Your Honour?”

“Hold your questions, Mr Harcourt,” the Judge ruled.

Harcourt bowed his head and sat down.

“I did know of the engagement,” Lucius said, nodding his head in acknowledgement towards Harcourt. “But that is neither here nor there. I read the transcript of the trial this morning, and the various editorials written about it. Everyone seems to assume that Mr Potter was in love with my son. I believe this is a misunderstanding. Mr Potter is in love with me.”

The court went wild. Harry’s mouth had dropped open as he looked across the courtroom at Malfoy Senior, who appeared entirely unperturbed as he flicked a non-existent piece of lint from his robe.

“Are you telling us, Mr Malfoy, that you and Mr Potter are in – a relationship?” Anglehurst asked.

“Certainly not,” Lucius said with disdain. He looked over at Harry, distaste obvious on his face. “I
have not, and never will, have an interest in members of my own sex. However, Mr Potter approached me some time ago – for the purpose, I believe, of improving relations between our families, as inevitably, his children would become linked to the Malfoy name, and suggested a business arrangement. Naturally, it was in my best interests, given that I wished to restore the damage that I had done to the family name, to accept an offer from such a notable person.”

“A business arrangement? Mr Potter’s business is furniture making, I believe?”

“That’s his day-to-day pleasure, I think. An amusement. Mr Potter is a major shareholder in Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes.”

The information had never been made public before. There was a lot of murmuring around the court. That privileged information instantly leant truth to Malfoy’s assertions of knowing Harry Potter well.

“Is that true, Mr Potter?” Anglehurst asked.

“It is,” Harry agreed.

“A shareholder through his wife, I assume,” Anglehurst commented, offhandedly.

“Oh no. I believe Mr Potter was instrumental in providing the finance for the business to set up originally,” Lucius said, looking over to Harry, who nodded in confirmation.

Well, Malfoy had been looking up his facts. Or George had told him, Harry thought.

“I see. And this contact – for business – led to….”

“Several meetings,” Lucius took the prompt. “Both at my house and his. On the last occasion, Mr Potter visited me at my Paris house, where, as you may have heard, I have leased the ground floor to the business. Mr Potter visited me in my private salon upstairs, however. I am afraid he made a proposition that made me lose my temper a little.” Lucius took a handkerchief from his pocket with a flourish, and dabbed his lip. “Later, a friend saw him leaving Le Lion d’Or with another man.” Lucius looked down.

“I’m sorry,” Anglehurst said, “I don’t quite follow.”

“Of course, you wouldn’t be aware. But in Paris…well, it’s no secret that the clientele …are inclined to people of the same sex,” Malfoy said, delicately.

“It’s a queers’ pick-up place?” Harcourt asked, feeling that he was safe to insert a question at last.

“I’ve never been there,” Malfoy said superciliously. “But I believe that is the general understanding, yes.”

Anglehurst turned to Harry. “You are not under Veritaserum, of course, Mr Potter. Nevertheless, I would like to hear your answers. Are you in a business arrangement with Mr Lucius Malfoy?”

Well, Malfoy’s explanation of events had been masterly, Harry thought. He’d muddled the timing, not said anything that was untrue, and painted a picture that Harry could grasp at. But Malfoy hated gay men – including his own grandson. Did he really think that Harry had been thinking about him? He doubted it. Malfoy was taking advantage of an opportunity. Would Harry be in his debt instead, if it paid off? Harry didn’t have time to think on it.

“Yes,” he answered.
“And you have visited him at his home - homes – in London and Paris?”

“Yes.”

“He has visited your home?”

“Yes.”

“You had an argument with him in Paris?”

“I wouldn’t call it an argument.”

“What would you call it, Mr Potter? A proposition?”

“….Y- yes.”

“And afterwards, you went to a gay bar?”

“It was a restaurant,” Harry corrected.

The court tittered.

“Thank you for that clarification, Mr Potter. Perhaps you could clarify something else. Yesterday, you admitted, under Veritaserum, to a fantasy involving Malfoy. Naturally, the court assumed that it was Mr Draco Malfoy. I am sure you are aware that your answer has an impact on this matter. _Did_ your fantasy involve Mr Draco Malfoy, Mr Potter?”

Harry had found relief in answering truthfully, if minimally. Suddenly, he realised that he could lie. He could say that the fantasy involved Narcissa. It would take away all the stigma involved with the accusation that he was homosexual. And yet…Narcissa had saved his life. It would be dishonouring her to say it. Not to mention being a lie. He might get caught out in a lie, if they used _Veritaserum_ on him again. If he lived that long. And…his fantasy _had_ involved a man. He’d come hard, just on the thought of that lithe body…and if he denied that, if he used the name of an innocent woman, a dead woman, was he stamping on the rights of men like Snape and Kingsley, to have whatever fantasy they wanted?

“Mr Potter!”

Harry glanced at the gallery, where Draco still sat, much to his surprise. He was leaning over, looking pale and wan. And curious. He looked at Lucius, who raised an eyebrow at him. He looked away, as if embarrassed. “No,” he said.

“No, Mr Potter? Draco Malfoy was not the object of your…thoughts?”

“No, Your Honour,” Harry said clearly, and hung his head.

Anglehurst turned to Malfoy. “Thank you, Mr Malfoy, for taking the trouble to come and clear up this matter. You may step down.”

Lucius inclined his head, stood, and using very little pressure on his cane, swept out of the court.

Harry wondered whether he would survive long enough to need to worry about living down the ignominy of the world thinking he was infatuated with Lucius Malfoy.

Hermione spent the next three quarters of an hour demolishing the remainder of Harcourt’s arguments. To Harry’s surprise, Harcourt did not seem perturbed, but rather, sat there, stroking his
cheek, as if he was biding his time. Nevertheless, rather than feeling that his guilt was a foregone conclusion, Harry began to have a little hope. It was a help to be undrugged, and to have his mind clear enough to follow everything.

An usher slipped in, and handed a note to Harcourt. It wasn’t unusual in the court, and yet it inevitably aroused curiosity.

“Members of the Wizengamot, there is no evidence,” Hermione said, “that Mr Potter was involved in the murder of his wife. Three men committed this dreadful crime. Where are the others? The prosecution is arguing that—”

“If I may, Your Honour?” Harcourt interrupted.

“Mrs Weasley was just closing, I believe,” Anglehurst said. “Is your interruption appropriate?”

“Your Honour, I have just had some important information.”

“Important or not, is it relevant to this trial, Mr Harcourt?”

“Of utmost importance, Sir.”

A murmur ran around the court-room. Harry wondered what on earth it was. Dread filled him, because Harcourt looked too smug by far.

“Whilst you were approached by Mr Lucius Malfoy during the recess, Your Honour, I was contacted by the MLE.”

“Yes?”

“They told me that they have the names of the two other suspects in this crime.”

Harry stared at Hermione as the court let go its inhibitions and burst into excited whisperings.

“Order!” Anglehurst barked, banging his gavel as the noise continued.

“I see. And will their arrests have a material affect on this trial?”

“Oh, yes, Your Honour. I’ve been awaiting further information. The note I just received says that one of the suspects, who is being interviewed here, has implicated Mr Potter.”

Once again, the sound rose to a roar.

“I will have order!” Anglehurst snapped, pounding several times.

As the room quieted, he said, “It seems we need to suspend this case until we have further information—”

Harcourt coughed. “The witness is apparently ready to give evidence, Sir.”

“Now?”

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“Then send for him,” Anglehurst ordered.
It was a quiet filled with anticipation, as they waited.

Nothing could have prepared Harry, however, when the doors crashed back and his apparent co-conspirator was brought in, chained and pale.

“No!” Harry shouted.

Hermione had stood up, her hands to her mouth.

There were cries from the gallery.

Silence fell as the man was magically bound to a chair, as Harry was.

“State your name for the court,” the clerk asked, in the bored voice of a man who had no interest in the answer.

The man swallowed, then raised his head, and said clearly, “Longbottom. Neville Longbottom.”
Neville Anglehurst, who’d been having a word with the court clerk, looked up and addressed Neville. “Mr Longbottom -”

“Professor.”

Harry, who’d been staring, disbelieving, at Neville, felt his eyebrows rising into his hairline.

“I’m sorry?” Anglehurst began.

“It’s Professor Longbottom,” Neville said authoritatively. “I am the Herbology Professor at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

“I see. I understand, Professor, that you have admitted being one of the three men who murdered Mrs Ginevra Potter on the afternoon of March 2nd. I must make clear that this is not your trial: your fate will not be decided by the proceedings today. You are here purely as a witness, as I am informed that in your statement to the Aurors this afternoon, you named Mr Harry Potter as one of the other two attackers.”

“Thank you for the information,” Neville said.

Harry gawked at his astonishing calmness.

“Your last statement is correct,” Neville continued.

“Merlin, Neville, what have they done to you?” Harry whispered.

The previous day, Neville had come to support him, come to the cells, worried about Lily and exchanged easy banter with his children. Why was Neville doing this? Had he been drugged? Had he had mind-magic performed on him? Harry looked up into the balcony to see if he could see Snape, then across at Hermione. Both of them were staring intently at Neville.

“For the record, would you also name the third attacker?” Anglehurst asked.

“Yes,” Neville answered. “The third attacker was an old pupil of mine called Daniel Poulter. That is to say,” Neville corrected himself, “he was not in my classes, but he liked to help out in the greenhouses. There are precious roses in Greenhouse 3, you know.”

There was some sniggering in the court.

Something poked like a sharp stick into Harry’s brain. Neville loved his plants, but ever since the days of *mimbulus mimbeletonia*, he’d kept his obsessions to himself. It wasn’t as if roses were particularly rare. He didn’t remember there being any roses in the greenhouses in his day –

“Indeed,” Anglehurst said. “I don’t think your plants are particularly relevant to Mr Potter’s guilt, Professor –” he looked sharply at Neville, “unless you were using plant extracts to drug or influence Mr Potter?”

“I care far too much about my plants to misuse them, Sir,” Neville responded with his head high and his eyes forward. “People don’t seem to appreciate that plants can be endangered species too –”

“Yes, yes,” Anglehurst said testily. “Let us keep to the point, Professor. You say Mr Potter, Mr
Poulter and yourself were the three men responsible for murdering Mrs Ginevra Potter. Is that correct?"

“That is precisely what I am saying, yes.”

“Can you explain to the court how this plan came to be hatched?”

“Yes, Sir. Harry came to see me when he discovered that Ginny was having an affair with Malfoy. It’s common knowledge that Malfoy was an utter bastard –”

“You will moderate your language, Professor,” snapped Anglehurst.

“My apologies,” Neville said.

Harry could see that he was sweating profusely. Was it a drug reaction?

“Malfoy treated both Harry and I appallingly at school. Harry is always terribly slow on the uptake,” Neville said sarcastically, turning to look at his old friend. He turned back, looking towards Hermione. “He relied totally on Hermione – Mrs Weasley, as she is now – to work everything out for him. He was never any good at reading between the lines or seeing what was under his nose.”

“And what was under his nose?”

Neville paused. “Oh, lots of things. He never realised that I loved Ginny, for starters.”

Harry could hear the gasps of many members of the Wizengamot, even as his own mouth dropped open.

“I don’t think it even entered his head to think of what was going on back at Hogwarts when he was away in seventh year. I think he has this glorified image of Hogwarts as safe and secure. Well, it wasn’t: he wasn’t there to share those dangers, and Gin and I were. We became very close. Lovers. He just whisked back in, all victorious, and expected to have her back. I have to say it for Gin, she always knew a good thing when she saw it: Harry put her into the top ranks of our society, but then he let her down, didn’t he, hiding away? Malfoy was able to offer her lots more. They all deserved what they got. I made Harry see they had to be punished. He just didn’t realise that he was going to be punished too.”

Harry’s jaw was hanging open, and he shut it with a snap. Where had all this come from? He could not believe this of Neville. Neville was lying, because he sure as hell hadn’t killed Ginny, which meant that Neville was lying about everything else. Apart from Daniel Poulter. Ron had eventually shown Mitty a picture of Poulter, and she’d confirmed that he was one of the wizards. Remembering that somehow soothed the fraction of uncertainty in Harry’s breast – the fear that he had had mind-magic worked on him, and that perhaps he had done it after all, without knowing. Because Mitty would have said that Neville was one of the other men, and anyway, if he was there, he’d just have walked in. So what was going on? What was Neville trying to say?

He kept an ear on the questioning whilst thinking back over what had been said so far. Neville said that he was an idiot, slow on the uptake, didn’t read between the lines. That was all true. Did that mean Neville was trying to tell him something?

He thought back, and suddenly it hit him. He could see Hermione sitting forward too, looking pale. She flashed a look at Harry, who nodded.

Various bits of Neville’s statements came back:
“…he liked to help out in the greenhouses. There are precious roses in Greenhouse 3, you know.”

Precious roses in Greenhouse 3. Precious Rose is in Greenhouse 3. Oh fucking Merlin!

“I care far too much about my plants to misuse them, Sir….people don’t seem to appreciate that plants can be endangered species too – ”

I care….plants can be endangered…. Rose was in danger. Harry had not a doubt about what was happening, now. He thought quickly back, trying to recall…

“I think he has this glorified image of Hogwarts as safe and secure.”

Oh god. Someone had Rose in Greenhouse 3, and forced Neville to come and do this. He must suspect someone here was listening, to make sure he incriminated Harry and himself. But he must be absolutely fearing for Rose that he was risking the hints that he was making. But – at Hogwarts? Why had Rose been at Hogwarts? Had she been taken there?

Harry couldn’t remember when he’d last felt so helpless. Would his death be enough to save Rose? Should he just let that happen? But what would happen then? Would other people’s children be used to force others to give in to these people? Did Neville know who was responsible? Why had Neville suddenly been brought into this? Was someone targeting everyone from their year? Was it nothing to do with this weird masked group? Was it someone from their year with a grudge? But why would they have left it so long?

His head was buzzing with all these thoughts, and he shoved them to the side. The only thing that mattered at this moment was getting Rose to safety. Was ensuring that she wasn’t endangered by anyone realising that they knew something was up.

Harry felt anxious even about looking up to the gallery, even though he regularly took glances up there. Seeing Lily, he felt almost faint with relief that she was here, and not at the school, a target for whoever had taken Ron and Hermione’s daughter. Whoever had done this knew them all well enough to know that although Neville didn’t have any children of his own, he was close to the Weasley’s. Enough to know that taking Rose would force him to do this.

Although anyone who knew Neville well would know that he would put almost anyone before himself.

“If I might ask a question, Your Honour?” Hermione stood, smoothing her hands down her skirt.

“Go ahead, Mrs Weasley.”

Hermione straightened up. She looked straight at Neville. “Neville, I’ve known you for many years.”

She paused. “Does your wife know what you did? Does she know that you’re here?”

What was Hermione asking him? It sounded horribly vindictive. People were tittering, Harry thought with disgust. He tried to – oh! Was she asking if Hannah was safe? Clever Mione!

“She doesn’t know,” Neville said gruffly. He looked up at Hermione. “She doesn’t know where I am. I was taken at Hogwarts. I expect someone in here will know if she’s still in the Leaky,” he asked, looking round.

So, two answers there. Hannah hadn’t been used as a hostage as well, as far as Neville knew. And he was taken – Neville didn’t say arrested – at Hogwarts.
“Had my lunch there, she served me,” someone called out. One of the reporters in the gallery.

“Thank you,” Hermione said, calling up to the man. She turned back to Neville, who looked immensely relieved, and yet still as pale as a sheet.

“You are absolutely certain, are you, Professor Longbottom, that you wish to tell this court that Harry murdered his wife?”

Neville looked straight back at her. Sweat stood out on his brow. “I am.”

“Thank you. That is all.”

Harcourt, Anglehurst and Harry all turned to look at her in surprise.

“You have nothing further for Mr – Professor Longbottom?” Anglehurst asked.

Hermione leant on the desk as if she was looking at her papers. She lifted her head. “If I may, Your Honour?” She indicated walking in front of her workspace.

Anglehurst waved her on.

Hermione walked over to Neville and stood in front of him. “There is only this,” she said, and hit him around the face with a resounding crack.

As people leapt to their feet left, right and centre, Harry watched as Hermione leant in, grabbing the front of Neville’s robes, trying to haul him towards her. He couldn’t hear what she said, but he was pretty sure he knew a ruse when he saw one. He saw Neville nod, and then Hermione let go and swept away as Aurors came rushing up, not quite certain what to do.

“I apologise, Your Honour, for allowing my feelings to overcome me. I have known both defendants for many years, and…”

“Your behaviour is inexcusable, Mrs Weasley,” Anglehurst cut across her.

“Yes, Your Honour. I appreciate that charges may be laid. Perhaps you would allow me to stand down?”

“I certainly wouldn’t dream of allowing you to continue. Please leave the court.”

Hermione, head down, rushed out.

Harry breathed a sigh of relief.

“Well, Mr Potter, a very thorough case has been made against you. Nevertheless, I cannot allow this case to come to its conclusion when you have no legal representation.” He banged his gavel on the table. “Court is dismissed until tomorrow,” he announced. “Mr Potter, you’d better find yourself a new counsel damn quick.” And he stood up and left.

Court attendants came over to remove the spells chaining Neville and Harry to their chairs. The doors of the court were open, and people began standing and making their way out, excited chatter filling the air at this latest development. Harry was pulled to his feet, as was Neville. They began to shuffle, in their shackles, towards the exit to the cells.

Suddenly, there was the most tremendous noise. Harry recoiled instantly, diving into a crouch. All around him, everyone was doing the same. Neville had thrown himself to the floor. There was an unearthly silence, and then screaming broke out. Harry twisted his head to see where it was coming
One of the witches in the front row was cowering down, peering over the edge of the hand-rail, yelling and pointing. Still crouched, Harry turned to see what she was looking at.

Neville was still lying flat out, face turned away.

An Auror leapt to the side, cursing, as something seeped across the floor and caught his feet.

Blood.

Dark red, rich blood.

Coming from underneath Neville’s still unmoving body.
Panic broke out.

People were rushing for the exits. The nimble in the Wizengamot were jumping over the railings to access the doors from the courtroom floor.

Harry found himself jostled from every side, with Aurors rushing from everywhere, dragging him out towards the holding cells. Some people were trying to escape that way too. Harry was aware of Franklin and Hencliffe, some other Aurors whose faces he vaguely knew, Harcourt and the court clerk, a tall wizard who’d been staring at him from the front row. He nearly fell over as someone crashed into him from behind. More people were crowding, pressing him forward, as the onrush was stopped in its tracks by the barred entrance to the cells. He wondered if he would die from being crushed, rather than by execution, when suddenly he felt someone grab his wrist; fingers slipped down over his hand and then something was shoved into his palm. His fingers closed automatically, and the next second he felt the pull of a port-key, heard the shouts of those left behind, before he was hurtling through the constricting tube-like space.

He landed painfully on his hands and knees.

The crash of the chains around his wrists and ankles hitting the stone floor echoed around the chamber. Harry looked up, around.

He was alone.

His heartbeat sounded deafening in his ears.

Normally, he would have been chained to an Auror to move to the cells, but obviously, in the panic, they’d skipped that step.

So who had given him the port-key? He opened his hand. It was only a knut. Nothing to distinguish it.

He was in a cell, about ten feet square. The wire-encased light bulb high overhead suggested he was in a Muggle prison, apart from the fact that there was neither a window, nor a door.

He looked at the cuffs, and tried using wandless magic to take one off. With a grinding noise, it split apart and worked loose. Harry made short work of the other end, and the ones on his ankles, delighting in being able to use magic again at last. Fear and shock had made it swell in him, and it was a relief to let some of the energy go. He picked up one of the manacles with its attached chain.

He could use magic, but, as the shot in the court-room showed, physical attack had its place too.

He didn’t know who had brought him here. He’d been surrounded mostly by Aurors, and given the treatment he’d had from the MLE, he didn’t hold out much hope that he’d been kidnapped by friends rather than foes. On the other hand, what was the point? Neville’s evidence was the final nail in his coffin, pretty much literally.

Dear Merlin, Neville! And Rose!

At least Hermione had got out before the shooting began. He hoped to god she’d got to Hogwarts. Had Ron, in the gallery, understood what was going on? Snape was there. He’d help them. God. He needed to be out of here.
Were his own family safe?

No one was safe.

Was Neville dead?

Why – why - had he been shot?

Hannah would be there in the Leaky, working away, not knowing that the most dreadful thing had just happened….

All the time Harry was thinking, he was walking around the cell, trying to find any weak spots.

Suddenly, he felt the shift of magic. A door appeared to the left of him.

On instinct, Harry threw a disarming spell at the person about to step through, and flung himself bodily at him, slinging the chain of the manacle around his neck and yanking the man in front of him, his back to Harry’s front, as a hostage and target in case there were others about to head through the door.

The man remained perfectly still. Harry was aware of the breadth of him, the muscles in his back bunching, readying for action. He pulled the chain tighter.

Harry could just see others over the height of his shoulder, past the dark skin of his neck and dangling ear-ring.

No hair.

“Harry.”

Half strangled as it was, he still recognised Kingsley’s voice. Patient, understanding, despite the pressure against his throat.

“Put them away.” Kingsley managed to make a whisper an order to the wizards and witches pointing their wands at them.

Even as he spoke, Harry was letting him go.

Kingsley turned round slowly, arms raised.

“I’m sorry –” Harry began, reaching down and picking up Kingsley’s wand. He handed it back.

“Damn good reactions,” Kingsley said approvingly. “Most people can’t do magic in here either. And I’m sorry for the delay: it has a ten-minute time lock. Come through.” He put a gentle hand on Harry’s back to lead him out of the cell. “Back to work!” he said briskly, and the witches and wizards in the outer room grinned. A couple nodded at Harry, and one gave him a thumbs up, then all got on with something else.

“Why did you take me out of there? Neville was shot –”

“There’s nothing you could have done to help him,” Kingsley said, shaking his head. “My man on the ground had to make the decision –”

“Rose –”

“Is safe and well.”
“No,” Harry said, grabbing hold of Kingsley’s arm.

“Harry.”

He swung round at the voice. A young witch had stepped out of a doorway to the side, holding out a cup of tea.

“Rose!”

Kingsley grabbed the cup as Harry hugged her. “Oh, thank Merlin! But – but – I was sure Neville was –”

“He was,” Kingsley said heavily.

“You’ve just been rescued?” Harry asked.

He realised how pale she was as she shook her head.

“It’s Hugo. We think.”

“Hugo? But Neville said ‘Rose is in Greenhouse 3’ –”

“I think it would have been a giveaway if he’d said ‘Hugo is in Greenhouse 3’,” Kingsley said with a shrug. “And anyway, Rose was here.”

Harry stopped dead. He looked from one to the other.

“I’m missing something here,” he said. “Rose was here? Already? And how did you know what was going on?”

“Rose is working for us, and Lucius Malfoy planted a bug made by George.”

Harry’s mouth opened and shut.

“You’re catching flies, Uncle Harry,” Rose said.

“You’re working for Kingsley? Since when?”

“A week?”

“My god. Do your parents know? Don’t answer. We’ll talk about that later,” he touched her arm briefly to take the sting out of his words. He looked at Kingsley. “What about Hugo? What’s being done? And N - Neville?” his voice quavered. “What can I do?”

Kingsley had led Harry into an area where several witches and wizards were listening to a large mouth on the wall, which was talking nineteen to the dozen, the shape of it changing as different voices came out of it.

“This is the other end of the bug Malfoy planted in the court-room. As you know, recording devices are not allowed in the gallery or Wizengamot, and there’s a time delay even on the Quick Quotes Quill statements before they’re allowed to go off for printing.”

Harry listened to the mayhem of noise.

“What’s happening?”
Kingsley put his arm on his shoulder. “Severus rushed down to help, but I’m afraid Longbottom was killed instantly.”

Harry wasn’t surprised. He’d seen the blood and it had been seeping across the floor at a hell of a rate. And yet, it was still a shock. Still unbelievable.

Everything was unbelievable.

Ginny was dead. Malfoy had been charged, and was now free. Harry was as near to being found guilty as made no odds. Though now he was an escaped prisoner, which was probably even worse. Neville had been killed. Something dreadful was happening to Hugo even within the protection of Hogwarts.

Nowhere was safe.

“They’re achieving it, aren’t they?” Harry said wonderingly.

At the look Rose and Kingsley gave him, he explained, “Destabilising our world. Wiping out ‘the old heroes’. Making the Ministry a mockery and Hogwarts unsafe. What’s next?” His face swung suddenly to Kingsley. “Severus was the only other person to get an Order of Merlin First Class – I mean, I know Ron and Hermione did, as well as Neville and I, but attacking Hugo is the same as attacking Ron and Mione, isn’t it? They’ll go for Snape,” he said anxiously. “Where is he?”

“Severus can look after himself,” Kingsley began, but Harry cut him off.

“I thought I could too, and I sure as hell bet Neville never thought he’d ever be in the position of destroying his own reputation, hurting his wife and ending up dead by gunshot in a Ministry courtroom.”

“Good point,” Kingsley nodded. He went over to a large map of Europe, which had several flashing dots of different colours on it.

“What’s that?”

“This one is Severus,” Kingsley said, touching one of the dots. “He’s at Hogwarts.”

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Ron was blasting the gate when Snape apparated in. Hermione was shouting at the winged boar on the top of one of the posts; the other post was empty. Bill was waving his wand over the gates between Ron’s attacks. James and Albus were trying to cut a way through the hedging to one side.

“The gates are locked?” Snape stated the obvious.

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “When we demanded entrance, the other winged boar took off. I don’t know what’s taking them so bloody long.”

“Since when has Hogwarts locked its gates as a matter of course?” Bill demanded. “They were always open in our day.”

“Don’t really know,” Albus said, as the last person to have been a pupil. “They were open if we had a Hogsmeade day. Didn’t really have any need to know at other times, did we?”

“They were shut when I was Headmaster,” Snape said. “That was because I was trying to stop it
being an easy option for Death Eaters to just waltz in. They had to floo, and there was only one access point. Has anyone floo-ed through?” he asked, then snapped a quick sharp Latin phrase at the remaining boar.

Nothing happened.

“I thought the password would have changed, but it was worth a shot,” he explained.

“Two of my team should be up there,” Ron said, nodding towards the castle. “We just came straight here, but I saw Ed and Jemima as we were leaving the Ministry, and asked them to floo in. We came this way because we thought it would be quicker,” he said, through gritted teeth.

“How did you know it wasn’t Rose?” Hermione asked.

“Rose is no longer a student here, Hugo is,” Snape shrugged. “It seemed logical. I saw you speaking to Neville under cover of the slap: did he give you any further information?”

“‘Petrificus Totalus’, and ‘Light-Blooming Devil’s Snare’. I take it there’s a variant that’s grown in a greenhouse?”

“Was developed as a defence for the boundaries, but we never used it: it was too difficult to control. It’s vicious.”

“As soon as the Petrificus wears off it’ll attack him?” Albus asked, making the connections in Neville’s statement. He looked horrified.

“‘Yes,’” Snape said bluntly. He looked around. “This delay is either deliberate, or they’re already helping Hugo.”

“I don’t trust anyone these days,” Ron said, casting another hex, which appeared to have no effect at all.

Snape took a deep breath. “I’ll see what I can do.” He waved his wand over himself, and then, to everyone’s astonishment, turned around and began running.

“What the hell?” Bill stuck his hands on his hips.

Snape was running down the incline in the path, away from the gate, holding his arms out.

“What is he – ?”

The next moment he was in the air.

“Well, fuck me,” Ron said.

“Bloody hell, why didn’t I think of that?” James exclaimed, and in a moment, the man was gone, and a large crow was hopping along the ground, flapping its wings awkwardly before taking to the air, and following the large black figure that was dwindling into the distance.

“I’m going to see if I can get through the hedge,” Albus said, before shrinking down to cat form.
Snape landed beside the greenhouses. From the sky, he’d been able to see that a small party was just leaving the castle.

Something didn’t feel right. The boy should have been missed, for starters. And they should have already been here, unless someone was stalling. He headed stealthily towards Greenhouse 3. It had always been the place where dangerous plants had been grown, so Severus’ attention had been grabbed the minute Neville spoke of growing roses in there. There were only two varieties of rose with poisonous thorns, and neither benefited from being hot-housed, which diluted the venom in their spines.

He halted, wand out, as a crow whirled to land beside him. He had a moment’s relief to see that James had mastered taking his clothes with him during the transformation, which was one of the aspects that took no small amount of skill, and put off many a potential animagus. Snape inclined his head at him in acknowledgement, then held his finger up for silence.

James nodded once in understanding.

They both crept up to the window and peered in. A flailing vine hit the glass, making them lurch back. Even their shadow had been enough to agitate the plant.

Carefully, they moved back and headed around the building, hoping to get a better view elsewhere. The whole greenhouse couldn’t be planted with Light-Blooming Devil’s Snare, could it? Snape closed in on the window again, James just behind him, and this time they managed to get a good look.

Across the greenhouse, Hugo was standing upright, almost completely surrounded by the murderous plant. There were strands around all his limbs, thick vines across his chest, and another around his throat.

“The spell must have worn off,” Snape whispered.

“He’s just trying to hold himself still?” James gawped.

Snape nodded, staring through the window.

“Bloody hell, that’s cruel!”

“I’m presuming Neville had to implicate your father in the quickest time possible, to give Hugo any chance at all.”

“I’m going to murder whoever did this to us,” James said grimly.

Snape looked across at him assessingly. “Don’t let your rage distract you,” was all he said. “Can you see in the dark in your bird form?”

“You can only work with this plant in the dark: regular Devil’s Snare shrinks back when lit; this variety is more robust, but it does become less aggressive at night. If I cast a darkness spell in there, do you think you can fly in and nip it out at the root with your beak? I warn you, you may be affected by the toxins if you take any into your system. I carry a bezoar and a general purpose anti-toxin, but you may feel unwell until I can get some more specialised potions into you. Say now if you don’t want to do this.”

“Oh, I’ll do it,” James answered, lifting his wand to perform the transformation.
Snape grabbed his arm. “You could die. Know what you are committing to.”

James looked at him, and this time answered more slowly. “I understand. It’s best to get right to the base, just above the ground?”

Snape gave him an approving look. “Yes, but if you can’t get to the main stem, go for the biggest vines, and keep going.”

James nodded, and the next moment, a crow was at Snape’s feet. It hopped away, then spread its wings, flapped, and took off, wheeling in a big circle before lining itself up with the doorway.

Snape eased the door open a fraction; even that noise caused the plant to lash a tentacle out of the opening. Snape was pretty sure that it had been doused in Speed-Gro. He cast the spell. The plant seemed to rustle quietly. He flung the door wide, and felt the rush of air as James whooshed past, wings drawn tight to allow him to get through the door-way.

He slipped into the now darkened greenhouse, closing the door to keep the light out, reaching blindly with a hand to the hook where – yes! The night-vision goggles that Neville and Pomona had used all those years ago were still there. He donned them quickly, feeling the plant sending a tentacle up his leg inquisitively, rather than with its normal aggression. He slipped on the thin gloves that were beside the goggles, then slowly moved forward. He could hear the shallow pants of Hugo’s breathing, could see the plant had had almost entirely encased. It had not let go of its hold. James wasn’t anywhere in sight, which meant, he hoped, that he had landed right behind the plant. He continued to walk forward slowly, drawing the plants’ attention. The next moment, the plant began thrashing wildly.

Hugo jerked.

There was no time to waste. Snape rushed forward, pointing his wand to slash the vines nearest to Hugo as he went. He almost sprawled straight into the boy as a tentacle snaked around his ankle. Glass shattered as the flailing vines smashed through the windows, almost blinding him as light flooded in. He ripped off the goggles, took one look at Hugo, whose eyes were bulging as he was strangled, and cast a *Petrificus Totalus* on the boy. He knew he would be terrified, but the lack of movement would stop the plant squeezing him. He slashed at the vines which were now focussing their attack on him. He felt the sting of the tentacles against his face, now unprotected.

Just as he was despairing that James could not manage to cut through the vine with his beak, he saw the young man take shape behind the plant, point his wand at it, and yell, “*Sectumsempra!*”

Snape dashed forward and cut through the vines around Hugo’s neck and chest as the plant flailed in its death throws.

More spells helped demolish the plant, as Snape and James freed Hugo from the rest of the tentacles.

“Swallow this,” Snape said, taking two bezoars out of his pocket and handing one to each boy.

“Throat’s too dry,” Hugo croaked, his hands rubbing at his neck. Snape swung round. There was a watering can nearby, and he summoned it, sniffed, transfigured a flower pot into a cup and poured some in.

Hugo swallowed gratefully.

James had the bezoar to his mouth when he looked up at Snape. “What about you? You were stung too, I can see it on your face.”
“I have some resistance. I will deal with it later.”

“Sure?”

Snape nodded.

The door crashed open.

“How! What on earth is going on? These Aurors said you were trapped in here,” an authoritative voice called.

Snape turned round. He felt Hugo lurch and tightened his hand on his arm.

“The Headmaster,” James whispered.

“Drink this and then we can get you out of here,” Snape said, handing over a vial to Hugo. “Just one sip, then pass it to James. Well done. Do you think you can walk?”

“Yes – no-o, my legs are weird.”

“They would be,” Snape said pragmatically. “Being petrified and then keeping still is very demanding on the muscles. I’ve got a potion to help relieve the pain, but you just need to allow the other to get a five minute head-start. James and I will help you, as this lot don’t seem willing to brave crossing the vines,” he said, raising his voice at the end.

“Here, you should have some of this too, yes?” James said, handing the vial over to Snape and putting an arm around Hugo’s waist.

The two Aurors had stepped towards them.

Snape took a sip and pocketed the vial. “Thanks,” he said, causing James to look at him sharply.

“Can we help?” the woman Auror said.

“Alert St Mungo’s,” Snape answered briskly, as they made their way across the mass of still-twitching plant matter to the group standing by the door.

“We have a perfectly good infirmary here,” the Headmaster said. “Speed is of the essence, I imagine.”

“Indeed,” Snape kept walking. “And specialist treatment too. His parents are at the gates, where they have been held at bay. I don’t suppose, after this afternoon’s events, that they will wish to risk your dubious care.”

“How dare you! Who the hell are you?” snapped the other man.

Snape looked him up and down.

“Adrian, I believe this is our former Headmaster, Severus Snape,” the Headmaster said. “Adrian Donnelly, School Secretary,” he waved a hand at his assistant. “And I am Peter Brown, current Headmaster.”

“Ah yes. We’ve heard so much about you recently,” Donnelly sneered. “I believe you should remove your hands from our student,” he added pointedly.

Snape had had years of practice at keeping his posture and countenance unresponsive. But he felt
Hugo stiffened, and dropped his hands from the boy. Why was it always assumed that because you liked men, you were naturally a paedophile?

What he did not expect was what happened next.

“He’s just saved his bloody life,” James erupted. “Where were you whilst he was practically killed? Keep walking, Hugo! We’re not leaving you here!” And he began to urge Hugo on. “Severus, help him, for Merlin’s sake.”

Snape looked to Hugo, who nodded.

Something swelled in Snape’s chest. He supported Hugo under the elbow again.

Donnelly, meanwhile, had transfigured a stretcher. “Get on that, Mr Weasley. We can get you to help far faster,” he ordered.

“Oh the contrary,” Snape said, “it is essential for him to be upright, and to walk. His muscles need the movement, and the potion I have given him will get through his system faster if he is in motion. Proceed, Hugo.”

They reached the door. Peter Brown stepped in front of it.

Snape’s wand was in his face in the blink of an eye.

“Let them past, Sir,” Ed said. “Auror Weasley is here and will want to decide what is best for his son.”

And indeed, as they stepped out of the door, charging up the path were Hermione and Ron, with a bedraggled-looking Albus striding behind with Bill.

“Hugo!” Hermione screeched, and literally ran right up to her son, just stopping as she was about to throw her arms around him. “Will I hurt you?”

“Don’t care,” Hugo’s voice quavered, and the next moment, he was enfolded in his mother’s arms.

Ron reached forward, shaking Snape’s hand and then James’. “Thank you both. Thank you,” he gave James a hug for good measure. “Thanks Ed, Jemima.”

“Don’t thank us, boss, Master Snape and James had done everything before we were allowed to investigate,” Jemima glared at Donnelly.

“I merely –” Donnelly began.

“Right. Run ahead and warn St. Mungo’s,” Ron said to Jemima. “Looks like you could do with it too,” he said to Snape. He’d put his hand around his son and he and Hermione started leading him down the path. Before Snape could answer, Ron looked back at Professor Brown. “I’ll be along to see you later, Headmaster,” he said dismissively, voice full of suppressed fury.

“I am at your service,” Brown said, bowing slightly, before turning and heading back towards the greenhouse with Donnelly.

“I’m afraid you can’t go in there, Gentlemen,” Ed said, as he cast wards over the building. “It’s a crime scene.”
“I’ll send SHIT,” Ron called back. “And a CAW. Keep guard, Ed.”

“Youssir!”

“What does he mean by that?” Donnelly demanded in outraged tones.

“Standard procedure, Sir,” Ed said cheerfully. “Obviously, a Crime Assessment Wizard needs to check the building over thoroughly.”

“We don’t know that a crime has been committed! A schoolboy creeping into a restricted area –”

“The CAW will work that out, Sir, and then we’ll know if this requires S-H-I-T.” Unlike Ron, Ed spelt it out.

“I’m sorry,” Professor Brown said tightly. “I’m not familiar –”

“With SHIT?” Ed waited for the men who’d prevaricated and delayed them so badly to nod.

“Surprising,” he said coolly.

As Donnelly went red in the face and stepped towards him, he explained, “Seriously Horrible Incidents Team, Sir. I think you’ll be right up to your neck in the SHIT soon enough, so I suggest you return to the castle, Gentlemen, and an officer will be along shortly to interview you,” and he turned his back on them to continue his task.

At the hospital, they all piled into one treatment room, whilst a team of mediwizards dispensed various potions and treatments to Hugo, James, Snape and even Albus, who had got pretty scratched up trying to get through the hedge. Snape sniffed and checked each, and carefully chose a bezoar for himself from a selection which the young Potions’ Master on duty presented to him with shaking hands.

“Well, you’re all fit to go,” the Chief Mediwitch said. “As long as you all have someone to keep an eye on you overnight? Just in case of any reactions? The likelihood is very small, but you must floo at once if you notice any swelling, difficulty breathing, rash, horns, or anything else unexpected. Alright?”

They all nodded acquiescence, and started to move out of the room.

“Why don’t you all come over to our house?” Hermione said, looking at Harry’s boys. “You could look after each other and Grandad whilst Ron and I nip off and thank Neville, check your Dad, and bring Lily back with us. What?” Hermione looked from one to another at the sudden silence.

“You left the court-room just before me,” Ron said. “Neville was shot.”


“He might be here in St Mungo’s,” Ron said, looking around for a Mediwizard to ask.

“He’s dead,” Snape said quietly.

“No,” Hermione gasped, her hands over her face. “No.”
“He died to save me?” Hugo said, going very pale.

“What about Dad?” Albus grabbed Snape’s arm. “I saw them bundling him off. He’s alright, isn’t he?”

“I know no more than you on that score,” Snape said. “As soon as I had ascertained that Neville was dead, I came after you all.”

“Yes, thank you,” Hermione reached out and touched his arm. “Thank you,” she said again. “God, Neville is dead. I can’t believe it.” She looked at Ron. “I need to go and see Hannah. Oh dear Merlin, what can I say?”

“Lily went to be with Dad,” Albus said. “We’d better go to the Ministry.”

“You’ll go back to our house, and wait the night,” Ron said firmly. “No, don’t argue. You’ve all had wounds, and you’re either staying here in hospital or at our house. No discussion.”

“I’ll go and check on your father,” Snape said.

“You’re supposed to be under watch too,” James said sharply.

“I will be,” Snape said.

James looked at him, then nodded, before looking away. “Lily?” he asked.

“Yes, I will make sure she returns to you safely,” Snape nodded.

“What’ll happen now?” Albus asked. “To Dad? I mean, Neville said he’d done it.”

“I think we can discredit that easily enough,” Hermione said briskly. “I’m not leaving Neville’s name tarnished. Everyone needs to know what he did to save Hugo.”

She looked up at her son, who was taller than she was by several inches. “Come on, let’s get you home,” she said, slipping her arm around his waist.

Severus found himself leaving the building with Bill. He glanced across at the man. He’d been almost totally silent at the hospital.

“I’ll come with you to see Harry,” Bill said.

But when they arrived at the Ministry, it was to find that entrance was being blocked to all but authorised personnel.

“Farningham, isn’t it?” Snape asked, recognising the receptionist as a former pupil.

“That’s right, Professor,” the man went pink. “Fancy you remembering me after all these years! Looks like you’ve been in a fight,” he said, with a nod to the sting marks on Snape’s face. He glanced across at Bill, noticed the gnarled scars on his face, and blushed harder. “I’m afraid I still can’t allow you in, Sir,” he said, looking away and fiddling with some papers.

“Of course not,” Snape agreed. “Is this because of the shooting in court today?”
Farningham looked up again. “It’s in the papers already, is it?”

“I’ve no idea. I was there.”

“Oh! What was it like?” Farningham looked round, then leant on the desk conspiratorially.

“Bloody,” Snape said. “Very loud, too.”


“They’ve caught the person responsible, I take it?” Snape brushed away a speck on his sleeve, as if unconcerned.

“Oh yes, Sir. Pleading Imperius, I believe,” the chap winked, as if that could not be true.

“A common defence,” Snape nodded in apparent agreement. “So why are they still barring entry?”

“Well, it was the abduction, Sir. Harry Potter. Whisked away in front of everyone’s eyes! No one knows who did it, and everyone’s trying to avoid the blame up there,” he nodded vaguely upwards.

“I’m sure,” Snape commented, making the man laugh.

“Well, we’d better be off then,” Snape said, straightening, as someone else came up behind. “Good to see you,” and he shook hands with the man.

“What the bloody hell is going on?” Bill snarled as they made their way out onto the street. “And what was with all that chummy yummy stuff? One of your Slytherins, was he? Or one of your fag friends?”

A man bumped into him.

“Watch where you’re going, can’t you?” Bill snapped

The chap leapt back, and Snape put a hand on Bill’s arm.

Bill shook it off.

“Bad day,” Snape said to the hapless man, who scuttled off.

Bill whirled on Snape, face fierce.

It took a lot for Snape to not recoil.

“You’re letting your – malady - show,” he said quietly.

Bill looked like he’d bite back, but then seemed to rein himself in.

“I need a drink,” Bill rubbed a hand over his face.

“I’m going to try to find Lily. Good evening, Bill,” he said, noting that the day had slipped into dusk whilst they were at St Mungo’s. He turned to walk away.

Bill grabbed his arm.

Snape just looked down at the hold.
Bill let go.

“I’ll come with you.”

“Not in that mood, you won’t,” Snape said. “I will not have you frightening Lily. The day has been shocking enough as it is.”

Bill opened his mouth.

Snape just looked at him. They were similar heights.

Bill looked down, then rubbed his hand over his jaw. He looked back up, and Snape’s heart jolted as he saw the amber flash of Bill’s eyes.

“She needs family, not another queer.”

“I’m sure she does,” Snape agreed mildly. “Who is the first queer you’re referring to? Her father?”

“He admitted having a thing for Malfoy.”

“When did you last have sex, Weasley?”

“What the hell sort of question is that?”

“Last night, I don’t doubt. Three, four, five times? More?”

Bill was bright red. “How do you know that? Have you been spying on –?”

“No, I haven’t. But I make potions for werewolves –”

“I’m not a werewolf!” Bill hissed.

“No. But your eyes are amber right now. We both know that Greyback’s bite affected you. You’re an idiot if you haven’t sought help. It’s five days before the full moon and your sex drive is overwhelming. It’s part of the condition. Now think about Harry.”

“What about Harry?”

“If you believe he spoke the truth when he said that he had a fantasy about Malfoy, you must believe that he spoke the truth when he said that he has not had sex in years.”

“What are you saying?” Bill said, his posture looming.

“I would bet my life that you’ve had some weird fantasies when you’ve been deprived of sex for just a couple of days,” Snape said. “I would bet my life that you’ve had sex with a man and hated yourself for it.”

Bill grabbed him, lifting him off the ground.

“With the sex drive comes the aggression you are exhibiting now. You weren’t able to help Hugo, and you feel you’ve let down a member of your pack. Because I succeeded, with James, you see me as a threat. Because you aren’t taking a potion that I regularly make for werewolves to help them control their lust, you’re feeling aroused right now. You’re hard. You don’t even realise that you’re rubbing against me, do you? Don’t deny it: just from being this close, you’re hard and you hate it because you don’t find me attractive, but at this moment, you can barely control whether you want to fuck me or beat me to a bloody pulp. Tomorrow, you’ll tell yourself that I provoked it,
whichever you end up doing. Put me down, go home, have sex with your wife, and see me about the potion tomorrow. Being infected with werewolf toxin does not make you homosexual, Bill, it just makes you sex-obsessed. You can’t help it. Go channel it where it’s welcome.”

Bill’s strength was overwhelming. He kept Snape there, held with his feet off the ground. People walking past stared, and hurried on.

The amber eyes flashed blue, and back to amber. “Lily – ”

“Is part of your extended pack. I know. But you’re also emitting a pheromone that makes people attracted to you. While you still have part of your brain, Bill, just ask yourself: is she safer with an aged homosexual, or is she safer with you?”

Slowly, the blue returned. Bill lowered Snape to the ground. Snape didn’t dare drop eye contact. Bill nodded slowly. “Look after her.” And with that, he strode off, disappearing into a side-street. Snape heard the crack of apparition.

Breathing out, he followed, and apparated to the alley nearest to Grimmauld Place.
At The End Of A Tough Day

It was late by the time Snape flooed home. Kingsley was there as he stepped out of the fireplace, taking him into his arms and just holding him.

Snape allowed himself to relax, and lean into the strength of his lover. Strong hands soothed down his back, and he breathed in deeply, luxuriating in the scent that was uniquely Kingsley. His partner had obviously showered, and smelt of soap and clean skin. Snape dropped to his knees, and made quick work of Kingsley’s fly.

“Fucking Merlin, Severus –”

Kingsley’s cock was in Snape’s mouth before it had even had time to harden, though it was responding satisfyingly fast to the practised stroke of his tongue. Hands settled into Severus’ hair, encouraging him, and he felt the delicious organ jump as he sighed around it, tension leaving him as he concentrated only on this one task.

Later, they were sitting at the kitchen table, eating a late salad with some good bread.

“Well done with the Weasley boy,” Kingsley said.

Snape had floo-called him from Ron and Hermione’s home, where he’d eventually tracked down Lily, after talking to the Potter house elf. Lily had had a horrible time, with her father having disappeared before she got down to the cells. There’d been panic, no information available, and no-one interested in helping her. She’d wandered into the corridor, to wait with everyone else. Once security had mobilized, they’d shut down all the exits, and the hallways were full of milling people. Draco Malfoy had seen her, and taken her under his wing, delivering her to Ron and Hermione’s house, from where she’d floo-called to leave a message with Mitty.

The events of the day had taken their toll. All three Potter children were staying the night there. His conversation had allowed him to put their minds at rest that their father was safe.

He’d paid a brief visit to Hannah Longbottom, to offer his condolences, and to tell her how very brave and selfless her husband had been.

It was unexpected to find The Leaky open and full of people. Instead of shutting the pub, Hannah’s staff had taken over behind the bar, and people were able to slip in and talk to her as the news spread.

Longbottom had chosen to limit his duties at Hogwarts, refusing to take on the role of Head of House, or any mentoring role, though he had made himself available to students in the early morning, when he’d worked in the greenhouses or was digging over the outdoor beds. In the evenings, Neville usually joined his wife behind the bar at The Leaky, so was very well known in the Wizarding World.

Ron was still there when he arrived, although Hermione had gone back to her son. As soon as Snape moved away from Mrs Longbottom, Ron had left his companions, who looked to be Seamus Finnigan and Dean Thomas, if he was any judge.
“Drink, Severus?”

Snape opened his mouth to refuse, saw the questions in Ron’s eyes, and nodded. “A Macallan, if you please.”

Ron ordered a triple, another for himself, and to Snape’s horror, led them over to the table where his friends sat.

“Bugger off, will you, I need to speak to the Professor,” Ron grinned to soften the words.

“Evening, Professor. Ron tells us you were a hero again today. Well done,” Finnigan said, surprising Snape.

“Neville was the hero. And James Potter.”

“Yeah, Neville was the man,” Thomas agreed.

Into the morose atmosphere, Ron coughed and jerked his head towards Hannah. “Go make sure she’s got plenty to drink.”

“Sure. Good to see you, Sir, though I wish the circumstances were different,” and Finnigan stretched out his hand.

Snape shook it.

A moment later, he was sitting opposite Ron.

“The word is that Harry’s escaped,” Ron said.

He’d already left to visit Hannah when Snape had arrived at his house, and had the floo call with Kingsley.

Discreetly, Ron cast a privacy ward. Snape added his own.

“So I understand,” he said.

“You don’t seem too worried,” Ron noted.

Snape took a sip of his drink.

“Those kids need to know where he is.”

“They do,” Snape looked directly at Ron, who visibly sighed in relief.

They sat in silence for a couple of minutes.

“What are we going to do, Professor?” Ron said, his voice low. “What’s going to happen? I can’t see a way out.”

Snape didn’t answer. “We need to meet,” he said at last.

“Where’s safe?”

“We’ll be in touch tomorrow.” He threw back the drink and stood up, swaying for a moment.

“Are you alright?” Ron was beside him instantly.
“Alcohol interacts with the potions. I am fine.”

“I can’t say thank you enough,” Ron began.

“I’m glad Hugo is safe,” Snape cut him off.

“Yeah,” Ron rubbed the back of his neck. “I owe you. I won’t forget. Anything –”

“Don’t be foolish,” Snape said acerbically. “Never promise ‘anything’.”

Ron snorted. “Yeah, well, I mean it, near enough. Right, I must get back. Dad and the kids will have been keeping Hermione going, but she’ll need a big glass of wine about now, and then she’s going to go to pieces. And then she’ll want to be up all night working out defences for Harry should he be recaptured, and she’ll want to go over exactly what we’re going to say to the Headmaster tomorrow.” Ron slung back his drink and clunked the glass on the table.

“You know her well,” Snape gave a slight smile.

“Always something new to learn,” Ron shrugged. “That’s good, I think.” They’d started heading towards the door, when Ron turned to Snape. “What did you think of the Headmaster? Hugo said he was rude to you.”

Snape shrugged. “I am more concerned as to why it is so difficult to get access to the school, and why even your Auror colleagues were held up.”

“Yeah,” Ron agreed. “I’ll be bloody asking about that myself.”

Snape sprawled on his back next to Kingsley. They’d moved upstairs and gotten into bed whilst Snape was recounting the day’s events. “I said we’d all meet up today.”

“Good idea.”

“Where?” Snape turned his head on the pillow to look at his lover.

Kingsley moved onto his side, taking Snape’s chin in his hand and looking at the sting marks on his face. “Do these need anything?”

“They’ll have faded by tomorrow,” Snape dismissed them.

“Do they hurt?”

“Not so much, after the potion.”

Kingsley bent forward, kissing each one lightly.

“Kingsley –”

“I’m thinking.”

Snape snorted. “Ah. Don’t let me stop you, then.”

Kingsley’s mouth moved over his, light and teasing, lips just stroking, breath feathering, not even a
Snape was conscious of his heart starting to thrum, his breath shortening, his cock stirring again. “You’ll be the death of me,” he groaned, his own tongue licking out to flick over Kingsley’s upper lip.

Snape gloried in the sight of Kingsley’s bunching muscles glistening in the candlelight as his lover moved over him, the feel of Kingsley’s hardening cock catching on his thigh, the strong weight of him as he lowered himself against him. He couldn’t resist running his hands down the muscular back, smoothing over the lush ripeness of Kingsley’s arse. He loved Kingsley’s arse. The sight of it, the feel of it...his mouth was watering. Kingsley knew it too, and kissed him as he flexed the muscles under Snape’s hands, thrusting forward gently.

Snape raised one hand and their lube flew into it.

“God,” Shacklebolt said, undulating against him. “Want that. Thought you might be too tired.”

“I thought I might be too,” Snape agreed, unscrewing the lid behind Kingsley’s back, keeping the pressure between them. “You appear to have vivified me.”

“Hmm, we’ll see what big words you can manage in a minute,” Kingsley said, moving to the side so that he could dip into the pot. His fingers homed straight in to their destination, the slightest tease before he slipped inside.

Severus dipped his own fingers, then grasped Kingsley, a firm stroke causing his lover to thrust into his fist.

“In, now,” Snape gritted.

“At your service,” Kingsley lined himself up, and took Snape’s mouth in a passionate kiss as he thrust home.

Kingsley was wiping Severus’ groin with a flannel when he said, “I don’t think Harry is going to be very happy in hiding.”

Snape looked down. “My cock makes you think of Potter?”

Kingsley chuckled. “I told you I was thinking.”

“If you just fucked me so you could think, we’ll have to up our sex life. Who knows what bright ideas will come to you.”

Kingsley slipped the flannel between Snape’s legs, cupping his scrotum with just the tiniest hint of threat. “Are you complaining about our sex life?”

“Only as much as you’re suggesting that your mind isn’t in it when we’re at it,” Snape widened his legs further, showing his trust in that small action.

Kingsley bent down and kissed a nipple. “Well, you blew my mind completely away. Where does that leave you?” He trailed his tongue along the line of hair heading downwards.

“Satisfied?”
Kingsley’s head came up, and he kissed Snape slowly.

“I wonder what it would be like to have him here,” Kingsley said, after several satisfying minutes.

“In our house?”

“Here. In our bed.”

Snape looked at him. “What are you thinking?”

“Sex is easy. This is so – intimate. I don’t know if he could do it.”

“You think having sex with Potter would be easy?”

“He has just admitted having a fantasy about a man,” Kingsley grinned. “Puts things into the realms of possibility again. But I don’t think he finds sex easy, no.”

“Where did that come from? You’ve been talking to him about sex? Today? Where the hell did that fit into the scheme of things?”

“We had a little chat, is all.”

“Hmm. Anyway, before you get your hopes up, neither of us looks like Malfoy. Either of them.”

“Or any of them,” Kingsley said.

Snape snorted. “We both thought of that, did we?”

“He saw the boys at it and was turned on? Straight off to the shower? Much more likely. I’ve seen him with Lucius. He struggles to contain his animosity.”

“He used to hate me. I used to hate him.”

“Did you?”

Snape looked at his lover, and sighed. “Alright, I hated his father and took it out on him. I admit it. Drove me up the wall, all the same, when he was a kid. Albus let him get away with murder.”

“Albus expected him to commit murder.”

“Yes, he was right about that. Albus treated him abominably.”

“You too.”

“I deserved it. Potter was a child.”

“Well,” Kingsley said, pulling up the sheets, “that’s water under the bridge.”

“If he likes ripe young flesh, we’re hardly what he’ll be looking for.”

“Severus, everyone likes ripe young flesh,” Kingsley grinned, as he blew out the candle.

“I’m not convinced he’s gay.”

“No. But I like him. So do you. I’m happy to have him around, on whatever basis. It was hard to leave him tonight, to be honest. I can see how you felt when you were there all the time. I think I only just stopped him from bolting.”
“Yes, he doesn’t like being inactive.” Severus turned, and stroked a hand down Kingsley’s chest. “Well done.” He lay back again, and sighed. “So where did your sex-fuelled thoughts lead you to decide we’ll all meet?”

“I’m thinking here. It’s still under Fidelius. Depends if you mind our house – our privacy – being invaded.”

“It’s too late to worry about that, isn’t it?” Severus settled down, throwing an arm over Kingsley’s hip as the larger man scooted towards him in reverse, back to his front.

“I’d say so, but I wanted you to decide.”

Snape kissed the back of his neck, inhaling the scents of fresh sweat and sex.

They slept.
The next night found Harry waiting at the kitchen table in Severus’ and Kingsley’s house. The table had been extended, though Harry wasn’t sure who was coming.

The last twenty four hours or so had been…unexpected. Eventful. Troubling.

He’d been restrained from going to help Hugo, but then, so had Rose.

If he hadn’t been so worried, he would have found it interesting, seeing Kingsley in work mode again, taking control effortlessly, giving orders with the expectation of being obeyed. As it was, give or take his time in the cells, it had been years since Harry had had to obey anyone. But Kingsley’s equipment had shown that there were already two Aurors on the scene: if Harry had turned up, they’d have had to arrest him, and that would have distracted them from dealing with whatever was happening to Hugo. Even if they’d been part of Ron’s team, his very presence would’ve put them in an impossible position. Harry had had to trust that Ron and Hermione, Snape and the Aurors, would be able to deal with the situation.

Harry had hated it. He’d understood, but he hated feeling useless. The waiting to hear had seemed endless. In the end, Kingsley had sent him off with Rose, and another new recruit, and had asked him to take them through their paces on defensive spells.

It had let off some steam, and both Rose and Amir had been astonished that Harry could defend himself from all their spells, even without a wand. It had been quite an eye-opener for Harry too. He hadn’t tested his magic in that way for a very long time. Of course, they were both young, but it did his ego a little bit of good to know that he hadn’t entirely lost his touch. And he’d enjoyed teaching them too.

Perhaps he ought to take on an apprentice in the workshop.

The stupidity of the thought had pulled him up short.

He wasn’t in any position to be planning a future.

When Snape’s dot had moved to St. Mungo’s, Kingsley had sent one of his team to find out what was going on. Harry had thought he was being rather mean not to let Rose go at that point.

Had he known his own children were there, he would have apparated to the hospital himself.

Kingsley seemed to be overseeing several missions at once, and Harry could see that he really didn’t have time to talk to him.

Rose had brought him some parchment, suggesting he wrote to his children: she’d promised that she would take it that night when she went home, and see that they got it.

One of the workers showed Harry around: showed him the kitchen, which was stocked with food, the bathrooms, and up to a small room on the top floor that would be his to use. Feeling un-needed and in the way, he withdrew into it when Rose left, throwing himself onto the bed.

His thoughts were full of anger and despair. He felt edgy, needing to take action, and yet he was aware that even the work-out with Rose and Amir had tired him. He was not as well as he should
be, not as fit as he should be.
He started doing some press-ups, sit-ups, trying to force his body into being stronger, and better.
There was a tap at the door.
Harry got up and opened it, sweaty and breathing hard.
“I’m not fit.”
“Severe poisoning and imprisonment will do that to a man.”
Harry shrugged, then looked up sharply. “There’s no – nothing else has happened?”
“Nothing. Although you might like to know that your James helped free Hugo.”
“James?”
“Both your boys went with Ron and Hermione, and Bill, but couldn’t get into Hogwarts. When Severus arrived, he flew. James is an animagus, I gather?”
“Yeah, he’s a crow.”
Kingsley nodded. “Well, he was straight in there after Severus.”
“He’s alright? And Severus? And Hugo, of course?”
“Little bit of stinging from Light-Blooming Devil’s Snare, which St. Mungo’s have sorted. Your Albus had a few scratches from trying to get through the hedge in his animagus form too. They’re all fine,” Kingsley said again, seeing the shock on Harry’s face. “All your children are staying with Ron and Hermione tonight, so don’t worry.”
Harry rubbed his hand over his chin.
“This was exactly what I didn’t want.” At Kingsley’s look, he continued, “The children having to fight.”
“Well, you might not have wanted it, Harry, but they did a damn good job.”
Harry nodded, looking distracted.
“Well, I’ll be off. I just thought I’d let you know, and check you were okay before I left for home. You can contact me through the floo here if you need to: it’s got a safe link.”
“Thanks. I – I’m fine,” Harry said, stepping back. “And th – thank Snape for me. For Hugo.”
Kingsley looked hard at Harry, before stepping forward and putting his hands on Harry’s arms, so that Harry was forced to look up at him.
Harry felt very small with the larger man right in front of him, suddenly aware, as he had been when he’d held the manacle chain around Kingsley’s neck from behind, of the sheer muscular power and restrained strength of the older man.
“You weren’t responsible for saving Hugo. You aren’t responsible for everyone.”
“I know,” Harry said.

“No, I don’t think you do,” Kingsley disagreed. He looked down at Harry, and said, “You’re not alone. And I’ll do my damndest to stop anyone hurting you again.”

Harry jumped in his arms, glancing up, startled.

Kingsley dropped his hands, but didn’t move away. “No-one’s ever said that to you before,” he said slowly, assessingly. “You’re safe, Harry. I’m going to keep it that way.”

Harry found it hard to breath. He squeezed his eyes shut. He was shocked with the strength of his desire to just let everything go, to accept that Kingsley could manage everything, could mean what he said. But…

“Safety is meaningless if I can’t help those I love,” he said. “It’s just another prison if I’m trapped here – ”

Kingsley’s laugh sliced through his words. Kingsley took his arm, led him over to the bed, and sat down next to him.

“I’m not going to keep you trapped here. And I’m sorry I haven’t had time to talk to you. My agent at the Ministry had to make a snap decision on whether to take you out of there. I know it’s put you in a very difficult position. But after Neville was killed, it was clear that something very bad was going on, and the likelihood of truth prevailing seemed non-existent. Someone was out to get you, to the point that your old and dear friend was forced to tell outrageous lies in court which damned himself and you. That meant they were desperate. We will clear your name, I promise.”

“I can’t live on the run forever,” Harry said. “And now - the kids - if I’d been executed, at least – ”

“Don’t even go there,” Kingsley said sternly. “You know your kids would not be happier if you were dead.” He gentled his voice. “They’ve already lost their mother. Don’t even think they’d be better off without you, Harry.”

Harry’s head was down, arms resting along his thighs. He was aware of the smell of his own sweat. He nodded.

“I know you find it hard to trust anyone – ”

Harry looked up, about to protest.

“I mean really trust someone,” Kingsley interrupted. “I understand why you wouldn’t,” he said quickly. “Experience has taught you otherwise, and that’s a powerful lesson.”

Harry opened his mouth and shut it. He glanced quickly at Kingsley, and away again.

“You want to ask something personal? Fire away. I can refuse to answer if I don’t want to.”

“I shouldn’t – ”

Kingsley got up. Harry thought he was leaving, and felt disappointment and relief, until Kingsley just shut the door, and sat down again.

“Now,” he said. “Ask.”

“It’s about – about – well, what Ginny wanted. Was doing.” He swallowed.
“Being handcuffed to the bed?” Kingsley knew at once what Harry meant. They were talking about trust, after all.

Harry nodded quickly. One hand automatically went to the other wrist, where the raw marks of the cuffs he’d had on earlier still hurt.

Kingsley picked up his hand, pulled out his wand, and quietly healed the bruised flesh.

Harry swallowed.

Kingsley repeated it with the other hand, then tucked his wand away. “I should have done that earlier. I’m sorry.”

“It didn’t matter,” Harry shook his head. “It’s just…” he looked down at his now clear wrists. “I don’t understand,” he said quietly.

“To you, being restrained has only meant fear and pain,” Kingsley said quietly.

Harry nodded. “I don’t understand how it could mean anything else.”

“Most people haven’t ever been held prisoner,” Kingsley said. “To most people, if something is draped over their eyes, and a whisper of silk binds them to the headboard, all it means is the promise of pleasure. Of someone they trust, touching them in ways that will please them. The only uncertainty is where, and when. The only anxiety is how long they’ll have to endure the delight, before they’re allowed to come.”

Kingsley’s voice was deep, rumbling. Harry couldn’t believe that they were having this conversation. “Would you let – oh, god, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean –”

“I’ve never been a prisoner as you have. So I would find it very easy, very erotic, to give myself up to anything Severus asked of me,” Kingsley said.

Harry breathed in deeply. He tried not to think about that.

“In sex, even without physical bindings or ties, the act itself involves giving yourself up to another, don’t you think? I know that’s obvious for the penetrated partner, but also -”

Harry shuddered, remembering the body search when he’d been arrested.

“You’re repulsed,” Kingsley said. “And yet you expect a woman to do so without –”

“It’s not that.”

“Really.”

Harry glanced across at Kingsley, seeing the shutters down in his expression.

Well, Kingsley had been profoundly honest with him.

“I – they body searched me. When I was arrested. I don’t understand how that can be –”

“Hold on. Who body-searched you?” Kingsley’s brows were drawn together.

“I think they thought I was hiding my wand up my arse.” Harry attempted to make light of the situation as he explained to Kingsley what had happened.
“You were naked? In front of all of them? He did that in front of all of them? And Felton was there?”

Harry nodded, ashamed, and yet relieved that Kingsley appeared as outraged as he had felt himself.

“I’m so sorry,” Kingsley said.

“Not your fault,” Harry shrugged. “You don’t think that’s standard practice, then?”

“All I can say is that it bloody well shouldn’t be. There’s obviously more to sort out at the Ministry than I knew.”

“It doesn’t matter – ”

“Of course it matters!” Kingsley snapped, then reined himself in. He looked down at Harry. “You don’t regard yourself as having worth. What if they had done that to – James, or Albus, or Lily? Would you still be telling me that it didn’t matter?”

Harry’s eyes flashed. “I see your point,” he said tightly, feeling even more helpless than he had done before.

“We will make things right,” Kingsley said, a hand briefly touching Harry’s thigh to get his attention. “And as for what you were saying…I would feel every bit as hurt – physically – and outraged, had that been done to me. And I like Severus’ cock up my arse.”

Harry gasped, and snorted, throwing a quick, blushing face at Kingsley.

Kingsley stood up.

“We’ll all meet tomorrow. Things will come alright. Try and sleep.”

Harry nodded, and got up too.

Kingsley turned as he reached the door. “Bye the way, the showers are just down the corridor.”

“Are you telling me I stink?” Harry grinned, trying to lighten the mood.

“I like the smell of a good bit of honest sweat,” Kingsley smiled back, eyes slipping over him in a way that made Harry shiver. “But you’ll be niffy by tomorrow. Go wash the prison off you. Towels are on the stand, and there’s a house elf called Dido if you need anything.”

“Thanks. For everything.”

“Goodnight, Harry,” Kingsley smiled, and was gone.

Harry had enjoyed the shower, the pleasure of hot water and being able to get clean, the joy of privacy. He was surprised that he had fallen asleep quickly, but his night had been full of a tumble of dreams and nightmares.

He woke early, and drew the curtains, pleased to see the world outside. He wondered whether he was allowed to go out, and then decided he needed to get a grip. He had another shower, wandered downstairs, grabbed a cup of tea and some toast, both of which tasted wonderful. Kingsley’s base was in Dublin, much to Harry’s surprise, in a house which reminded him a bit of Grimmauld Place, although a lot of wizarding adaptations had been done to it. He said hello to some of the staff who
were already working away, then summoned Dido, and told her he was going out.

Dido gave him a piece of paper with some words written on it, which he needed to say to be able to return to the house. Moments later, Harry was out in the open air for the first time in ages. It was a beautiful morning, the sun shining, the air fresh. He strode along until he came to the Liffey, and then walked alongside it for a while. Something about the grey waters sparked an idea, and without really thinking about it, Harry apparated.

He was practically blown off his feet by the wind. Nevertheless, he laughed out loud with delight. He’d done it! Wandless, here he was, on the northern coast, looking down on The Giant’s Causeway. A thought took him, and Harry quickly sent a *Patronus* to Kingsley to let him know where he was.

The sun was shining in visible beams through a gap in the clouds, painting wave after rolling wave with silver along its crest, the whole ocean spread out before him, a huge, powerful force. Down below, he could see the basalt columns, and excitement in his veins, he headed along the headland. He made his way through the car-park and past the still-closed visitors’ centre, loping down the winding path. Tall rocks rose either side, and there was scrub grass, and knotweed, lovage, and gillyweed growing in the lee of the cliff, out of the wind. Harry supposed it wasn’t surprising to find many wizarding plants around: Ron had said that there had been a magical community here for yonks.

He made his way over the columns, entranced by the regular shapes underfoot, until he stood on the edge of the ocean, feeling like there was nothing else in the world but him and this raw, savage life-force, the pounding sea, the gusting wind, the filtering sun and scudding clouds, the heavy weight of the landmass behind him.

He could fairly feel the magic thrumming in the place. He couldn’t help throwing his arms wide, his face turned to the sun and wind, just letting it all roll through him. He could feel his magic rising, constrained as it had been for so long, not just in the cells, but for years and years, tamped down, unused.

He let himself feel it, let it sing loud in his veins. He didn’t know how long he stood there. Eventually, he became aware of how cold the wind was, whipping against his chest even through the sweatshirt he’d borrowed, stinging his cheeks. He became conscious of the ache in his arms. He delighted in it all. In feeling. Being.

He lowered his arms.

“Alright, there, mate?”

Harry whipped round.

“You looked like you were part of it,” the man said. “Like you were a statue, that’d stood there forever. Apart from the clothes, of course,” he laughed. “I’m just thinking of what Michelangelo’s David would’ve looked like in jeans and trainers!”

“Bit warmer than with just a fig-leaf,” Harry grinned, shoving his hands into his pockets, embarrassed at having been caught looking a complete dork. And yet, the peace he’d experienced was still there, filling him.

“Ah, but he didn’t have that really. They stuck that on to make him respectable for Queen Vic to see him.”
“Really?” Harry laughed.

“Too true. They always miss out the interesting bits in history lessons, don’t they?”

“You’re right,” Harry agreed, but the words started him off thinking.

“Have you seen the amphitheatre round the side? Gets your imagination going, doesn’t it, this place?”

“Not yet, but I agree. Where are you from?” Harry asked.

“New Zealand. You’re a Brit, of course.”

“I am. Travelling?” The chap was young, around the same age as his boys. He had the weathered look of a backpacker – tanned, longish hair, clothes that were clean but were of the non-iron variety with multiple pockets.

“Yeah, having a bit of a look around the world. I like this place. Nothing big about it: it’s still all secretive, even though it’s famous, isn’t it? I like that. Lots of places are stuffed full of tourists, you sort of lose the feel of what they’re about. Machu Picchu, for example. Ever been there?”

“Nope, ‘fraid not,” Harry shook his head, sitting down on a column along from the man.

“Don’t get me wrong, it’s worth seeing. But there’s something about having a place to yourself, isn’t there?”

Harry grinned, and stood up again. “Right, I’ll go and have a look at the amphitheatre, then. Let you enjoy this place on your own for a bit.”

“Oh shit, I didn’t mean to be rude!”

Harry laughed. “Enjoy.”

“Thanks,” the guy nodded, seeing the easy smile on Harry’s face. “Appreciate it, mate.”

Harry set off up the path. The amphitheatre was fenced off where some of the ground had crumbled away, but Harry stood and watched the birds wheeling about from their nests on the cliff edge. A boat was riding the waves in the bay below, its anchor dropped. Harry couldn’t see anyone aboard. With his hand shielding his eyes, he scanned out to sea, watching the light sparkling on the water. A movement. He looked intently. Harder.

His chest started pounding.

Taking a last look, he turned and loped down the path, then back up along the way he had come, to harvest a bit of gillyweed. He headed back down. There appeared to be no–one on the Causeway now; the young man must’ve made a somewhat briefer communion with nature than Harry had. He strode along to where a rock formation shielded him from view, stripped off his clothes and swallowed the gillyweed. The water was likely to be freezing, but then, last time he’d had gillyweed, he hadn’t noticed the temperature of the lake.

He lowered himself in, not sure if there might be more columns lurking just under the surface of the water.

There were.

And there were also three merpeople, waiting for him.
They greeted him, and he followed them. It was different from swimming in the lake: the sea felt much more alive, threshing and shifting, moving his body. There were lots of fish, shoals darting in united flurries of movement. He should have expected them, of course, and yet it was strange to think that when he’d looked out from the shore, it hadn’t occurred to him that there were living creatures just feet from him, going about their daily lives. As were the merpeople, who had taken him to – Harry recoiled at the sight of two almost entirely eaten, but recognisably human bodies, tethered by weeds to the sea bed. Just as fear was rising in him, one of the mermen touched his arm, and indicated for him to follow again. Harry found himself winding through more columns, and then he was in what appeared to be a village, and was led to a person whom he assumed was the head woman.

It was strange being with people to whom nakedness was normal. The merlady was quite old, and her wrinkled flesh bobbed and floated on the water, her breasts rising and falling on the currents. But Harry didn’t have the time to dwell on it, or on the broad-chested mermen who surrounded her, as he was welcomed, and offered a plate of what appeared to be seaweed and raw whelks.

Under the water, he could understand the merpeople, and they him. He listened to their concerns, and nodded as diagrams were drawn on the sea floor. He was given the name of a local wizard who was accepted among them, and would be willing to act as an intermediary. These merpeople seemed less aggressive than the ones he’d met before, but maybe that was his age, and the lack of fear in his visit. He did not have any loved ones to save down in these depths.

Judging the time when the gills were about to disappear was almost impossible, and he was still a poor swimmer without the webbing that disappeared as the gillyweed wore off. Two mermen dragged him along the last dozen yards, deep underwater, and thrust him up towards the light. Harry surfaced, coughing and spluttering, scrabbling to get a grip on the stone.

Hands grasped him, heaving him up. Harry felt his skin grazing against sharp edges, and jackknifed, hitting his knees as he found himself on all fours, spitting out sea water and taking huge breaths.

“You’re an idiot.”

Harry nodded, glancing up, not yet ready for words.

Something draped over him.

A towel. He hadn’t brought one with him, but its presence made him realise he had been kneeling there stark bollock naked.

He looked past Kingsley to see an old couple, in hiking gear, watching with interest.

Harry got to his feet, wrapping the towel around him.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“That’s alright, dear,” the woman said. “Lovely view here.”

“Alice!”

The woman chuckled, and came over. She bent down, her face near his groin.

Harry held the towel tighter.

“Grazed your knees, Poppet. I’ve got some plasters and a bit of Savlon in my bag. John, reach it out
for me, would you?” she said, straightening and turning her back to the man, who came forward, unzipping it and rooting around inside.

“Oh, they’ll be fine,” Harry said awkwardly.

“I’ve been carrying a first aid kit for forty years,” she said. “I check it out every year. Never needed a thing. You’re not going to stop me now!”

Harry met Kingsley’s now laughing eyes over her head, and then glanced at John.

“I never argue with her,” he shrugged. “Lose your snorkel, did you? As well as your trunks?”


“Isn’t it too rough to see much?”

“Yeah, not the best place,” Harry agreed. Starting a snorkelling trend here wouldn’t go down well with the underwater locals.

He felt the woman bending over him again and the next moment he had plasters on both knees.

“Thank you very much,” he said politely.

“Glad to help,” Alice smiled. “Now, you get dressed before you catch your death. I don’t know how you young things do it.”

Harry laughed. It was years since anyone had called him a young thing, if ever.

The couple began to move away.

Kingsley held out his sweatshirt. “Here you go, Poppet,” he said, sotto voce.

Harry slipped it over his head, doing a wordless and wandless drying spell on himself at the same time, then turned his back and pulled on the jeans, conscious of his nakedness under them in a way he hadn’t been before, when he’d taken the clothes from the store at the house. There’d only been what appeared to be women’s knickers available, and he felt bloody glad that he hadn’t been caught wearing those.

Kingsley waited whilst he slipped the trainers back on.

“We’ll walk up the headland a bit and then apparate.”

“Actually, there’s a chap in the village we need to see.”

Kingsley raised an eyebrow.

“The merpeople communicate with him now and then: they trust him. As much as they trust any human, anyway. They’re pretty pissed off at the moment, so I said I’d see him and let them know anything we found out through him.”

Kingsley nodded. “You do realise,” he said, as they walked up the path, “that although you told me where you were, you never mentioned that you were going for a little swim?”

“Yeah, sorry,” Harry said, looking across at him. “The thing is, I never even thought of it, and then some merpeople beckoned me from the water, so I had to go, didn’t I?”
“You could have died! It was freezing in there!”

“Yeah, but I’d seen the gillyweed growing, and before, I never felt cold with it; you don’t, you know?”

“You used gillyweed?”

“Shit yeah! I can hardly swim otherwise.”

Kingsley stopped dead.

Harry stopped too, opened his mouth to ask why, and found Kingsley’s hands planted either side of his face, and then Kingsley kissed him straight on the lips, before letting him go.

Harry stood there gawking.

Two lads coming down the path wolf-whistled.

Harry went bright red. “Why did you do that?”

“Because I underestimated you. Because we all underestimate you,” Kingsley said, walking ahead as if nothing had happened.

Harry hurried to catch up. His heart was thumping and his breath seemed to be catching.

“What? Why?”

“I never thought of gillyweed. I got your message, came here, couldn’t find you, found your clothes. I didn’t know what had happened. It seemed crazy to think you’d gone for a swim. I was worried that…you might have got into trouble. It never bloody occurred to me that you’d found a merpeople village and bloody gillyweed and…”

“It grows here!” Harry said. “I know it’s supposed to be a Mediterranean plant, but I saw some in the shelter of the rocks on my way down. And when I saw the merpeople, it was obvious – hold on.” He ran back down the path, heart pounding more than it should, and picked some more of the rat-tail-like growth. He turned back. Kingsley was leaning against a rock, waiting, watching him, long powerful legs stretched out, his arms folded, biceps bulging.

Harry swallowed.

Kingsley was always friendly. But – did he often kiss men on the mouth? Kiss women? Harry couldn’t imagine doing it. He’d only kissed women on the mouth in romantic situations, sexual situations. Usually with tongues and action. Did people go around kissing others on the mouth?

Mrs Weasley had kissed him on the mouth once, but he was pretty sure that was because he’d turned his head at the wrong moment.

He felt at sea again. Which was appropriate with it all around him.

There were things to do: he did what he always did, and shoved the worry to the back of his mind.

Kingsley wasn’t having any of it. “I shocked you,” he said, straightening, thigh muscles straining against his jeans. He glanced at the gillyweed Harry was holding like a barrier. “Severus will be pleased with that. It’s for him?”

“Yeah, of course. The local guy’ll pick his own, won’t he?”
They walked a few paces.

“Harry?” Kingsley said gently. “Don’t let it worry you. I’m a very touchy-feely person.”


“You don’t like it?”


“Yeah, sorry,” Kingsley said easily. “If it offended you,” he added.

Harry didn’t know what to think. What to say. “Do you often kiss people? On the mouth?”

Kingsley laughed. “A bit too gay for you? No, I don’t. As I say, I’m sorry. I was worried. Saw the clothes…had to wonder if you’d topped yourself.”

“What?”

“You’ve had a bad time. And people do. We should have had you home with us, rather than leaving you at the base.”


Kingsley stopped again, this time keeping at a distance. “It’s not about feeling responsible for you, it’s about you being a friend,” he said. “We care about you. Anyway, we like you around the house.” He turned to walk on.

“But…but.”

Silence. They walked.

“I don’t know enough about how people interact,” Harry said quietly. “Do people kiss like that? Am I misconstruing? Should I kiss people like that? I don’t.”

“I’m an idiot,” Kingsley said. They were up on the headland now, the wind whipping about them as they walked towards the magical village.

“Look,” he said. “You’re right. Most people don’t kiss on the mouth. Only people they’re intimate with, or really care about. I’m sorry to have upset you. I was more worried than I liked to think, and I over-reacted.”

They walked on a bit further. Ahead, houses were suddenly appearing in what had been an empty landscape.

“So, you’re saying you’re human?” Harry said, a smile curving his mouth.

Kingsley looked down at him, saw the rosy cheeks and twinkle, and cuffed him around the head, dropped his arm over his shoulder in a moment’s hug, and then it was over.
Harry shivered at the memory, sipped the glass of red wine in front of him, and waited for the others to arrive.
Lily threw her arms around her father’s neck, and to his surprise, so did his sons, even James, who he had not seen, apart from in the gallery, since the information that he’d fantasized about Malfoy had come out.

Fortunately, this aspect was forgotten in the discussions that followed: what had happened to Hugo, and to Neville.

Draco had devoted almost the entirety of *The Prophet* to articles such as:

*Murder at the Ministry: 13 Injured in Stampede!*

*Pupil Tortured at Hogwarts; Longbottom Murdered in Court, Potter Kidnapped from Ministry: Is Nowhere Safe?*

*Hero Professor Neville Longbottom Forced into Perjury to Save Pupil.*

*Which War Hero Is Next?*

*Mistreatment of Wizards Awaiting Trial: Abuse or Apathy?*

*Obituary for Hero Neville Longbottom.*

“You’ve done an excellent job, Draco,” Hermione said. “Well done.”

“I agree,” Kingsley nodded. “Has there been any feedback?”

“Merlin, it’s been non-stop!” Draco rubbed a hand over his receding hairline.

Harry thought he still looked exhausted. There was a washed-out look to him.

“Half a dozen people have written in about their own treatment in the cells – mostly, from first glance, it doesn’t appear to have been anything like as bad as you suffered, Harry –”

“Or you.”

Draco looked away, as if his experience didn’t matter. “Nothing like that,” he agreed. “And we’ve had over a hundred people offering donations in honour of Neville.”

“That’s nice,” Ron said. “Good, that is.”

“Yes. I’ll need to organise someone to set that up. Some people have sent cash already.”

“I can do that,” Bill and Albus said at the same time, then grinned at each other.

“How’s Hannah?” Harry asked. One of the worst things about his position was not being able to go and see her.

“She’s got lots of support,” Hermione said. “I went to see her again today. The pub’s open: everyone’s milling around.”

“Hugo? What can you tell us about what happened? I know the MLE will have sent people to talk to you, but if you don’t mind going over it? There might be something that sparks something off,”
Kingsley asked.

“Yeah, sure,” Hugo said.

Now that his ordeal was over, he was looking quite pleased with all the attention.

“Mum and Dad came to see Professor Brown today, though, so they might want to throw stuff in.”

“Apparently,” Ron said, diving straight in, “although his class mates had said he was missing, the school didn’t follow it up because they ‘were giving him a bit of leeway’. They thought he’d bugged off to come to Harry’s trial again.”

“Hey!” Lily exclaimed. “How come I get expelled and he gets leeway? It was my Dad’s trial!”

“I’m sure you haven’t really been expelled –” Harry began.

“Actually, Dad, there was a letter today,” James said. “They addressed it to me again.”

“Oh, Lily, I’m so sorry,” Harry said, stricken.

“Well, we’ve no intention of sending Hugo back to Hogwarts,” Hermione said. “I’ve made an appointment to have a look at Beauxbatons tomorrow. Lily could come with us. It’ll probably stand her in good stead to have done some time in France if she wants to study in Paris. And she and Hugo would have each other too. What do you think?” Hermione looked at Harry.

Hermione had obviously discussed this with Lily, because she was looking at Harry eagerly too.

“You like the idea?” he asked. “Will you have to redo your last year? Do they have the same system?”

“They don’t have the same system, which is why I think it might be a good idea to finish this year there and do the whole year again next year,” Hermione said. “I know you can both speak some French, but I think if you’re plunged in at the deep-end, you’ll have to learn to swim fast. Also, you could then do the Baccalaureate and ask permission to sit the English NEWTS as an overseas student – it isn’t common, but it is possible. You end up with a really useful string of world class qualifications.”

“What about your friends?” Harry asked.

“They’ll still be my friends, Dad,” Lily said.

“And she won’t have to deal with the shitty people,” Hugo muttered.

Lily nudged him to shut up, but Harry knew what it was like being in a school with people whispering about you.

“I’m sorry,” he said again.

She reached out and touched his hand. “It’s good to know who your real friends are,” she shrugged, and then at the look of sympathy on his face added, “Yes, alright, the gossips are horrid. I wouldn’t choose to run away from them – I’d like to see the look on their faces when you’re cleared,” she grinned.

There were smiles at her confidence. Harry felt bolstered, but…

“I’ve something to say on that score,” Kingsley said.
They all looked at him. His voice was always calm but surprisingly authoritative.

“I went to see Minister Benningdean this afternoon.”

There were gasps around the table.

“You told him where Harry was?” Ron leant forward.

“I put him out of his misery,” Kingsley agreed. “I told him that Harry was in the custody of the EWA. Given what happened to Neville, he knows that he has real problems at the Ministry. Also, we didn’t put him in the shit earlier for Harry’s treatment in the cells, which he ‘appreciated’. He’s agreed that Harry can remain in our custody until he feels that he can be offered a fair trial in Britain.”

There were gasps of delight around the table.

Harry didn’t know what to think. “What does that mean? Do I go to jail here?”

“It means I negotiated that you’d be under house arrest: you can stay on the property, receive visitors, but I’m afraid you can’t leave it.”

“What property?” Harry asked. “EWA Headquarters?”

“Here?” Kingsley said.

Something big seemed to be thumping in Harry’s chest.

“I’ll be in your way,” he whispered.

“I sincerely doubt that,” Snape said.

Harry stared at him. Did he know Kingsley had kissed him on the mouth that morning? Should it matter that Kingsley had? Harry had spent the afternoon trying not to think about it. Now it loomed in his head, large and impossible to ignore.

“You’re uncomfortable with the idea,” Snape said, his eyes narrowing. He turned to Kingsley. “Is there somewhere else –”

“That’d be great, Dad, wouldn’t it?” Albus interrupted. “You can’t go back in those cells. It’s really good that Severus and Kingsley are offering.”

“Yes, of course, but I don’t want to be a burden,” Harry said.

There was an awkward silence. Everyone knew Harry had stayed at the house, so his reluctance seemed odd. Harry knew he was embarrassing everyone.

He glanced up at Snape, and Kingsley. “I – thank you,” he said.

“Right,” George said. “Well, after that gracious acceptance,” he cast a wry glance at his friend, “have we got any more information on who attacked Hugo?”

“The school told the Aurors – and us – that someone must have broken into the school grounds.”

“The man was masked,” Hugo said. “I’m really sorry that I can’t tell you anything. Well, I told the Aurors he was a bit taller than me, white. Strong.”
“English?” Snape asked.

“What? Oh yes, I think so. I didn’t think about it, so I’d say yes. Definitely. His accent was sort of ordinary.”

“Smell?” Snape continued, ignoring the grins around the table at the description.

“What? Sorry,” Hugo said again, seeing the glare from his mother. “Er, not BO, or anything.”

“Deodorant? Anything strange?”

“Not that I noticed. But it was in the greenhouse: there’s lots of smells in there.”

Snape nodded.

“Tell me what exactly happened,” Harry asked, then looked round. “I suppose everyone’s heard it already?”

“As I said, it’s good to go over it,” Kingsley encouraged.

“I was in the greenhouse. I’d had an owl from Professor Longbottom asking me to call by after my Care of Magical Creatures class -”

“Was that unusual?” Harry asked. “Do you usually call him Professor Longbottom?” he added.

“Yeah, at school. I did,” Hugo swallowed, realising that he’d never be addressing Neville again. “It was unusual, but you do occasionally get owls from teachers. And I’ve had one or two from Prof – Neville - over the years. I didn’t think anything of it. Then, when I got to the greenhouse, he was surprised to see me. We were just sort of talking at cross-purposes when this masked man comes in and throws a disarming spell at us both.”

“Both of you at once?”

“Yeah, I felt such an idiot. But it was so unexpected!”

“I’m sure it was,” Harry agreed, reaching a hand out to touch Hugo’s arm. “Neville knew how to fight: if he was disarmed, you didn’t stand a chance.”

“No,” Hugo swallowed. “Well, Neville shoved me behind him, but the chap threw something, and the next minute that bloody pl – sorry, Mum,” he blushed.

“You’ve earned the right to call it a ‘bloody plant’ if you want,” Hermione said warmly.

Hugo snorted. “Yeah. Anyway, it started lashing around me at once, and at Neville. Neville started trying to do some wandless magic, but the man cast *Petrificus* at both of us. The plant quieted down then, but then the man *accio-ed* Neville. He told him he had to get Harry executed that afternoon, or he’d let the plant kill me. And I think he did something to stop Neville explaining what was going on to anyone, but it was hard to hear, they were right across the greenhouse away from the Devil’s Snare.”

“Did the Headmaster explain why Neville wasn’t missed?” Harry asked. “Surely he would have been having lessons? There would have been pupils looking for him. And how come no-one found Hugo beforehand? Did he spell the greenhouse to stop entry?”

“It was the one afternoon Neville apparently doesn’t have lessons,” Hermione said. “Which suggests whoever did this knew his timetable.”
“You think it was someone in the school?”

“Well, he’s usually in the Leaky when he’s not at Hogwarts, and it’s delivery day from the Brewery, so most of the wizarding world could have known,” Ron shook his head.

“But Hugo, what did you think? Could it have been a pupil? Judging from their size? Or...or a teacher?” Harry asked.

“I don’t know,” Hugo said. “It would have to have been a sixth-former, at least, because – well, I was sure it was a man, definitely not a kid, but I didn’t recognise his voice. And - ”

“Yes?” Kingsley prompted. “Any information helps, Hugo, don’t worry if it seems silly.”

“Well, he – he held himself like a man. When he was talking to Neville.”

“Yes, I know what you mean. And Neville didn’t seem to know him?”

Hugo shook his head. “Not that I could tell.”

“He would have been a fool not to disguise himself,” Snape said. “Body and voice. If he was someone likely to be known to Neville.”

“Poor Professor Longbottom. What a shitty, horrid thing to be forced to do,” Scorpius said.

“You’re absolutely right, Scorpius,” Hermione said.

“I’m not understanding this,” James said.

Everyone turned to look at him.

“How did someone break into the school and them not know? I mean, we found it impossible to get in – the place was locked up tight, wasn’t it? And you had to wait to gain admission.”

“Unless they could fly,” Hugo said.

“That’s cool, by the way,” Scorpius commented.

James looked across at him.

“Being an animagus. You both are?” he looked at the brothers.

Albus nodded. “James’ form is more useful.”

“But you get all the stroking and stuff,” James said. “Oh, that sounds pervy,” he slapped a hand over his eyes.

Everyone laughed.

Harry looked at his oldest son. Albus was much more into touching in his normal form. Had that influenced his animagus identity? And did James wish that he was touched more?

“Teddy can change into anything, can’t he? And Severus doesn’t even need a form to fly,” Albus said. “Now that’s what I call cool. Can you teach that?” he asked.

“It is a learnable ability,” Snape said, with some hesitation.

“Why don’t more people do it?” Hermione asked. “Not that I’d want to, but I mean, you could
have quidditch without brooms and things.”

“That’s like saying a running race is like the Grand Prix without the cars,” Ron said, who’d watched quite a bit of Muggle telly with his father. “You can’t separate brooms from quidditch. Not to mention, Quality Quidditch Supplies would put a death notice out on you.”

“And we’ve had enough of those,” Kingsley said, sending a chill over the conversation. “It’s a good point about the protections on Hogwarts and how anyone got in –"

“Yeah, but it’s not just that. I’m sure Mrs Banton – she’s the caretaker - said that they keep records of exactly who’s there at Hogwarts. So if no-one extra is on that list, surely the person who did that to Hugo had to be there already.”

“How would they know who exactly was there?” Andy asked. “I mean, if someone broke in?”

“They must have something like the Marauders’ Map,” George suggested.

“That bloody thing,” Snape snorted.

“‘That bloody thing’ was a brilliant bit of magic,” George argued. “It’s a map that shows the whole school, and everyone in it – where they are, where they’re going,” he explained.

“You mean, someone can see exactly where you are at any given time?” Scorpius asked.

“Yeah. It was brilliant for avoiding Sn – Professors doing duty,” George amended quickly, his eyes twinkling.

Snape folded his arms, and pretended not to have heard.

Harry, Ron and Hermione shared a grin with George.

“And the school have got it now?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“They must have made their own,” Harry said. “You’ve still got ours, Lily?”

“You allowed your children to have it?” Snape demanded, sitting upright.

“How on earth would you have something like that?” Andy asked.

“My Dad and his friends made it,” Harry said, a hint of pride in his voice. It was one of the few things he felt he could feel proud of his father about.

“Your father?” Draco asked, surprised.

“Yeah, and Teddy’s father, and your cousin, Sirius. And Peter Pettigrew.”

“The traitor?” Draco’s brows drew together.

“Yeah. They were friends.”

“I suspect Peter had very little to do with the making of that map,” Snape said. “At least, in terms of the magic. I had the unwelcome pleasure of having him reside with me for a while; he could barely boil a tea-kettle. However, his animagus form – a rat, how appropriate,” he sneered, “no doubt allowed him to gain access to various parts of the castle.”
“You don’t have to be strong to do the animagus transformation?” Andy asked.

“I’m not sure,” Harry looked to Snape.

“I suspect his friends gave him a lot of help in achieving it,” Snape said dismissively.

Andy leaned forward and looked at Albus. “Would you teach me?”

Albus looked quickly at his father, who just smiled at him. “I’ll try,” he offered.

“I probably won’t be able to do it. But I’d love to have a go. What about you, Scorp?”

“If Albus is willing,” Scorpius looked hesitantly at his year-mate.

“Sure. I’m bound to be a crap teacher, though, so don’t get your hopes up.”

Harry found himself watching James’ reaction. He hadn’t been asked. Of course, Andy and Scorpius had been in the same year as Albus, so they knew him better…he glanced away, and realised that Snape had also been watching James.

“Harry has some news too,” Kingsley said, into the lull.

All eyes turned to look at him.

“I think – well, I can’t be certain, but – I think Rowle and Nott are dead.”

“What?” Ron leant forward.

Harry threw him a brief smile. “Yeah. Well, I, uh, thought I’d go and have a look at The Giant’s Causeway. You know, because you were saying it was amazing, and magical. And I agree. And then a merman waved at me, so – “

“A merman waved at you?” Andy said in amazement.

“Yeah. They’re not just in the lake, you know.”

“There are merpeople in the lake?” Scorpius gawped.

Harry, Ron and Hermione all looked at each other, and grinned. “There are,” Harry said. “You’ve never been told about them?”

Scorpius and Andy both shook their heads. “All you lot know?” they asked, looking at the other younger ones.

“Mum and Dad were used as bait in the Triwizard Tournament,” Hugo explained.

“And Dad was a competitor,” Lily put in.

“Are merpeople fierce, then? Dangerous?”

“Well, they don’t like any nonsense,” Harry said. “And up at The Giant’s Causeway they got really pissed. Ron, you were right: Nott and Rowle were trying to raise power for some big magical working.”

“Well, at least it wasn’t a complete red herring,” Ron sighed. “And?”

“And I was shown two pretty eaten bodies at the bottom of the sea.”
“Urgh!” Lily grimaced. “Gross.”

“How did you know it was Nott and Rowle?” Draco asked.

“The merpeople drew the Dark Mark in the sand on the seabed. And they told me.”

“You could speak to them?”

Harry explained about gillyweed, and went over his underwater discussions. “And the bottom line,” he said, “is that they were really pissed off about what Nott and Rowle were doing.”

“So they just killed them?” Hermione’s brow was furrowed.

“Well, according to them, the sea rose up and took its revenge. How much influence they had on that happening though, I’m not sure.”

“They were both bastards,” Draco said, unevenly. “Does anyone know what they were raising the power for?”

“Does anyone think it was a coincidence that Harry was arrested and ‘disappeared’ just in time for whatever they were going to do at full moon?” George asked.

“You think it was to do with me?” Harry asked, his surprise evident.

“You’ve got to be one of the most powerful wizards around,” George shrugged, “and the timing is suggestive of a link, isn’t it?”

“Is he? I mean, are you? Really?” Lily asked, looking at her father.

Harry shrugged, but a couple of the adults snorted.

“Oh, I meant to give you this,” James said, pulling Harry’s wand out of his back pocket and pushing it across the table towards his father.

“Oh, thanks,” Harry said, picking it up and slipping it into his own pocket. “Am I allowed to use magic, Kingsley?”

“Hold on. You apparated to The Giant’s Causeway without a wand?” Draco asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Harry blushed.

George started whistling some tuneless ditty, leaning back in his chair, arms crossed, smirking. Hermione was grinning.

“Yeah, you’re my man!” Ron grinned, raising his hand for a high five.

“I think whether you’re allowed to use your wand or not is irrelevant,” Kingsley grinned. “They won’t be able to monitor it as we’re under Fidelius, so do what you want, bearing in mind that my life is on the line if you abscond or do something terrible.”

Harry looked at him seriously, and nodded.

After they’d covered Hermione’s plans for his defence, the situation in the Ministry, and arrangements for Neville’s funeral, the meeting broke up.

James headed straight to the floo.
“I’ll fetch you some clothes,” he said, cheerily.

Too cheerily, Harry thought, as his son avoided looking him in the eye.

“We’ll help him, don’t worry,” Lily said, misreading the tension in her father as she gave him a hug. “Anything in particular you need?”

“My tools would be good,” Harry said. “Some small pieces of wood?”

Albus nodded. “I’ll get them.”

“How’s Mitty?” Harry asked suddenly. “Is she coping?”

“Yeah, she seems fine. She’s seeing Dinky, and he comes over to our place too, and we’ve all met him.”

“Oh good! Well done! What do you think of him?”

“He’s really protective of Mitty, which is so sweet,” Lily grinned.

Albus made a puking motion behind her back, and Harry laughed.

After they’d gone, Harry found Draco lurking.

“Can I have a word?”

“Sure,” Harry said, though his stomach started knotting. He looked at Kingsley. “May I take Draco into the garden for a moment?”

“Help yourself,” Kingsley said easily. “You don’t need to ask.”

Out in the cooler air of the evening, Harry and Draco walked side by side for a few paces.

“This is awkward,” Draco said, after a moment.

Harry turned to look at him, his lip curling up. “And nothing that has gone before has been awkward?”

“True,” Draco made a noise that might have been a snort in anyone else. Then he seemed to steel himself.

“Go on,” Harry said, turning serious. There was a low wall, built to contain a raised herb bed. Harry leant his bottom against it, legs stretched out in front. He breathed in deeply, inhaling the heady mixture of scents.

Draco followed suit, propping himself beside him. “Did my father do something to you?” he asked, voice low and tight. “You know, back then. When you were a prisoner at the Manor.”

“What?”

“I – I’ve been going over every possibility since he appeared at the trial. I mean, why would he? And why would you… I mean, he’s always had a… a presence, I understand that. But he’s always
been so against… I mean, he can barely mention Scorpius’ name. But then, thinking back, he always had a thing about you. He always asked about you, what you were doing, why I hadn’t beaten you at quidditch. If he saw you – in Diagon Alley, at the World Cup – he could never ignore you. Did he – did he – ra – abuse you? In the dungeons? Because, I can understand why that might make you – I mean, I’ve read books about that sort of reaction, and you can get help – ”

Harry stood up, and walked away. He was instantly transported to the fear he’d felt, all those years ago, the loss of hope at being captured, the fact that Ollivander had been a prisoner for such a long time. The prospect of more torture. But he had never, never even considered what Draco was suggesting.

“Oh Merlin,” Draco whispered, and Harry realised that Draco had misunderstood his reaction.

“No,” he turned round quickly. “He never – no one ever – ”

“Ginny said you couldn’t bear to be bound or experience pain in bed,” Draco said. “I never thought – I’m so sorry – ”

“No!” Harry burst out, coming over. He almost gripped Draco by the arms, but at the last moment couldn’t bring himself to.

“He didn’t. I promise,” he said.

Draco stood looking at him, rocking on his heels, hands in his pockets.

“Nothing happened. Not like that. Not sexual.”

Draco nodded at last, and looked away.

“I – that was the worst year of my life,” he said quietly. “Having the Dark - that monster in my house.” He looked up at Harry. “I know it must have been much worse for you. But at least you were fighting for something you believed in. I was – a coward.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. “I didn’t have a family to influence me,” he said awkwardly.

“My father,” Draco began. He took a breath, and went and sat on the wall again. “You’re in business with him?”

“Yes, I suppose.”

“I can’t see why you’d trust him. You shouldn’t. I don’t understand why you thought that would help our families get together. You know I don’t let him in the house. And if this is about sex, or love: he’s never going to want you. Even if he does,” he said thoughtfully, “he’s too entrenched in his views. He won’t let himself have a relationship with you. Or if he did, it would be about having power over you. He’d hurt you, Harry. There are lots of good men out there.”

“God, shut up, Draco!” Harry burst out, his brain exploding at the unexpectedness of it, at the stream of consciousness ramble.

Draco jerked back in surprise. A thought seemed to dawn on him. “My God. It was me. You weren’t under Veritaserum when you agreed it was my father –”

“Alright, alright, just stop it, stop it, will you? Don’t you ever stop? God!” Harry paced. One glance at Draco’s face as he passed made him realise that he’d confirmed rather than denied Draco’s thoughts. Also that his reaction was rather extreme. But honestly!
He walked over to the outside table and sat down. “Sit,” he ordered, pulling out a chair. 

Draco sat.

“I don’t fancy you. I hated your guts through school, and then later I was impressed with how you pulled yourself out of the shit and made something decent out of yourself. Then you wanted to marry my wife. Alright. You could give her what I couldn’t. I think you’re an absolute bastard for fucking her in my own home. On the other hand, you were prepared to die to honour her reputation and your promises. And you’re a good father. That’s the total sum of my feelings towards you. And I could do with a fucking drink.”

“Ginny said you knew. That you didn’t mind,” Draco picked up on the one thing that was still really riling Harry.

“I didn’t mind you being together. I felt bloody violated when I found out that you were doing it in my home. What the fuck was wrong with your place?”

Draco rubbed a shaking hand across his hair. No wonder he was balding, Harry thought maliciously.

“I – Ginny wanted to,” he shrugged. “In those last few months.” He looked up.

“I could have come home at any time.”

“In the day? She said you never came home in the day.”

“It wasn’t impossible.”

“Maybe – maybe she wanted you to catch us,” Draco said slowly. “She – she was impatient with waiting.”

Harry shrugged. He’d said it. He wasn’t used to revealing his hurts. He was surprised that he didn’t actually feel any better for having done so. Wasn’t that what everyone said? To let it all out? He didn’t think it was worth doing at all. Now there were two of them hurting, and he was having to think things about Ginny that he didn’t want to.

“She wasn’t a bad person, Harry, you know that,” Draco said, interpreting the look on his face.

“You think I shouldn’t find that hurtful?”

“Yeah, I can see that you are hurt. I’m sorry, for what it’s worth,” he offered.

Harry shrugged again. This wasn’t a conversation he’d expected to have. Well, in for a penny….”You like inflicting pain,” he said, leaning back to see how Draco would react.

“What?” There was no mistaking the confusion on Draco’s face.

“It was one of the things Ginny liked about you, wasn’t it? I was always rather surprised. You seemed to hate it, back then. You know. Not in sex, but….”

“Fucking Merlin’s balls, Harry, you don’t think there’s any comparison, do you? Fuck! Ginny liked being tied up. Tying me up. Rough stuff. It’s not - I don’t need – I don’t get off on that particularly, but –”

“You what?”
“Ginny liked it. You know that!”

“Yeah, I do. It was why our marriage didn’t work. I couldn’t – ”

“Don’t you understand? You don’t do you? It’s not just about a quick hard fuck, you know.”

“Right.”

“Bloody hell.” Draco rubbed his hands down his legs. “It’s about trust,” he said at last. “She said you never trusted her. You could never really give yourself over to her. It hurts, when your partner feels like that.”

Harry could feel his face flaming, his anger and defences rising. “And you could,” he snapped. Being lectured about trust twice in a day was a bit much.

Draco was quiet for a moment. “Look,” he said wearily. “I don’t expect you to understand. Ginny was the first – and I suspect the only person - I’ll ever have a relationship like that with. I don’t need pain, or control games. But – it meant a lot to me.”

“Right,” Harry said again, disbelievingly.

“You don’t understand. I don’t know why I’m bloody explaining this to you. But – she trusted me. After everything that had happened, do you think anyone trusted me, Potter? But Ginny did. She gave herself into my care: completely. She trusted me to look after her needs. You probably have no idea how that felt. But it meant everything to me,” Draco whispered.

Harry swallowed hard. He did know what Draco meant. He did know that he couldn’t ever give himself over to anyone like that, to put himself into another’s hands so entirely. A future – if he had a future, which he doubted – of loneliness stared him straight in the face.

Draco got up. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I – I didn’t think you cared enough – felt enough – to be hurt. I was wrong. And I failed Ginny in the end, didn’t I?”

And he strode across the courtyard.

“Draco.”

The footsteps halted.

“Your father is spying for us.”

Draco turned, stared, and came and sat down again.

“Would you care to repeat that, Potter? I think I had a funny turn.”

“Go back to calling me Harry, will you?” Harry said. “I feel all those teenage rivalries when you call me Potter.”

Draco did snort. “What’s this about my father? How the hell did you get him to agree to that?”

“He offered me his life. For yours.”

Harry could actually see the pupils in Draco’s eyes widening, despite the dimness of the garden.

“He did?”
“I accepted.”

“You – you did? But – he’s alive.”

“I’ve accepted all his holdings, everything. I gave him the opportunity to do something to bring some respect back to the Malfoy name: that is, his part in it. You and Scorpius and most of your ancestors are pretty alright.”

“You told him that?” Draco choked.

“Yes,” Harry agreed bluntly.

“I can’t believe it.”

“He’s not old and he’s not an idiot. He’s got time to turn things round. His own reputation.”

“And he took that? From you?”

“Draco,” Harry said gently, “he knelt at my feet, surrendered his wand, and offered me his life.”

“Yes, but his pride is a very different thing.”

Harry was startled into a laugh. “Indeed.”

Draco was silent for a moment. “So that was why you freed me?” he said at last.

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“But…” Draco was obviously thinking. “You played my father?” His voice squawked in a very unmasculine way.

“I suppose,” Harry grinned. He looked at Draco. “I told him you were innocent, though.”

“I’m astonished that he’d bother…oh.” Realisation seemed to dawn. “This wasn’t about me. It was about the family name. The family line. Because of Scorpius.” He hung his head, then stood up again, ready to go. “Well, that’s my father. The bastard can remarry himself,” he bit out.

Harry didn’t feel he should go about revealing Lucius’ secrets, even to his son. “I know you loved Ginny,” he said, “but maybe, someday, you’ll meet someone else…”

“You’re such a romantic,” Draco sneered. He straightened. “No doubt I’ll eventually marry someone else. I’m not like you: I need someone, even if it isn’t like what I had with Ginny. My father will feel it’s all been worthwhile.”

Hurt more than he wanted to admit at the off-hand remark, Harry just said, “I know your father is a bastard, and I don’t trust him. But for the sake of the Malfoy name, because he can see that his lifespan is a blot on it, at present, he might turn things round, you know. For his own reasons.”

Harry shrugged.

“He might,” Draco agreed. “But I’m not going to wait with open arms for him, so don’t think you’ve done anything all sweet and cuddly for my family –“

Harry had had enough. He stood up too. “I got your father involved to help find Ginny’s murderers. That’s it.”

“Alright, alright.” Draco said. He shuffled his feet. “If he thinks you fancy him, he probably hopes
to manipulate that.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sure he’ll try.”

Draco laughed. “So. Harry Potter is gay.”

“Thinking of an article in *The Prophet*?” Harry asked. “I’m sure you’ve been beaten to it.”

“I promised you privacy before: I’m not planning to go back on that,” Draco said. “Though it might help my son and those like him if you came out publicly, and gave an interview.”

“I can just see it,” Harry said. “*Harry Potter: the Wife-Killer*. You think that’ll help gay wizards?”

“When you’re proved innocent, then?”

“You think I will be?” Harry said, bitterly. “Seems unlikely. Anyway, one wank does not a gay man make. I’ve no idea what I am. Stupid, I think.”

“You didn’t do it, and we have to prove it, that’s all.” Draco said. “Okay, I’m off this time.”

Harry put a hand on his arm. “I know your father is a bastard, but don’t give up on him.”

Draco raised an eyebrow.

“I can see my son can hardly bear to be near me,” Harry said quietly. “It hurts.”

Draco looked at him, then nodded, and was off.
“There’s something wrong,” Snape said.

He was leaning against the sink, looking out of the window. Kingsley, who had just got in from work, was pouring himself a glass of chilled water from the cooling cupboard.

“What do you mean?” he asked. He put the jug back and strolled over, following Snape’s gaze. “With Harry?”

They both watched for a few moments as the younger wizard could be seen walking slowly towards the house along the path from the bothy across the vineyard. He was obviously dawdling, in no hurry to arrive.

“I thought it was having to miss Longbottom’s funeral, so I didn’t say anything.”

“But?”

“But he’s acting like a house elf,” Snape said.

“Severus!” Kingsley laughed. “How d’you mean?”

“Like he’s trying to make himself invisible. He does little jobs for us and disappears off, or says nothing about it. He fixed the wonky chair over in the corner, and the sticking drawer in the dresser. He cleans away the meals as if we didn’t have an elf. He has breakfast, clears up after himself, and is out before we’re even around. He’s taken his work to just about the furthest point from us as he can. When I mentioned it, he said he didn’t want the noise to bother us. He’s using the old bothy as a workshop, but when I went over there, it’s so tidy you’d barely know he used it. He takes his lunch with him every day. Shall I go on?”

“Merlin, that’s enough, isn’t it?” Kingsley said. “Oh shit.”

“What?” Severus looked at him.

“It might be about him being a prisoner here, but…”

“But?” Snape said sharply.

“I kissed him.”

Kingsley tipped the glass up, his Adam’s apple shifting as he swallowed.

“You kissed him,” Snape said. “And you didn’t think that might make a difference? When? Wait. Don’t tell me. Fuck! He looked anxious the minute you said he was going to stay with us. I meant to ask you about that then. He’s been worrying the whole bloody time?”

“Yeah, I kissed him over in Ireland.”

Snape walked over to the wine rack and pulled out a bottle of red. He opened the drawer – the mended drawer – and fished out the corkscrew.

Kingsley took hold of him by the biceps, turned him round, and smacked a kiss on his lips. He held tight to Snape as he pulled away. “That’s how I kissed him.”
Snape looked at his lover.

“I’d sat on a bloody rock by his pile of clothes for forty minutes! I thought...the things that were going through my mind...and I didn’t know...I was trusting...”

“You thought he might have committed suicide?” Snape cocked his head.

“How in Hades was I to know that he’d go and find a merpeople village? And bloody gillyweed! In Northern Ireland! When he said he could hardly swim without it, I just ...kissed him.”

Snape leant his rear against the dresser. Kingsley didn’t move away.

“What did he do?”

Kingsley shrugged. “Nothing. I think he was shocked.”

“I’ll say,” Snape said. He shoved the corkscrew back behind him.

“I thought I’d squared it with him.”

“You talked about it?”

“Yeah –”

“Oh! Sorry –” Harry had opened the door, taken one look at Snape within the circle of Kingsley’s arms, and was retreating fast.

“Get back here,” Snape ordered.

Harry paused. And raised an eyebrow.


“I don’t want to disturb you –”

“You aren’t. We were just talking about you.”

“Oh,” Harry said again. “I’ve been trying to keep out of the way. I could sleep over at the bothy, it would –”

“We miss you,” Kingsley said, snagging the corkscrew from behind Snape and moving away to open the bottle. “I reckon it’s my fault.”

“What?”

“That kiss. It scared you off.”

Harry looked from one to the other, his body tense. “Were you arguing about me? Because you shouldn’t. It wasn’t anything, Severus –”

“It was. It was a sign of relief and affection,” Kingsley corrected, pouring the wine into three glasses before walking over and shoving one into Harry’s hand.

“We’ve been arguing for thirty years, near enough,” Snape said. “I’m afraid you’ll have to get used to it.”

Harry opened his mouth, looked from one to the other, and took a large sip of his wine instead.
“Come and sit down,” Kingsley invited, his voice gentle, as he moved to the table.

“Do you need help?” Harry addressed himself to Snape, who had taken a knife and was chopping some peppers.

“The steak needs slicing. Very thinly. The second right knife in the block is good for it,” Snape said.

Kingsley moved to a different seat. Severus knew it was so that Kingsley could watch them both. He wondered if Harry realised that he had called him Severus, rather than his usual Snape.

The meat was in the pan before Harry said, “I don’t understand. Are you cross with Kingsley?”

“Am I cross that he kissed you?” Snape didn’t beat about the bush.

Harry nodded.

“Yes.”

Snape could see Kingsley shift, watching him carefully. Good.

“Not that I object to him kissing you, though I would have liked to have seen it,” Snape went on, causing Harry’s head to whip round.

A smile spread across Kingsley’s face.

“I’m cross because he thinks he’s explained, but he’s left you with more questions than answers, I suspect.”

Harry blushed, and nodded.

“Fire away,” Snape said bluntly.

“Do you kiss people like that?” Harry asked.

“No,” Snape said. “Kingsley has a rather more – ebullient – personality than me. You might have noticed,” he suggested, dryly.

“Everyone has a more ebullient personality than you, Severus,” Kingsley slung back, raising his glass to him to take the sting out of his words.

“No doubt true,” Snape agreed, unbothered.

“You’re so different,” Harry commented, following the play from one to the other. “But it works?”

“I bask in the glow of his ease with relationships, his light-heartedness,” Snape said, giving the pan a stir, and then a sniff, before adding a couple of extra leaves from a bunch of herbs on the work top.

“And I suspect I’d be exhausted if I lived with someone like me,” Kingsley chipped in. “Severus is – can be, I should say, restful. When he isn’t worrying himself about people we care about,” he added, looking pointedly at Harry.

“I didn’t mean to make a fuss about nothing –”
“A kiss is never nothing,” Snape cut across him.

“You’re making me confused again,” Harry said, sitting down now that he was sure everything was done as far as possible.

“We like you,” Kingsley shrugged.

Harry looked from one to the other.

“Well, I like you both, of course,” he said, slowly. “Is this because of the Malfoy thing?” he asked. “Because you think I’m gay now?”

Kingsley laughed. “We liked you before that. We’ve enjoyed your company when you’ve stayed.”

“Are you gay?” Snape asked directly.

Harry put his glass down carefully. “I’ve got three children,” he said.

“So you have,” Kingsley agreed. “Great kids too: well done.”

Harry smiled.

Snape sat down too, and took a drink from his glass, leaving it to Harry on whether he wanted to answer.

“Does one wank image make you gay?” he said, awkwardly, then blushed.

“Many people seeing two men going at it might be repulsed. I would think it at least suggests an open mind if you came from the memory of the sight,” Kingsley said.

Harry’s back had gone ramrod straight. “You knew. You’re not disgusted?” he whispered.

“What, that you saw two handsome men and found it erotic?”

“They’re the age of my kids!” Harry picked up his glass and took a gulp, looking away in embarrassment.

“You’re young enough to be mine, but I could easily come thinking about you,” Kingsley said.

Harry gasped, sucked in a breath, and found that his drink had gone down the wrong way.

Snape got up and thumped him on the back to clear the obstruction.

“Kingsley doesn’t do subtle,” he said, sitting down again, once Harry had recovered.

“I don’t understand,” Harry said, looking from one to the other. “What’s going on here?”

“Absolutely nothing.” Snape said, cutting across Kingsley as he opened his mouth. He got up and went to stir one of the pans. Kingsley looked across at Harry, and eyes twinkling, shrugged as they waited for Snape.

They had a longer wait than they might have liked, as Snape drained pasta and then served the meat sauce onto it, bringing the dish over to the table so that they could help themselves.

“Smells great,” Harry said.

“Help yourself to parmesan,” Kingsley nodded at the block and shaving tool that Snape had put on
They tucked in and enjoyed the meal.

“That was delicious,” Kingsley wiped his mouth with his napkin. “So, Severus: you were saying?”

Harry couldn’t help grinning at the interplay between the two men.

“I was saying that whilst Harry is effectively a prisoner here, we treat him as such.”

Harry’s eyes widened.

“By that, I mean that we treat him with respect, and behave as people with a responsibility for him. We don’t know how long this situation will last, and Harry has no choice in it. Therefore, we do nothing that will make him feel uncomfortable, or threatened.”

“I’m putting you out so much – ” Harry began.

“No. You were putting us out by hiding away and refusing to be part of this household,” Snape said. “If you really want that, then we’ll do all we can to give you as much privacy as you desire. But,” he said, looking intently at Harry, “you seemed happy enough muddling in before. What has changed so much? Is it purely Kingsley’s kiss?”

“I don’t want to cause you any problems.”

“You aren’t. Can we get over that now?”

Harry smiled, sheepishly.

“From my side,” Kingsley said, “I’m sorry I invaded your personal space, and I’ll endeavour to control my urges to touch, but I’m not going to tiptoe round Severus in my own house. I don’t expect you’ll find us in flagrante on the kitchen table, but I’m not going to restrain myself from putting my arm round him if I feel like it –”

“Of course not!” Harry said, shock evidenced in his voice.

“Good.” Kingsley said. “Well, we’re agreed then. Anyone fancy a wander round the vineyard? I want to see how things are growing. That means both of you are equally welcome, and equally able to decline,” he added, looking at Harry.

“That sounds good, walk off all this food,” Harry agreed, then paused.

“You wanted to ask something?” Snape asked.

“What – I mean – what did you mean? You were talking about whilst I’m – on remand – or whatever you call it, here. How is what you’re suggesting different from – after? If I’m alive after, that is.”

Kingsley looked to Snape.

“After – the same is on offer. Unless, of course, you suddenly turn into the most awful bore, or homophobe, or leave your dirty underwear lying around.”

“He doesn’t wear any,” Kingsley inserted slyly.

Snape raised an eyebrow, but Harry interrupted:
“I do! It’s just that there were only girls’ knickers as far as I could see, in the cupboard at EWA headquarters. And I’m damn glad I didn’t put those on and have that lady see me wearing pink undies with lacy hearts on when I came out of the sea.”

Kingsley snorted, but Snape said, “So, you were able to apparate to the north coast, but not transfigure a pair of knickers into pants?”

Harry’s mouth opened and shut. “I didn’t even think of it.”

“Freudian slip, perhaps?” Snape murmured.

Harry went red, but admitted, “I – liked it.”

“You’ll be going traditional wizard like Severus under your robes next,” Kingsley grinned.

“Perhaps he already does,” Snape said, “though judging from the way you’re looking at me,” he addressed Harry, “probably not. It is an entirely different situation, anyway, and we are not going to have discussions of this nature whilst Harry is, as he puts it, on remand.”

“So we’re going to have them afterwards?” Kingsley asked cheerfully.

“What we have afterwards is entirely up to Harry,” Snape said, looking straight at the younger wizard.

“What does that mean?” he asked.

“If you like us, as we like you, you’re very welcome here,” Snape said.

“Thank you,” Harry said. “You’re very kind.”

“Not kind,” Snape shook his head. “So far, we’ve enjoyed your company. We like the idea of knowing you better. Of you knowing us. You might like to stay on as a friend, or as a frequent visitor if you wish to keep on Grimmauld Place. You may wish to use us – as two good friends – to explore your sexuality with, and find out whether you are indeed gay, or not. You may wish to become our lover. To join us. All of these options are open to us all.”

Harry stared from one man to another.

“Come on, let’s walk and talk,” Kingsley said again. “I’ve been away too much this week, I want to see my vines.”

Out amongst the burgeoning growth of the plants, Harry asked, “Have you – do you – is it a regular thing for gay men to have another in their bed?”

“Who knows?” Kingsley said. “I’m not much interested in what other people do. We never have before, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Then – why me?” Harry asked, puzzled.

Kingsley slung an arm over his shoulder, and then took it away quickly with an apologetic glance at Harry and Snape. He shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Because we think you’ll fit,” he said.
Lucius Malfoy stared at the enormous, pink smiling face staring back at him from the marble steps of his home. Or Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes, as the sign proclaimed in unrepentant English.

One of the huge pink eyes winked at him. A child, heading to the store, stopped and laughed, tugging at his parent’s hand.

Lucius drew a breath, and his wand, and cast a cleaning charm.

Nothing.

Gritting his teeth, he walked up the steps, straight across the grinning mouth, which blew a kiss at him. His robes fluttered. He could hear another child laughing.

He strode through the store. Although it was a weekday, it was busy. It did not take him long, though, to locate George Weasley.

“C’est magnifique, n’est-ce pas?” the red-headed wizard was saying, in an appalling travesty of a French accent, his arms gesticulating wildly.

The clutch of children around him were giggling, staring up at him in adoring fascination.

Suddenly George was looking directly at him. There was something very unsettling about a man that could revel in the fug of farting gnomes and be amused by vomiting hags, and yet stare at one with such intelligence.

And coldness.

Lucius drew himself up. “You will erase that disgusting thing from my doorstep at once,” he demanded.

George merely quirked an eyebrow. “You find a smiling face disgusting, Malfoy? Why am I not surprised?”

There were one or two snorts from the customers – obviously some were bilingual.

“You are defacing my property. I expect you to remove it at once.”

“It’s Permanent Pinking Agent,” George said easily. “It will fade.”

“Pray call on me upstairs as soon as it is done,” Malfoy said, turning away.

“You’ll be waiting in a hundred years? That might curtail your activities a little. Probably a good thing,” George commented, to more sniggers.

“Remove it!” Lucius hissed. “I will not be a laughing stock!”

“Oh, it’s way past too late to worry about that,” George grinned. He sobered a little. “Besides, it’s good for business. Which is good news for you.”

“I do not discuss money in public,” Malfoy held on to his temper. “I suggest we take this conversation upstairs.”
George straightened. “And be accused later of making…inappropriate propositions?” he said. “I think not.”

Malfoy stiffened, as George glanced casually at his watch. “I have a couple of minutes. Come into my office.” And with that, George turned away, and strode across the store.

Only a slight tension about Malfoy’s mouth indicated his fury, as he languidly strolled after George.

The office was as much a workshop as anything. There was a high bench, with several stools, and various gadgets laid out. George had already slid onto his stool, and propped his elbows on the table, when Lucius entered. He was about to speak when he saw Weasley glance over one of the experimental toys, and then pull his notebook towards him, jotting down some stray thought, ignoring Malfoy.

Well, Lucius had had years of being kept hanging around. He would not allow George Weasley to rile him.

“Well?” George said, not looking up. “Are you here about the paint, or something more useful?”

“I presume you’ll clear up that mess?” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“In two days time I’ll be launching Weasleys’ Awesome Soap Hog. It’ll gobble up and clean anything.”

Lucius tilted his head. “You have it ready?”

“Of course.”

“But you’re leaving that mess on my steps?”

“Have you seen Paris Magique? There’s a full colour picture on page four.”

“I noticed.”

“Excellent advertising, and free too,” George said, pulling the model he had studied earlier towards him, and waving his wand at it.

“You think parents will buy something that can’t be removed, even by their house elves?”

“Their children will love the idea, and the parents will give way when they see the incredible effects of WASH. Two products advertised in one fell swoop, not to mention the general profile of the shop. I can’t imagine you’ve ever concerned yourself with cleaning anything in your life, however, so tell me why you’re here.”

George’s easy dismissal of his concerns irritated Lucius intensely, especially as there really wasn’t an issue. George Weasley was obviously not a man to underestimate.

“I’ve been meeting with some people.”

“Yes?”

“I’d suggest Kingsley look into the schools.”

George’s head snapped up. “Elaborate.”
Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “Coffee would be nice.”

“I’m sure it would, but this is not a social call,” George said bluntly.

“We’re working towards the same end, are we not?” Lucius held his temper.

“No, I don’t think so,” George shook his head. He looked Lucius up and down, and then conjured an armchair.

It was Lucius’ third visit, and the first time that Weasley had made any concessions to him at all, and yet, Weasley seemed to have drained any victory out of it. He sat down, and George came round and pulled a stool towards him. It shrank as he sat on it, until he was at the perfect height to talk to Lucius. Lucius wondered if the spell was on the stool, or if Weasley had just performed some complex, wandless magic.

“If it’ll make you feel more comfortable to talk, I can give you coffee,” George said, snapping his fingers.

An elf appeared; moments later, a small cup of espresso steamed at his side. George hadn’t ordered one for himself, underlining his statement that this wasn’t a social occasion. Lucius decided to ignore the incivility, and drank the liquid slowly and with pleasure. George took down the model from the bench and started tinkering with it. Lucius’ lips twitched. George Weasley was not a walkover.

“I could be Potter’s – Harry’s – next lover, you know. Don’t you think it would be wise to treat me with more respect?”

George looked up slowly. “Perhaps you forget that I was upstairs with you when you met with Harry. I had an erection over Madam Pomfrey once, after I found my face buried in her bosom when she was fixing some injury. There’s no way I’d want to go there for real, and judging from the look of loathing on Harry’s face when he was looking at you that day, whether he’s come all over a picture of your snooty mug is neither here nor there. I hope he did. One thing I can be sure of, I won’t be inviting you for Sunday lunch as his partner.”

“I saved him.”

“I rather think someone else did that. Any favour you hoped to gain by your little fun in court got rather lost in the bigger picture, don’t you think?”

He was right, of course. When he’d read that Harry was interested in his son his initial response was disgust. Then he’d realised why Potter had bothered to save his son. Again. He’d never really understood why Potter had pulled Draco out of the fire all those years ago at Hogwarts: it had seemed such a foolish thing to do. Draco had been the enemy, and Potter had been ruthless enough with everyone else. And now he’d been willing to give his own wife up to Draco. Had he hoped to have contact with Draco through his relationship with Ginevra? That they would include him? Potter’s weakness for his son was a useful tool. He owed Potter his life, and whilst nothing he did would buy off the spell, he had certainly hoped that Potter might appreciate his actions. If Potter died, his life would pass to his heir. Although, from his research, it seemed more than possible that he might be able to mould the younger Potter, he was slightly surprised to find that he would prefer to deal with Harry Potter himself. Which was part of the reason why he was here. He wanted to know what had happened to him. Draco had run a series of articles about the case: and come to think of it, that in itself was worrying too. Draco had always been rather – concerned – about Potter in school. He had only managed to produce one child, although the Greengrass girl had gone on to produce several in her second marriage. Surely Draco’s relationship with Ginevra had not been in
order to get closer to Potter? His brow twitched, as the absurd idea that they could have killed her between them – set this up so that neither of them would be found guilty – flashed through his mind, before he dismissed it. If Potter had been capable of that, he would have accepted his own offer and taken his life too: he would have had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

“Lost for words?” George cut across his thoughts.

“Do you know where Potter is?” Lucius asked bluntly.

George raised his eyebrow.

“I understand that you can’t stand the sight of me, and are unable to show any manners whatsoever,” Lucius said curtly. “Nevertheless, Potter asked us both to play a role in apprehending your sister’s killers. I am attempting to do my part, but this childish behaviour is making it very difficult. I need to know whether he is alive, and whether I need to divert my attentions to attempting to rescue him.”

“Your debt would transfer to James. You’ll never be free.”

“I am aware of that, Mr Weasley. Did you think I made the offer without researching all the possibilities? And whilst it may be to my advantage to belong to a younger and more malleable wizard, for the present, I prefer to take my chances with Potter.”

George looked at him. “It’s a pity you didn’t think that when Voldemort was around.”

So, the gloves were off. Well.

“Potter was a child. And surprising as it may seem, I initially followed the Dark Lord because I agreed with his political views.”

“In pureblood supremacy.”

“You are a pureblood yourself. Don’t tell me it doesn’t feel good to know that the blood coursing through your veins carries a history of magic going back thousands of years.”

George sat up straight. “My pureblood brother was killed by your pureblood supremacists,” he said, voice deadly quiet. “You pureblood supremacists who were following a half-blood madman.”

“We didn’t know that, then. And I’m sorry about your brother, but there are always casualties in a war.”

“You didn’t do your research. I’ll deal with you because Harry asked it of me, but don’t expect me to forgive you. You allowed – encouraged - your own son to let a werewolf into a school, where the majority of pupils are purebloods. Where my pureblood brother was bitten. You personally targeted a child and handed her a dangerous dark artefact. A pureblood child. My sister. Don’t tell me your actions were acceptable because they were based on political views. You did what you were told. You hurt the very people you proclaimed to hold in high esteem. Don’t look down your nose at me because I don’t want to hold a cup in my hand and pretend to be civilized with you.”

Lucius hadn’t moved an inch, but it felt as if he was holding himself in, holding his breath, barely containing himself.

“You do what Potter asks of you, without liking it, yet berate me for having done the same with the Dark Lord?”
George stood up, moving away as if he couldn’t bear to stand near him. When the workbench was once again between them, he turned back. “Do you seriously compare Harry to the Dark Lord?”

“He’s more powerful,” Lucius said, and noted the widening of Weasley’s eyes. “Do you doubt that? He’s bursting with it.”

“He is,” George agreed, taking the wind out of his sails. “And does he misuse it? Does he seek power and glory? Does he hurt people? How dare you! Get out! You make me sick!”

George’s voice had risen, and risen. Lucius could feel the magic swirling in the room. He stood up slowly.

“You’re very loyal,” he said. “So was I, and yet you hold it against me.”

He held up his hands in surrender as he saw George’s wand pointed right at him.

“You’re right. He is not the same. And I hope I am not the man I was then,” Lucius added.

The wand stayed pointing at him.

“Potter is giving me a second chance. I intend to use it well.”

“Really? Forgive me if I take some convincing.”

“I understand that.”

“Few are able to change,” George said.

“Maybe,” Lucius agreed calmly. “But Snape did. And so did your brother Percy.”

“Percy is as much of a twat as he ever was,” George said, “not that that’s any of your business.”

“I don’t expect I’ll change my whole personality,” Lucius agreed. “But I can change my views, and my approach. And I can and will do what Potter asks of me. If you want your sister’s murderers caught, you’ll help me, not hinder me.”

George stared at him, saying nothing. The wand was still pointing at him. “Do you have anything else to report?” he asked, at last.

Lucius took it as a good sign.

“I’m developing my contact with people I met after following up on Daniel Poulter’s acquaintances. I’m pretty sure they have members in Beauxbatons, Hogwarts, and Durmstrang.”

“I think we can be sure of Hogwarts, given that there was an attack on my nephew and Neville Longbottom. It’s hardly news,” George sneered.

“I do not have any names. Yet,” Lucius said stiffly. “But I believe the staff are involved as well as training cells amongst the pupils.”

“I’ll pass it on,” George said, nodding slowly.

“I’ll bid you good-day,” Lucius inclined his head, and moved towards the door.

“He’s safe,” George said, as his hand reached for the door knob.
Lucius nodded, and left.

The next evening, he strolled to Chez Albert, a wizarding bar in one of the more upmarket areas of Paris. It was already late, and he was pleased to note that two of the young people he’d hoped to see were already there, with some other friends, and well into their second or third bottle, from the look of things. He deliberately caught the edge of his cane against a table, causing the group to look up, and he nodded in acknowledgement as Leonie smiled at him, and Artur raised a hand, before heading towards an empty table across the room.

“Lucius! Are you alone? Why don’t you join us?” Artur called out.

Lucius turned, and raised an eyebrow.

Artur laughed, and stood up, removed himself from the tangle of chairs, and came over. “Apologies, Monsieur Malfoy, I did not mean to embarrass you by bellowing like a child. Would you like to join us? I am sure you will find like-minded company,” he said, giving Lucius a significant look.

Really, Lucius thought, could young people not hold their drink these days? The boy was a subtle as an elephant.

Leonie came over, and threaded her arm through his. “Come and join us,” she said, batting her eyelashes. “Tell us some tales of your wicked past.”

“I am sure they would be most boring,” Lucius said. “Tales of youth are much more exciting. I will join you for a few moments: I have no wish to intrude.”

Two hours later, Lucius had three more names, and a great deal of concern.

He had moved on from the group of youngsters, and spent a half hour with an old acquaintance and his wife, before collecting his cloak. Outside, a fine mist of rain dampened the air, and he cast a quick *Impervious* charm as he stood under the awning that protected the outside tables.

Artur and his collection of friends tumbled out of the door. “Lucius! Not going home so early, surely?” Artur asked.

“It is almost one o’clock,” Lucius said coolly.

“And the night is only just beginning. Why don’t you come back with us? We’re going to play cards, and we need another body to even up the numbers.”

Nanette, the quietest of the group, put her hand on Artur’s arm. “I think it’s time I went home —”

“Nonsense,” Artur said roughly. “You will come with us.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow. The girl was pale and exhausted-looking, and had been quiet all night. “I will not be joining you, so if you wish for even numbers, it would make sense for Mademoiselle….” he waited. He had only been given her first name as they sat around the table, but he did not intend to use it without her invitation.
“Odont,” she gave him a shy smile.

“Mademoiselle Odont,” he gave her a slight bow, “to retire. Not everyone has your constitution, Artur,” Lucius smiled.

“Nanette needs to learn to keep up,” Artur said, carelessly. “And I don’t wish to suffer her father’s inquisition when I have friends awaiting me. You may go home later,” he said to the girl.

Lucius frowned. “But surely – ”

“I don’t have my apparition licence yet,” Nanette explained, looking down in embarrassment.

“Well, my dear, if you are not yet old enough to have your licence, you most assuredly are of an age when you still need your beauty sleep to maintain that lovely complexion. Pray allow me to see you home, Mademoiselle.”

To his surprise, the girl looked with agitation to Artur for permission.

“I believe I know your father,” he added. “It would be my pleasure to remake his acquaintance, if he is not already abed.”

“Oh, go then,” Artur said disdainfully to the girl. “My thanks, Lucius. And you will find Monsieur Odont excellent company, I believe,” he added with a wink that made Lucius cringe.

Lucius held out his arm, and felt the press of her small hand against it as she laid her fingers on him. “Let us walk a little whilst you give me your address,” he said, looking down into eyes that seemed to be brimming with relief. Unconsciously he raised his other hand and patted hers. “À bientôt,” he nodded at the party.

They headed down the street. The girl was small, smaller and younger than Lucius had realised, and he slowed his pace to accommodate hers, her hand still linked through his arm.

“Merci beaucoup, Monsieur Malfoy,” she whispered.

He looked down at her. Her head did not even reach his shoulder. “It is my pleasure, Mademoiselle,” he said. “I had forgotten how inconvenient life is without the freedom to apparate. You are taking your examination soon, no doubt?”

She nodded. “Next month. I’ve been practicing at home, of course.”

“Very wise,” he said. He looked down at her again. “You are rather young to be out drinking so late, my dear. Does your father not object?”

He felt her shrinking back a bit. “Father is pleased if I am in Artur’s company. We are engaged to be married,” she explained.

“At sixteen?” Lucius said. Even for a pureblood family that was rather young.

“I’m almost eighteen!” she corrected him.

Lucius smiled down at her affront. “I thought you were much older,” he said, eyes looking at her approvingly.

She blushed. “Do you take your apparition licence earlier in England, then?”

“At seventeen,” Lucius agreed.
“Really? That’s so unfair! Why do we have to wait?”

“I don’t know, but it gives me the pleasure of escorting you home,” he smiled.

She cocked her head to the side. She looked apprehensive. “You know my father?”

Lucius did know her father. From what he remembered, he was something of a bully – certainly, he had been. He trod carefully. “I knew him many years ago. I think the last time I saw him, we fought a duel at a party,” he confided. “Very bad manners.”


“Ah, you should never ask that! A woman, of course,” he whispered, in a voice full of intrigue.

“Papa?” Her eyes were huge when she was surprised. “And you, Monsieur? Who won?”

“It is many years ago: I am sure I have forgotten,” Lucius said, diplomatically.

“You’re lying,” she said, her eyes catching the glint in his. “Did you win?”

“A gentleman never tells,” Lucius patted her hand. He felt hers just grasping his forearm a little tighter. He thought he might probe a little. “I do remember he had something of a temper, though,” he added mildly.

He felt the shudder through his arm, though she said nothing. He moved on. “Would it be indelicate for me to ask if your engagement is a love match? Or perhaps an arranged marriage, such as my own was?”

She startled against him.

He looked down. “You’re surprised?”

“You’re married?”

“A widower,” he said.

“Oh, I’m so sorry! Forgive me –”

“No, no,” he patted her hand again, “it was a long time ago.”

“Oh. Still, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you.”

They strolled in silence for a few steps. “May I be very impertinent?” she asked, hesitantly.

“Let me judge if your question is impertinent,” he answered.

“Were – was your marriage – forgive me, I shouldn’t ask. I’m sorry. Isn’t the sky beautiful tonight?” she said in embarrassment.

Lucius hadn’t had anyone be concerned about hurting his feelings since – well, probably never.

“The sky is rather overcast,” he said gently. “My marriage was happy,” he added.

“Oh! Oh, thank you. I’m sorry, it was awfully rude of me –”
“It’s a very big step,” Lucius said. “It’s not at all surprising that you should be – a little anxious.”

She looked up at him with shy eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’d better tell me your address,” Lucius said. “And we’ll get you home to bed.”

The widening of her eyes before she looked down was entirely unexpected. She was a fraction of his age. Lucius felt something stir within himself. It was inappropriate. She was a child, a suspect, and engaged to be married. “You implied that your father would still be awake?” he changed the subject.

He felt her stiffen infinitesimally. She was definitely scared of him. “Yes, he waits up for me.”

“And he really doesn’t mind you being out so late? Are you not still at school?”

“I have a private tutor. He thinks it’s important that I get to know my fiancé and his friends.”

“Undoubtedly, though you must find it tiring to keep these hours,” he suggested.

“I – I am becoming accustomed,” she said.

“I’m sure,” he said, non-commitally. “Did you not know your fiancé previously?”

She shook her head. Surprisingly, he could sense her withdrawal. “Father arranged it.”

“Your mother approves?”

“She died when I was little.”

“My condolences, my dear, and my apologies.”

“That’s alright. Our address in Paris is 8, Rue St Paul.”

“Hold tight,” Lucius said.

The girl moved into his arms. Lucius hadn’t side-alonged anyone since Draco had been a boy. Narcissa had been as tall as he was, and very slender. Mademoiselle Odont’s head nestled under his chin, and he felt the brief brush of full breasts against his chest before she moved back.

They landed in the street outside the house, and Lucius was careful to step away as he steadied her.

A house elf opened the door, but her father came striding into the hall immediately.

“Malfoy?”

“Odont. I hope you don’t mind me seeing your daughter safely home. I’ll bid you goodnight, Mademoiselle,” he inclined his head.

“You – were with Nanette and Artur?”

“Ah, the conversations of the young are fascinating, are they not? Such enthusiasm!”

Odont hesitated, then said, “Why don’t you come in, Malfoy? Have a night-cap?”

It was an opportunity, Lucius knew. If Odont had arranged the marriage of his daughter to Artur Brouchard, he knew what sort of man he was, what sort of people, what sort of business, he was involved in.
But it was inadvisable to appear too eager. “Another night, perhaps,” he smiled, and took his leave.

Three nights later, he was enjoying a rather fine burgundy with Odont when Nanette came in. It was midnight.

“Monsieur Malfoy!” Her face lit up for a moment, before she reined herself in.

Lucius stood. “Mademoiselle.”

She crossed the room and kissed her father on both cheeks, then hesitated a moment, before coming over and doing the same to Lucius. Her lips were cool, and she smelt of cigarette smoke. Artur smoked heavily. Underneath, he was aware of the floral scent of her shampoo, the softness of her cheeks.

“So good to see you again, Lucius,” Odont said.

“Did you have a good evening?” her father asked jovially.

Lucius looked at her critically as she sat on the edge of the sofa nearest to her father. She was pale, he thought, and there was a sense of defeat to the line of her shoulders.

“Very pleasant, thank you, Papa,” she said. She looked across at Lucius. “And you, Monsieur Malfoy? You have had a good evening? Have you been with Father long?”

“We met at our club, and your father invited me back,” Lucius said. “I’ve had a very pleasant evening, thank you.”

“When will you be seeing Artur again?” Odont asked his daughter.

“He wishes me to join him at Chez Albert tomorrow.”

“Then you will do so,” her father said in a steely voice.

“Of course, Papa,” she said meekly, her shoulders slumped. She stood up, plastering a smile on her face. “If you’ll excuse me, Monsieur Malfoy, I think I ought to go to bed.”

Lucius stood again. “Of course, Mademoiselle.” He looked across at Odont with a smile. “My wife was most particular about her beauty sleep. She was rarely abed after ten. I do not know how you young things do it, and yet remain so very lovely.”

Nanette blushed, and Odont looked pleased at the compliment to his daughter. As she reached the door, Lucius added, “I expect I shall be stopping by at Chez Albert tomorrow. If your father permits, I will be happy to accompany you home, should you wish it.”

“No need to trouble yourself, Malfoy –” Odont began.

“Henri, there is no trouble in having a beautiful woman on one’s arm for a moment,” Lucius smiled.

“Well, if Artur does not object –”

“See how your evening goes,” Lucius said to the girl. “Your fiancé might have a most exciting evening planned that you do not wish to leave. It will be at your discretion, of course,” he bowed slightly.

Nanette gave a shy smile, a nod of thanks, and left the room.
“You must be very proud,” Lucius said once she was gone, sipping his wine.

“Hmmm?”

“You daughter is everything a father could wish for, I would imagine. Well mannered, genteel, and quite delightful. You’re to be congratulated, Odont.”

“You’re very kind,” Odont said, looking pleased but—a little ruffled by the compliment.

Lucius wondered why, but changed the subject.

Ten days had passed, and it was the third evening when he had brought Nanette home. On the previous two occasions, he had shared a nightcap with her father. Odont was an oaf, but that was a small price to pay. Artur seemed to be delighted that Lucius should take charge of his fiancée, and obviously had no patience or desire for her company. Nanette herself seemed to be getting more used to Lucius, though she was still restrained, and retired to bed quickly once they returned home. This time, they were still at the door when Odont appeared.

“Lucius,” he said, giving his daughter kisses to her cheeks as she passed to take off her cloak, “are you free Friday evening? I know it is very short notice, but some friends are coming to dinner. Artur’s parents, and one or two others you might know. I am sure Nanette and I would be delighted if you would join us. A small repayment of your kindness – ”

“No repayment is necessary, I assure you – ”

“Oh, do come, Monsieur Malfoy, si’l vous plait,” Nanette came back towards him, hands outstretched beseechingly.

“If it is your pleasure, I would be delighted to attend,” he said, taking her hands and kissing them. “My thanks, Henri. Do you dine late, or early?”

“Come at seven, for an apéritif. I am not one to eat late: my digestion does not like it,” he chuckled, rubbing his rather large stomach.

“I will be there. My thanks,” Lucius bowed, and turned to the door.

“You – you can tell me what you think of my new evening dress,” Nanette said, hurriedly.

Lucius looked at her, and then realised that the child was letting him know that it would be formal wear, as if he would not have assumed as much, in the face of any indication to the contrary. She was very sweet. If her mother had been present, she would undoubtedly have sent a note or made some such easy comment.

“Then I shall have even greater delights to look forward to,” he said, and with a slight bow at her, was gone.

He was very impressed with Nanette during dinner. Her father had obviously trained her to be an excellent hostess. Once the ladies had retreated to the salon, the gentlemen, in English fashion, stayed at the table to consume cigars and port. After some desultory conversation, during which he could see the tension Artur couldn’t hide, Artur’s father said, “Well, Lucius: Harry Potter is in love with you?”
Lucius knew at once that this was the moment he had been waiting for. He shrugged. “Some people prefer older men,” he smirked.

Artur laughed. His father looked at him forbiddingly. Odont seemed to be taking his lead from Paul Brouchard. Stéphane Gilbert, however, also laughed.

“You’re doing business with him?” Brouchard asked.

“I’m doing business with Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes. He has a financial interest in the business, nothing more.”

“You lied in court?” Odont asked, eyebrows raised.

Lucius’ lip curled. “I – may have – played – with the truth. There was value in having Potter being beholden to me. And he had done my son a service previously. I had not realised why at the time.”

Brouchard snorted.

“Your son was to marry his wife,” Gilbert said.

“Indeed. She was a pureblood of good family.”

“The Weasley fortunes have been much improved in recent years,” Odont commented.

“As you say,” Lucius said. “Ginevra had done rather well on the quidditch pitch, not to mention the various successes of her brothers. A fertile family,” he added, then shrugged, “but it is of no import now.”

There was a silence around the table that had the hairs on Lucius’ arms rising. What had he said? He took in his fellow men over the rim of his glass. Artur was looking sulky, but determined, his father grim, Odont looking down. Gilbert was feigning disinterest.

“Draco is your only child.”

“That is so.”

“And he too has only one child.”

“Draco is young. He will marry again.” Lucius did not let his tension show, as he placed his glass carefully on the table.

“It is the younger ones who are recalcitrant, is it not?” Brouchard said, looking at Artur, who turned his head away, angrily. “Well. It is our failing too: we were brought up knowing what our place would be in the world, were we not? Now, things are different. We need to ensure that our young people have that security, that the world is as it should be. We have been remiss, as a generation, in our efforts to preserve the identity of our world.”

“I like to think,” Lucius said coolly, “that I have given – much – in my efforts to achieve that.”

“Of course, Lucius,” Odont said quickly.

“I meant no offence,” Brouchard said.

The lack of apology in his tone, the implied dismissal of his years in Azkaban and the other indignities he had suffered, rankled. It was fortunate that Lucius was not a man to allow his emotions to show.
“But you will forgive me if I say,” Brouchard continued, “that it was obvious that things would come to naught. Riddle was a half-blood, after all.”

Lucius said nothing for a moment, just looking at Brouchard.

Feeling the tension, Odont said, “But a very powerful wizard, of course. Very powerful, from what I heard.”

“You were young, I understand that, when he first came to prominence. Your loyalty was, of course, admirable, Lucius. A most noble trait. Properly placed….,” Brouchard let the words hang. There was suggestion in his tone.

“A man would have to do much to command my loyalty these days,” Lucius said. “I have not seen anyone likely to arouse it.” Two could play this game of veiled insult.

“Touché,” Brouchard laughed, surprising Lucius.

The men eyed each other up. Tension sat in the air.

Artur opened his mouth, and was stopped by his father raising a finger.

“Well,” Brouchard leant back in his chair. “England seems a waste ground in terms of ideas and directions. Benningdean is your Minister for Magic, is he not? What has he done for Wizardkind? Too soft! Too ineffectual! He is a friend of these Muggle-borns and half-bloods, I believe, but what has he even done for them? He is a waste of magic.”

“I would agree that he is a man entirely lacking in charisma,” Lucius said, “but then, LeFevre hardly seems inspirational either.”

“Ah, you are following our politics, are you?”

“I read the papers, Brouchard. I do know who your Chief Minister is. As for your politics – does France have any?”

Odont laughed, then looked to Brouchard.

“It is not our politicians who are giving us a new direction, is it? Not in England, not in France. But the people are feeling it, are they not? The people want change. And it will come.”

“As if a magic wand had been waved?” Lucius said sarcastically. “People need someone to rally around. I see no-one stepping up.”

Brouchard lay down his cigar. “You think a movement needs a –a figurehead?”

Lucius could tell there was genuine interest in his response. This little dance was getting interesting.

“You have only to look at history,” he shrugged. “Movements that skulk in the dark wither and die. People need a strong figure, an eloquent figure, to rally behind. If a movement does not have the courage of its own convictions, if its members are not proud to stand up and proclaim who they are, it cannot expect, nor does it deserve, to gather support.” And for the first time in decades, he pulled up his sleeve, exposing his Dark Mark. “You may criticise my choices, Brouchard, but do not say that I did not have the courage of my convictions.” He stood up. “It has been a most interesting evening, Gentlemen, but I have another engagement. Good evening to you all. Henri, please give my thanks to your daughter. The trout was –” he kissed his fingers in a very Gallic
gesture - “inspired.”

Odont stumbled to his feet. Out in the hall, he said, “I hope we haven’t offended you, Lucius. Paul can be – abrupt.”


“Oh, good, good.” Odont shook his hand.

As he walked down the street, Lucius felt that it had indeed been a most interesting evening. The question now was whether they would take the bait.
**Relationships**

“Are you still uncomfortable here?” Severus asked bluntly, over lunch, having taken his sandwiches across to the bothy and joined Harry.

Three days had passed since the conversation between the three of them, and although Harry had stopped hiding himself away, something was off.

“It’s not that,” Harry shook his head. “I feel – jittery.”

“Explain.”


“Physically? Mentally?” Snape picked up a tomato from the basket, and took a bite. The juice ran down his chin, and he wiped it away unconsciously.

Harry looked away quickly, and concentrated on the feelings inside him.

“It – “ he glanced back at Snape, who was sucking the juice off the side of his hand, and dropped his gaze down to his knees. “Too much magic,” he gulped.

“Too much magic?” Snape repeated, pausing as he picked up a stick of celery.

“Yeah,” Harry shrugged.

“Pent up magic because you couldn’t use it in the cells? You can use magic here –“

“It’s not just that,” Harry whispered.

“What are you not telling me?” Snape said in a long-suffering voice. “Get it out, Harry.”

“I think – I think I may have raised power myself,” Harry said apprehensively.

Snape gave him a confused look.

“At The Giant’s Causeway,” he explained.

Snape poured them both a coffee from the flask he’d brought with him, took a sip, and cradled the cup in his hands. Then he looked directly at Harry. “Tell me what happened.”

Harry drew a breath. “I hadn’t intended to, or anything. It’s just – do you want to have a look?”

“Are you suggesting I use *Legilimency* on you?” Snape asked in surprise.

“It’s probably easiest,” Harry said.

“You trust me?”

“Yeah,” Harry shrugged. “I’m a bit better at *Occlumency*, so I’ll try and direct you to what I want you to see.”

“Very well,” Snape said. He wondered if Harry was aware of the degree of privilege he was offering him.
He took another fortifying sip of the strong brew, and put his cup down, then carefully reached out a hand and turned Harry’s face towards his. He could feel the hint of stubble under his fingers, was aware of Harry’s Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallowed. He repressed the smile that wanted to curl his lips, conscious that Harry had been finding it impossible to remain unaware of him and Kingsley since their conversation.

Such thoughts were wiped from his mind moments later, as he pulled himself out of Harry’s memory.

“More coffee,” he said, aware that his hands were trembling too much to do it himself.

“I’m sorry.” Harry poured and shoved the cup into his hands. “I tamped down the memory, honestly.”

That sentence alone was enough to shake Snape further. “That was tamped down?” he asked at last. “Compared to what happened at the time?”

Harry nodded.

“And now?”

Harry looked a bit puzzled.

“How does it feel now?”

“Buzzing?”

Snape swallowed. “Let’s get this straight: is what you’re experiencing now more or less than in the memory you showed me?”

“More?” Harry said. “It’s making me feel all squirmy. Like I can’t sit still.”

“Indeed,” Snape acknowledged. “I think it might be an idea to burn some of that off.”

Harry nodded. “Yes, I need to. Normally, I use a lot of magical energy when I’m doing the magical components of my pieces, but I haven’t got anything anywhere near ready to do the magic on, and I can’t seem to concentrate enough on the physical side without burning off the magic, so ….” he grimaced. “I’ve got the jitters.”

“Have you experienced it before? Like this?”

“Not this bad,” Harry said. “I’m usually quite careful about what I make, what pieces I have ready to work on, so there’s always a through-flow. Also, I’ve never – what happened at The Giant’s Causeway – I didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Snape said, standing up. “Tell me what happened there, exactly. You seem to have missed out this part in your earlier accounts of mermen and underwater villages.”

“Can we walk?” Harry said, standing too. “Moving takes the edge off. Activity. I’ve been doing a lot of exercises,” he ran a hand over his stomach. “At least it’s helping me get back in shape,” he gave an embarrassed chuckle.

Snape ran his eyes over him. “There was something wrong with your shape?”

Tension flared suddenly, burning hot, in the mote-filled silence of the bothy.
Harry glanced at Snape, looked away, sucked in a shaky breath, looked back, eyes moving up from the ground, over Snape’s robes, up the thin torso, raking over his shoulders, down over the bare skin of his forearms, before flashing up to meet Snape’s eyes.

The glance felt physical. Snape could feel the hairs on his forearms standing up, as if reaching towards the touch. He was incredibly conscious of the nakedness of his skin there. His cock was filling, lifting, tenting his robes, unfettered as it was underneath. The cloth brushed against the sensitive skin of the head, the foreskin peeling back under the pressure of his erection, and he jerked, breath hitching, lightheaded. He saw Harry’s gaze drop, take in the cause, heard the tiny sound that strangled in his throat.

Everything was magnified in the dim light, the sharp shadows, the wood-filled scent of the bothy.

Cool air brushed his skin.

Harry gasped, and then he was rushing out of the door, kicking over the picnic basket.

Snape looked down. His robe hung from his shoulders, open at the front, his erection standing out proudly. Dazed, stunned, torn, he hesitated only a second before grasping hold of himself. Need and desire, and the look in Harry’s eyes as he’d stared at him, took him to a fast and furious completion.

He leant against the work-bench, forearms braced, as his pulse slowly steadied, and the silence was no longer shredded by his harsh breaths. His seed dripped from the edge of the wood onto the earth floor. Straightening, legs shaky, he pulled the napkin from the bottom of the picnic basket, poured water from the jug onto it, and wiped himself clean, the cold sting of the water delicious and deflating at the same time.

He buttoned up his robe, glad that at least Harry’s magic hadn’t ripped the garment, poured himself more coffee from the ever-hot, ever-full flask, and sipped it.

Some semblance of normality had returned by the time he’d finished his coffee. He glanced at his watch, and grimaced, picking up the basket and apparating straight into the chamber outside his lab, dashing in and dousing the flames underneath the cauldron he’d been working on, before apparating back to just outside the bothy.

There was no sign of Harry. He strode along the path in the opposite direction to the house. Suddenly, he could see Alejandro, the vineyard manager, running towards him whilst glancing back. Panic began to bloom and he began to run.

“Harry,” the man gasped, as they met. “Está en el rio!”

Fear bubbling in Snape’s chest, he apparated straight to the bank, where they often swam.

Harry was standing fully clothed in the water. Steam was rising from it.

“You’ll scald yourself!” Snape shouted.

Harry turned to look at him. “The water – it’s anchoring me: I’m leaching off some of the power doing this.”

“Why can’t he leach it off doing something useful?” Alejandro grumbled in Spanish as he came to stand, panting, besides Snape.

Severus turned to look at him.
“If he wants to play with water, we could do with some irrigation up in the corner plot where Kingsley wants to put the new vines. Now that would be useful. Boiling water indeed.”

Severus grinned, and slapped the man on the back.

Whilst Snape returned to salvage what he could of his potion, Harry spent the next two hours creating water channels, and then, after another comment from Alejandro, created a bore to the water table instead, up in the far corner.

Several hours later, hot and sweaty, he stood outside the manager’s house, grinning.

“Pity this is all about water magic,” Alejandro said, gulping down a long drink of freshly squeezed orange juice.

“Why’s that?” Harry asked, nabbing an almond biscuit from the plate that Alejandro’s wife was offering him, with a smile of thanks.

“We have a new baby on the way,” Alejandro said, looking proudly at his wife. “The house is a bit of a squeeze already. We’ll have to move back into the village.”

“You don’t want to? Congratulations, by the way,” Harry smiled at the blushing woman.

Alejandro shrugged. “My mother lives in the village – I love her, of course, but we lived in town before. She’ll be arriving with dinner every other night, and throwing in criticisms about how Rosita deals with the children. Loving them to death, of course, but Rosita is a wonderful mother. Here, we can call on her if we need her, but we actually have some peace and quiet. It’s the best way.”

“Why don’t you just extend the house, then? Surely Severus and Kingsley will allow it?” Harry asked in surprise.

“It’s wizarding built. Well, more to the point, it was built by Alonso Carrera. This whole estate. He didn’t want anyone else to get in on his work, and he booby-trapped all the buildings so that only his family could work on them. Thing is, his last surviving great-grandson died fifteen years ago. There’s nothing to be done: you won’t find a wizard around here willing to take it on.” He eyed Harry speculatively.

Harry knew a challenge when he saw one. “I’d love to have a bash. I’d need to ask Severus and Kingsley, of course.”

A crack made them both jump.

Kingsley shook himself, a common sight after apparition.

“Just the man,” Alejandro said, getting straight to the point. “Can Harry have a go at expanding the house?”

Kingsley looked at Harry, and everything that had happened – or not happened – with Snape came rushing back. He felt his face heating. He was suddenly conscious that he had stripped off his tee-shirt, and was naked from the waist up. Kingsley was obviously conscious of it too, his eyes skimming quickly over Harry before he turned to Alejandro and Rosita. “Severus said you were
"working on the water supply, or something?"

“Oh, he’s done all that,” Alejandro chuckled. “Just an afternoon’s work!”

“All right? Well, I’m happy for you to try, Harry, but I think you and the children,” he nodded at the couple, “ought to be out of it, just in case it doesn’t work. Take out anything that’s important to you. If you have to move you’ll need to pack them up anyway.”

“It’s an awful lot of work,” Rosita looked a bit crestfallen. “We don’t need to go yet…we’d be fine to begin with. The baby will be in our room anyway for a few months…”

“Not if I can help it,” Alejandro muttered, causing his wife to swat his arm and Harry and Kingsley to smirk.

Kingsley put a hand on her arm. “I didn’t mean for you to do the work,” he said gently. “We can do that for you.”

Harry glanced from Kingsley to the others. “You – you’re not - ?”

“I’m a squib, Rosita’s a Muggle,” Alejandro said easily.

“You – this doesn’t bother you?” Harry said, thinking of all the magic that he had worked that afternoon, under Alejandro’s direction. Translation spells might not be that good, but they had got on with a mixture of them, sign language and a lot of humour. Harry had had a great afternoon.

“But if you can save my home here and keep me away from my mother,” Alejandro grinned. Harry laughed. “I’ll come tomorrow and pack for you, then have a go.”

“Are you sure you can do it?”

“No, not sure at all,” Harry said, “but I’ll have a damn good try.”

“I’ll make some more biscuits,” Rosita said, with a wink.

Harry looked at the empty plate. “I ate them all,” he said, hands covering his face. He peeped through his fingers. “They were brilliant.”

Rosita laughed, and went into the house, and then he and Alejandro showed Kingsley what they’d been up to, and then the sun was dropping in the sky and Harry was walking back to the house with Kingsley, Kingsley talking easily about his day, and the fact that they’d got an agent into Hogwarts as the temporary Herbology teacher replacing Neville.

Back at the house, Snape was preparing dinner. Harry’s heart began to thump, but Snape just glanced up, said, “You look like you could do with a shower. Dinner’ll be ready in ten minutes. Kingsley, lay the table, will you?”

And with that, everything was ordinary.

It was after they’d eaten that Snape said, “I owe you an apology.”

Harry startled. “I owe you one!”

Kingsley looked from one to the other. “Want me to go?”

“Certainly not,” Snape said. He looked at Harry. “I promised you that you would not be hassled or
put into an awkward situation. I’m sorry. You may rest assured that I will endeavour to prevent such a situation occurring again.”

“You had an ‘awkward situation’?” Kingsley asked, with interest, looking from one to the other. “What happened?”

“I became inappropriately aroused,” Snape said, the words flat and unemotional, as if they didn’t speak of urgent need and of something volcanic that had almost happened and only just been avoided.

“Really?” Kingsley’s eyes darted lasciviously down Snape’s body. “Are you wearing a different robe to the one you had on this morning?”

“I – I – magicked his robe open,” Harry went beetroot red. “Did I damage it?”

“No, not at all. And we are not going to discuss this, and make Harry more uncomfortable,” Snape said tightly.

“Did you come on it?” Kingsley demanded, leaning back in his chair and steamrolling on.

“No!” Harry exclaimed, at the same time as Snape said, “Not while Harry was there.”

Harry gasped. “You – you wanked?”

“You didn’t?”

“Fucking Merlin,” Kingsley said, “what did I miss?”

“Something you’re going to continue missing, and so am I,” Snape said.

“It was probably the magic build up,” Harry apologised, half rising from the table. “I – I – I’ve been terribly horny ever since I raised power. Not that that’s any excuse –”

Kingsley’s chair crashed down on the tiles. “You raised power?”

“I didn’t mean to. It was at The Giant’s Causeway. I thought I was just enjoying being outside, and the sea, and the elements, and having my magic again, but I’ve been brimming over a bit since then, and…”

“And after he boiled the water in the river, Alejandro had the excellent idea of using him to irrigate the new plot.”

“Alejandro’s full of good ideas: Harry’s going to have a bash at extending his house tomorrow, so that they don’t have to go back to the village.”

“His mother is a pain,” Severus agreed. “Hmmm. Sit down, Harry,” Severus said, off-handedly.

“’Hmmm’? What idea are you brewing?” Kingsley asked.

“Do you think you’ll be able to alter the house? They’re booby-trapped,” Snape asked Harry.

“So I hear,” Harry said, “but if you’re happy for me to try, I’d like the challenge. Adjusting space is what I’m most used to.”

“If you’re successful, you can have a go here.”

“Because your mother is due to visit for her birthday, as usual, and I don’t think she’ll fancy sharing with Harry,” Snape said to Kingsley.

Harry looked from one to the other. “I’m in the way –”

“Not if you make us a new room,” Kingsley grinned.

Snape was chuckling too.

“What?” Harry said, looking from one to another. “What’s so funny?”

“My mother,” Kingsley said. “I can’t wait to see how you’ll get on.” He laughed out loud.

“What? Why?”

“You’ll see when you meet her,” Kingsley shook his head, and patted Harry on the hand.

“Do you know anything else about this booby-trapping builder?” Harry asked, after they’d settled down. “How come you bought the house if it was booby-trapped?”

“Well, it’s only if you want to change it that there are problems,” Kingsley said. “When we bought it, Xavier Carrera was still alive and kicking. He came and worked on Severus’ lab, no problems. Then his son was killed, and Xavier went into a decline, and suddenly half the village has houses they can’t alter.”

“That needs fixing, surely?” Harry said. “Didn’t they share the information with anyone? Didn’t they tell you anything or didn’t you see anything when they worked on the lab?”

“I might have observed one or two wand movements,” Snape said.

“That’s great!”

“Not really, I’ve never seen them before, and I’m assuming there was some non-verbal intent spell-work going on,” Snape said dampeningly.

Harry nodded. “We ought to have a curse-breaker look at it,” he said, casting a quick glance and looking away. “Do you know anyone?”

There was a moment’s silence. “Only the same man as you,” Snape said.

Harry looked embarrassed. “I’m sorry –”

“You cannot apologise for Bill Weasley,” Kingsley said.

“Why would you?” Snape asked.

“He – he’s sort of family,” Harry tried to explain. He didn’t know if he understood himself. “I’m sorry, I know it’s silly.”

“Nah, we’re used to homophobic people. You can’t apologise for all of them. It’s a pity he’s someone who could help us, though,” Kingsley said.

“I could just floo him and ask for advice?”
“You could,” Snape said, surprising Harry.

“You think he might help?”

“Who knows?” Snape said. Weasley had contacted him for the potion. He hadn’t heard from him since.

“I’ll ask him: he might not be able to resist the puzzle, and he might have some general advice. If that’s alright with you?”

“You go ahead. Do you need to talk to a builder too? Would that be a good idea?”

Harry wasn’t sure if what he planned, what he did with his magic and his gut would need it, but, “Maybe. Can’t hurt?”

“Good. Don’t want the room falling down on my Mum,” Kingsley grinned. “I’d never hear the end of it.”

“You never hear the end of it with her anyway,” Snape groused.

Kingsley laughed.

Harry wasn’t sure what to make of it.

Kingsley looked at his expression, and reached out and patted his arm. “Don’t look so worried. He loves her really.”

Snape snorted.

Every hour seemed to be filled. He talked to Bill, who seemed surprisingly willing to help, and actually offered to come and work on Alejandro’s and Rosita’s house.

With the beautiful weather, he was able to float all the family’s possessions outside into their garden. Severus, Harry and Bill worked first on analysing the booby-trapping. There was some awkwardness between Snape and Bill, before the involvement of the task swept that away. By the time they had deciphered the spell and created a counter, Bill was laughing and Snape was his usual acerbic self, without seeming to set Bill off again. They stood chatting as Harry worked on the extra room.

Doing a large magical working was both exciting and relieving. Harry loved it, and loved the satisfaction of the smiles on Rosita’s and Alejandro’s faces. The next day, he set to work on creating a room at the main house, following Snape’s instructions for a room large enough to have a sitting area, writing table and en suite as well as room for a large bed.

There were visits from Hermione, of course, to discuss his case, though Harry found it increasingly hard to concentrate on them. It seemed so very far away.

He wrote to Lily every day; she and Hugo had started at Beauxbatons straight away. Albus visited or floo-called every day. James did not.

“Give him time, Dad,” Albus said.
“Is it because he thinks I’m gay, or because Snape and Kingsley are?”

They were in the bothy. Harry planing a bit of wood, Albus sitting on a stool watching him.

Albus shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ve not seen that much of him. I think he’s catching up with Millie.”

Harry nodded. “Fair enough. What’s she like? I haven’t even met her.”

“Seems okay,” Albus shrugged. “I’ve only seen her a couple of times. Pretty.”

Harry snorted. James’ women always were.

A moment passed. The wood curled off the end of the plane and dropped onto the floor.


“I’ll answer if I can.”

“You – you seem happy here.”

Harry paused, but there didn’t seem to be anything else. “That isn’t a question.”

Albus slung him a look. “It sort of is,” he grinned.

Harry chuckled. “I am happy here. They’re good men. Good friends,” he said. He ran his hand over the wood, seeing if it was smooth enough.

“Yeah,” Albus agreed. Another moment’s silence. “Is that all?”

Harry didn’t really know what to say. He looked at the bench that Albus was sitting next to. He’d scratched some flaking stuff off of it, days earlier, puzzled, wondering if he’d spilt some glue. He’d sniffed it. His heart had thumped like a drum when it has dawned on him that it was Snape’s come. That Snape had stood there, after that – moment – and done that, here, on the spot. Harry hadn’t ever wanked anywhere but the bedroom or bathroom. The thought had been – arousing. And scary, in a way. It spoke of a passion and a freedom that - well, he didn’t think he could be like that. And Snape had been true to his word. Ten days had passed. There had been no more tense moments, no breath-stealing glances. “Yeah, that’s all.”

Albus nodded. “Okay.”

Harry planed again. “What about you?”

“Me?”

“Yeah. Any love interest?”

“I wish!”

Harry looked up, smiling. “Really?”

“What? What’s odd about that? Aren’t I allowed to want a girl?” Albus bristled.

“Of course you are. I didn’t mean – Albus, I didn’t mean to offend you,” Harry said, putting the plane down.
Albus shrugged. “I know.” He looked away.

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

Harry pulled up the stool beside him. And waited.

Albus sighed. “It’s me. I’m jealous, I suppose.”

“What? Jealous of who?”

“It’s ridiculous,” Albus said, standing up as if to go. Harry grabbed his arm. “Albus.”

Albus stood there, and shrugged. Harry dropped his hand.

“James, I guess. Not that I want to be him. He’s a dick.”

Harry laughed. Albus gave a wry smile.

“The girls like him?” Harry suggested.

Albus nodded, looking down.

“It’s the confidence, I suppose,” Harry said. He ran his hands over his knees. “God knows, I’m not one to help you out on this, Albus. I wish I could…”

“Yeah, I know,” Albus nudged his shin against his father’s in acceptance. “It’s just – oh shit, it pisses me off, you know? And then I hate myself for being pissed off. I mean, he’s such a twat. Why do they like him? Do I smell? Do I give off ‘stay clear’ vibes?”

“Of course you don’t,” Harry grinned. “And he’s not a twat all the time.”

“No, I know. He - he was straight in to help Severus rescue Hugo. No messing around. I don’t understand how he can do that and then cold-shoulder Severus. It’s - rude.”

“It’s probably best that he stays away whilst he sorts out his views,” Harry said.

Albus nodded. “I’d better go. Dad?”

Harry stood up. “Yup?”

“You wouldn’t – I mean, don’t not do something to please us. It’s your life. He’ll come round.”

Harry gave Albus a hug. “I’m not really in a position to make commitments to anyone right now,” he chuckled.

Albus hugged him back and pulled away. At the door, he turned again. “Who said anything about commitment? They look at you, Dad. Think about it. You deserve ‘a bit of lovin,’” he paraphrased a popular song, with the hip actions to match, “if nothing else. One of us ought to be getting some.”

“Albus Severus!” Harry gasped, but he heard Albus laugh, and the crack of apparition, and couldn’t help grinning himself.
James Potter pulled out of Millie and flipped onto his back, panting. He could feel her, breath heaving, beside him, and couldn’t help the rather smug smile that crept over his face. He turned to look at her, and she turned too, smiling back at him.

“Wow!”

He smirked.

“You’re amazing!” She snuggled in, under his arm.

James moved his hand so that he wouldn’t get pins and needles in his fingers.

“That was good, yeah?”

“Oh yeah.”

There was silence for some moments. James had pulled the cover over them and was just drifting off to sleep, when she giggled.

“What?” he hugged her into his side.

“Just thinking,” she chuckled.

“Oh yeah? What’s so funny?” he murmured, eyes still closed.

“Nothing much. Just thinking it’s a good thing you don’t take after your Dad.”

James felt a chill. “What?” he pulled away a bit to look at her.

She snuggled in instead. “You know. Queer. What a waste that would have been.” Her hand stroked down his belly, fingers threading through the hair just above his cock.

James lay very still. “You don’t know anything about my Dad,” he said tightly. “You’ve never met him.”

“Yeah, that would’ve been scary! Hey, it doesn’t run in families,” she said, sitting up, and rubbing her nose on his cheek. “No need to worry.”

“I’m not worried,” James turned his head away.

“After that? I should think not.” She feathered a kiss on his nipple.

He pulled her down against his side. He didn’t want to look at her.

The silence was uncomfortable, his earlier euphoria gone.

“Look,” she said, her fingers irritating as she traced his ribs. “I know this is a tough time for you. And it’s going to be bad for a while. I can’t imagine what it’d be like to have a parent who’s had the Dementor’s Kiss, but I’m here for you – ”

“Excuse me?” James sat up, batting her hand away.

She looked at him sympathetically. “I know it’s hard to face, and I think you’ve been doing the right thing, distancing yourself, getting used to it – ”
James climbed out of the bed, pulling on his pants as he went. He stood up, and faced her, hands on hips. “You think I’ve been distancing myself? To save myself grief? Or because my father’s a murderer? Or because he’s homosexual?”

Millie knelt up in the bed. “Calm down, I didn’t mean to upset you. I can’t think how awful it must be –”

“No, you can’t. You’ve no idea.”

“Hey! Don’t take it out on me!”

“You just said you were here for me. Or is that only for servicing?”

“What? You – how dare you? You’ve got an inflated opinion of your own talents,” she snapped, slithering off the bed and searching through the clothes strewn around the floor.

“Really? That’s not what you were saying a moment ago.”

“You can fuck off,” she swore. “I pitied you. I did! I can’t believe I’ve wasted any fucking time on you. You’re a shit, just like your parents. I should’ve known.”

“Don’t you say a fucking word about my parents! None of us would have any decent life without my parents!”

“You talk such crap,” she said, pulling on her robe and shoving her feet into her shoes. “I’m a pureblood: your parents did nothing for me. They spoiled things, that’s what they did.”

“Get out! You don’t know anything.”

“Oh, I’m going. My friends were right: they wanted to know why I was hanging around with someone from such a shitty family…”

“Shitty family!”

“Yeah. Your mother was a whore who got what was coming to her, didn’t she? And your Dad’s a murdering poofter. They deserved each other. And I fucking deserve better than their arsehole son!”

And she slammed the door behind her, leaving James, furious and disbelieving, standing, hands on hips in pants amidst the wreckage of their earlier lovemaking.

Eventually, he stripped off his underwear, slung it towards the laundry bin, and headed into the shower. He thought of going to the pub, but didn’t think he could face anyone. Was that what people really thought of him? Of his family?

He found himself exiting from the floo in Grimmauld Place. Mitty appeared at once.

“How are you, Mitty?” he asked, noticing that her belly was as round as a football now.

“Mitty is doing fine, Master James,” the elf beamed. “Thanking you. Is you looking for Master Albus? He is in the training room –”
“Great. Thanks,” and he was off down the stairs.

He was unprepared for the sight that met his eyes as he slung open the door.

Albus stood there, bent forward, hands on the ribs of Scorpius Malfoy, who was almost on all fours in front of him.

Naked.

Scorpius tipped over, onto his side, laughing, and James stumbled back, averting his eyes from the startling flash of white pubic hair and a surprisingly long cock.

“Watch your feet!” Albus shouted at him, as Scorpius flung a blanket around himself.

James stood stock still, looking down, and saw -

“Is that a scorpion?” he gawped, as the creature scuttled behind him and shot behind the sofa.

A second later, Andy stood there.

Everything clicked.

“You’re working on your animagus transformations?”

“Yeah,” Andy said, brushing his hair back, “but Scorp hasn’t worked out how to take his clothes yet, or get his balance when he transforms back.”

James looked across at Albus. He’d had similar problems when they were learning. His lips twitched.

Albus grinned.

“I’m so embarrassed,” Scorpius moaned. “How the heck do you do it? How come Andy can do it?”

James walked over. “I’ve no idea how Andy is managing, but Albus managed because he’s so unimaginative.”

“Hey!”

“Go into your form,” he grinned at his brother.

Poking a very juvenile tongue out at James, Albus did so. The cat he became couldn’t resist winding itself around their legs, sniffing and rubbing himself just a little before sitting back on his haunches.

James reached down and picked him up, though Albus scrabbled to be free. “Be quiet, this is important,” James said, giving him an awkward quick stroke down his spine. Albus settled, and then James stuck his finger under the loop of the green collar he was wearing. “This is the answer,” he said.

“A collar? Andy isn’t wearing a collar.”

Albus butted James with his head, and his brother put him down. He transformed at once.

“When we were learning, I had the same problem. I couldn’t work out how Albus was managing, and I couldn’t. It was ages before I clicked that he was wearing a collar in his cat form. I tried to think about what I could have on me.”
“What did you go for?”

James had never told Albus any of this. He’d never admitted his sense of failure.

Albus had never realised why he was able to manage to do it before James. He thought of his brother in his form. “You have a ring on your leg,” he realised.

James lifted up the leg of his chinos, then pushed down his sock. He had a thin braid around his ankle. “I tried it without actually wearing the braid to focus on, but it just makes it easier to have it.”

Albus felt around his neck. He wore a thin chain that a girl at school had given him when he was thirteen. When being fancied had seemed more of a possibility. He didn’t know why he’d always worn it; it was a nice chain, was all.

“What do you do?” Scorpius asked.

“I don’t know what Albus does, but I sort of concentrate a bit of the spell on transferring any non-human matter into the ring. Then I have my clothes with me when I need them.”

“Wow, that sounds sensible. What could I wear?”

“What’s your form?”

Scorpius transformed – rather more slowly than James or Albus did, but then there was –

“What the hell are you?”

Andy laughed. “He’s an arctic fox. Nothing straight-forward for Scorp.”

“You’re rather exotic yourself,” Albus grinned. “So how come you keep your clothes?”

“Could be your bony outside translates as clothes,” James mused. He watched, fascinated, as Scorpius prowled around the room. With a tail like that, no wonder he had balance problems when he transformed back. He thought of the flash of Scorpius’ cock, and then realised how ridiculous it was to think there was any connection.

“But that’s still part of him,” Albus said.

“Are you wearing some jewelry? A ring?” James looked at Andy’s hands.

Scorpius nosed under the blanket, and then changed back. “Yeah, he is,” Scorpius said, smirking as he wrapped the fabric around himself.

“He’s not,” James said.

“He’s got a nipple ring,” Albus said. “Hey,” he held up his hands, when everyone was looking at him. “I saw it when you first started trying.”

“How come I unconsciously used it to channel my clothes?”

“No idea, seeing as I didn’t know I was doing it with my neck-chain,” Albus shrugged.

“Doesn’t it hurt?” James asked, unable to suppress his curiosity.

“I like it,” Andy said.
“Hurting?”

“Knowing it’s there.” He flashed a look at Scorpius, and smiled.

“Right,” James said, suddenly uncomfortable and regretting where he’d taken the conversation. He moved towards the door.

“Charlie has one,” Albus said.

“What?” James turned with his hand on the door-knob.

“You’re acting like it’s a gay thing,” Albus said, hands on hips, “And therefore, of course, to be avoided at all costs. In case you catch it, or something.”

James planted his feet and leant his back against the edge of the door.

“Hey, you needn’t argue over us,” Andy said, looking embarrassed. “Scorp and I can practice on our own now.”

“Yeah, thanks for the help, James,” Scorpius said, waving his wand and suddenly clothed. “Really. You’ve given us a great pointer. And thanks again, Albus.”

Albus was about to protest, when Scorpius touched his arm. “It’s fine,” he said quietly.

Albus opened his mouth, then shut it again. “I’ll see you to the floo,” he said.

They’d been out of the room for two seconds when James strode after them. Scorpius was just taking a pinch of floo powder.

“Incorporate your wand into your inanimate object,” he said. “When you’re focussing the transformation.”

They all looked at him.

“Then you’ll always have it with you.”

“Thanks,” Scorpius and Andy said together.

James nodded, and then they were gone.

James and Albus headed to the kitchen.

“I don’t understand you,” Albus said, as he put the kettle on.

“If they’re helping us catch Mum’s murderers, they need to get their spells right.”

Albus sighed as he spooned coffee into two cups. “Surprisingly, James, it’s not the good things you do that bother me, but the fucking –” he shrugged and sighed.

“Merlin, what do you want from me?” James snapped. “You know what I think about queers. I helped, didn’t I? And I went to leave the room rather than be rude –”

“Yeah, you didn’t punch them in the face, I get that you showed loads of restraint,” Albus said
“You’ve ‘left the room,’” he made little quotation marks in the air, “‘with Dad, too, haven’t you?’”

“What?”

“Come on. You’ve not been to see him at all.”

“I’ve been busy –”

“If that’s your real excuse, I hope, when Dad’s been given the Dementor’s Kiss, that you think all those shags were worth never seeing Dad again, worth him going to his death thinking that you hate him.”

“Don’t be stupid. He knows I don’t hate him.”

“Does he? How’s he supposed to know that, James? He doesn’t know if you’re not visiting because he’s gay, or because he’s at Kingsley’s and Severus’. And frankly, I’m disgusted with you if it’s either of those. Severus has been great to us, and Kingsley. They didn’t have to help find who killed Mum, and look at all the shit it’s brought them because of it. And Severus especially – he’s been unbelievable, hasn’t he? And if they and Scorp and Andy are anything like representative of gay people, I can’t see how you can feel the slightest bit of – of - disrespect. And as for Dad. I don’t care what he is. He’s our Dad.”

“That’s easy for you to say –”

“Yes it is, because it’s all true. Why are you going on what anyone else says, rather than what you know, you experience? You’re not usually such an idiot: you can judge for yourself, can’t you?”

James stalked over and raided the biscuit tin, before walking out of the kitchen.

Albus followed him.

James flung himself down in an armchair in the sitting room, almost spilling his coffee as his head hit the back of the seat.

Albus sat down on the sofa, took a gulp of his drink, and put his mug on the side-table.

James sat up and reached for the remote control, flipping the TV on and searching the channels.

Albus slung his legs up on the sofa and stretched out.

They’d watched one and a half episodes of a quiz show when James said, “I just broke up with Millie.”

“When?” Albus asked, twisting a bit to look at his brother.

“Just now.”

“You came here for sympathy?” Albus asked disbelievingly.

“Thanks, bro,” James said sarcastically.

Albus sat up. “She dump you or you her?”

“She said Mum was a whore and Dad was a murdering poofter. I think that was a fairly clear indicator that we weren’t going to make a long term go of it.”
Silence.

“And she was with me out of pity, for a bit of icing on the cake.”

“Ouch.”

The quiz show audience were cheering some answer that they’d missed.

“How many people think that, do you think?” James asked.

Albus was quiet for a moment. “No one who knew Mum and Dad, and frankly, who else matters?”

“It matters to me,” James said.


“What? What for?”

“I applied to join their Healer programme.”

“You did?”

Albus nodded.

“You don’t like Gringotts?”

“It’s boring.”

“And they turned you down? You’ve got the grades.”

“Yeah. Apparently so do loads of other people. Only one in five get in.”

“Oh. That’s shit. Can you apply somewhere else?”

“Yeah, I’m looking into it. But something tells me I might not have got turned away before.”

James was silent. Then: “That just means we were getting things we didn’t necessarily deserve because of our name.”

“Yeah.”

“So we have to do it on our own merits. That’s not so bad. You’re good: you can do it.”

Albus smiled. “Pep talk? Twat.”

James grinned back, and grabbed the remote, flipping the channel.

“James?”

“Hmmm?”

“Not to push this one too much, but I’m just saying: if we want to be judged on our own merits, perhaps we ought to be doing the same?”

James looked at him. “You don’t give up, do you?”

“Just saying,” Albus repeated. He looked at the TV. “I’ve seen this episode, like, fifteen times.”
“Yeah, but it’s better than that quiz.”
“True.”

They settled down to watch.

Harry walked into the kitchen, and halted on the threshold. Severus was in Kingsley’s arms, and the kiss they were sharing was passionate, with a capital P. He couldn’t help noticing how Severus was utterly relaxed in Kingsley’s arms, the bulge of Kingsley’s biceps enfolding him. He tiptoed out again. There was a copy of The Prophet open on the table outside, so he picked it up and headed over to the hammock. The pictures flashed in front of him, but he barely noticed them.

Ever since The Giant’s Causeway, he seemed to have been hyper-aware of the physical. The feel of a piece of wood under his fingers, the sight of the breeze rustling leaves, the colour of an aubergine. More to the point, he was hyper-aware of himself, of the sun on his back, the brush of fabric against his skin, the flex and play of his muscles as they strengthened. He didn’t know if it was to do with raising power, or with being in this wonderful place, knowing that once the Wizengamot decided to call him back, he was most likely dead, and therefore his heart was savouring every minute.

He’d never felt such simple joy in life, and yet there was a constant, underlying tension. And it wasn’t about life, or death, or his worry about James, or about catching Ginny’s murderers. He knew he ought to care about all that, and he did, he did, and yet he couldn’t deny that he somehow felt divorced from it all. That he’d needed this break.

But. There was Severus and Kingsley. Their comments had sort of shocked him, and yet, the way they’d said them, as if it was nothing much... As if it was down to him.

But... when he saw them like that... when he thought about what they did, behind that closed door – and he did think, and he couldn’t stop thinking about it...

He’d found himself thinking about them in the shower, when his hand was around his cock, and he’d stopped quickly, terrified about what would happen if he was questioned again in court about his fantasies. And he’d tried to think about the Patil twins instead, and that only made him wonder if even then, he’d had a thing about being with two people, sandwiching him, enfolding him. And he’d come anyway.

He couldn’t seem to stop wanking. Thoughts of warm arms, smooth skin and taut muscles rose up at all sorts of times, distracting, delicious.

But when he tried to think of himself with Kingsley, with Severus, the dynamics were ... he couldn’t ... he didn’t think he could do it, didn’t think he could give himself so completely.
Ron Weasley held his father in his arms. It always surprised him how light he had become. Of course, he’d never been as tall as his sons, who seemed to have taken their height from the Prewitt side of the family, but Ron always had an image of him as quite stocky. Now his father was thin.

“Hold tight, Dad,” he said, and apparated.

The nurse at the apparition point at St Mungo’s had a hover-chair waiting, and Ron dropped his father straight into it, smiling his thanks at her.

“Th –th – thank you, Maggie,” Arthur said, reaching out his good hand.

Maggie shook it. “How are you today, Mr Weasley?”

“F-F- fine, fine. How’re you? Washing hard?” He gritted his teeth, shaking his head.

“Working very hard, but I’ve always time for you,” she smiled, comfortable with making the correction. “Would you like me to take you up, or is your son coming too today?” She glanced up at Ron.

“If you wouldn’t mind.” He came round in front of his father. “Tell Mum I’ll see her when I come to pick you up. A couple of hours suit you? Or a bit longer?”

“I’ll stay till… breakfast, if it suits you, Percy.”

“Tea-time, Dad,” Ron said, rolling his eyes, but smiling.

Arthur nodded enthusiastically, his head wobbling sideways.

“Thanks, Maggie,” Ron said to the nurse, squeezed his father’s hand, and apparated away.

Back home, Ron threw himself straight onto the sofa, head back. He shut his eyes, and breathed in deeply. He loved his father. He did. But looking after him was absolutely exhausting. He thought he’d have lots of time to think, but in truth, the all-day, every-day one-to-one contact had left him with no time to think at all. Not that the family had left him doing everything – his brothers called in when they could, and even Charlie came over every weekend. But having everyone in and out of the house brought its own work, even though they had a house elf. He had to think about having food in the cupboard, and what they’d cook, and he seemed to be ordering beers by the crateful.

He enjoyed their company.

But he missed time alone with Mione. He missed going to The Leaky after work with his colleagues, laughing about whatever case they were working on, laughing about others in the department.

Much as he missed these things, he didn’t know if he actually missed his job. Every time even a thought about it came into his mind, there was something that needed doing, or his Dad called, and he shoved the thought away.

He ought to think about it now. But….

He threw some powder into the flames, and called out Kingsley’s address. After a few moments, Snape’s head appeared.
“Would it be possible for me to come and visit Harry, Prof- Severus?” he asked.

“Come through.”

Moments later, he stood in their kitchen. He was conscious of how comfortable the room was, in a way that his own, streamlined, sparkling kitchen was not. It was very much a lived-in space. It reminded him of The Burrow, in some strange way.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m sorry if I disturbed you –”

“I need to get back to my workroom,” Snape agreed. He picked up a basket from the counter, which contained a flask and a tin. “Take these with you.”

Ron took the basket, looking at it curiously.

“Harry would forget to eat without a little encouragement,” Snape shrugged. “Come.”

He took Ron to the door, and pointed to the bothy across the fields. He looked Ron over. “I’d recommend a sun-filtering charm,” he said. “I imagine that skin burns easily.” He moved away.

“How is he?” Ron asked, to his back.

Snape turned to glance at him. “Decide for yourself,” he said, and was gone.

Ron cast the spell, and headed out across the fields. The sunshine felt incredible, and despite the unspoken criticism he’d felt from Severus, he found himself unwinding as he made his way through the vineyard.

It wasn’t as if he didn’t know what was going on with Harry: Mione had seen him regularly, and Harry had given her permission to discuss any aspects of his case that she wanted to.

He didn’t know what he thought about Harry being gay; it didn’t seem possible really. He’d been married to Ginny, after all, and had three kids. He’d fancied Cho. Hermione seemed perfectly alright with it, but then, for someone who’d been so into rules when they’d first met, she was surprisingly willing to break barriers and to look at almost anything from an intellectual perspective.

Ron wasn’t much into giving himself over to intellectual thought, and relied on his gut.

His gut told him he wasn’t very keen on Harry being a woofter, and especially not a woofter who fancied Draco Malfoy, or Lucius Malfoy, or whatever. Not that Hermione had talked about that. She’d just said one fantasy did not a gay man make, and to be honest, he’d had some pretty hot fantasies himself that he really wouldn’t enjoy if they’d happened in real life.

But if he had to fancy a man, surely someone manly, like Kingsley, was a much better choice. Not that Kingsley was free, but in principle. It didn’t make sense to fancy men and then like girly ones, surely. Not that Draco, or Lucius, were girly. But they were sort of slender and aristocratic and –

“Hey! Ron!” Harry had come out of the cabin and was grinning madly, jogging towards Ron.

Ron couldn’t help the smile that broke out on his face, nor the slight recoil as Harry went to embrace him. He saw Harry’s smile disappear, like the sun going behind a cloud, and cursed himself, reaching out himself and hugging Harry.

He felt the hesitation, the moment it took for Harry to pat him on the back, the speed with which he
withdraw.

“I’m a prat,” Ron said, grabbing Harry’s arm as his friend turned away.

Harry looked back. There was a moment, and then Harry grinned, and Ron felt relief flow through him.

“Come on in – or would you rather sit in the sun?” Harry asked. “How’s your Dad? And your Mum? I know Hugo’s okay, Lils mentions him in most of her letters. I think they’re settling in alright, don’t you?”

Ron couldn’t help smiling. Harry was so…Harry.

“Yeah, missed you too, Mate,” he said, and Harry laughed.

They were soon sitting in the sun, tucking into the biscuits from Snape’s basket.

“These are great,” Ron said. “D’you think you could get me some when - oh. Who does the shopping?”

“Snape makes these,” Harry said.

“Really? He bakes?”

“Cooking, potions – it’s all similar,” Harry took another bite.

“Until you find you’ve got a newt’s eye when you thought you were eating a raisin,” Ron inspected his biscuit carefully.

Harry grinned. “Tastes good. That’s enough for me.”

“Ewww,” Ron pulled a face, but nevertheless shoved the rest of the biscuit in his mouth.

“Didn’t expect Snape to be a mother hen,” he said, when he’d finally swallowed it all. “Though I suppose he was the same after we found you in the cells.” He looked over at Harry. “You’re looking a lot better.”

Harry grinned. “Been working out a bit,” he said, flexing an arm to demonstrate his bicep.

Ron looked down at the bulge of his own stomach as he sat there. “I’m getting fat,” he said, with shock.

“’S just that you’ve been at home near the food rather than at work,” Harry said, looking at his friend. “It’ll go when you get back. How much longer is it likely to be?”

Ron threw his head back, and looked up at the single cloud that was wisping its way across the sky. “I don’t know if I want to go back.”

Harry sat forward, looking at him. “Any idea of what else you fancy doing?” he asked, not the slightest hint of criticism in his voice.

Ron turned his head. “You’re supposed to say it’s my duty to go back and find out who killed my sister.”

Harry just looked at him. “You’ve been caring full-time for your father, your mother is in hospital, and your son was kidnapped. Do you really think I expect anything of you, Ron?”
Ron flashed Harry a grateful look, but then his face dropped again. “Don’t forget my best mate has been held for murder and then was almost killed in the cells.”

Harry snorted a little, but really, it was too raw, too sharp for that. Because the person murdered was Ginny, and she was almost physically present between them. There was nothing funny about her death, and nothing funny about anyone believing Harry had done it.

“That’s what I can’t stand,” Ron went on, as if a huge chunk of conversation had happened. “I was working there. No-one – no-one said anything about you being a suspect. I was kept right out of it. I was bloody sent away on a wild goose chase! And the one person – the one person – who told me where you might be was a total stranger! How can I go back and work with those people again, Harry?”

“It wasn’t entirely a wild goose chase,” Harry said.

Ron looked at him.

“Nott and Rowle had been there.”

“Not in Wicklow, they weren’t. I should’ve been looking for you. I let you down.”

“You thought it might have been a lead. Where else could you start? You couldn’t have known –”

Ron shrugged. “I got it wrong. And I lost sight of the bigger picture. We need to find who killed Ginny, because when we have them, you’ll be free. We’ve stopped having the meetings – we need to start up again.”

Harry nodded. “I think we all needed the break.”

“Yeah – no – well, they could bring you back into court at any time, couldn’t they? I know Mione’s been excused her behaviour, given the circumstances, and allowed to continue defending you, but the bottom line is we need to find these guys. I expect Kingsley’s keeping you up to date with what his team are achieving?”

Harry shook his head. “We don’t talk about it.”

“Really?”

“I haven’t brought it up; I expect he might if I did. But – I meant it: I needed the break. Even if there’s death at the end of this: I just needed…the peace. That was selfish of me.”

“Selfish?”

“I – the kids – if there are people out there that might hurt them – what am I doing lazing about?”

Ron snorted. “I’d hardly call it lazing. You’re not even allowed to leave this place. And from the look of you, you’ve been getting yourself into form to act. Mentally and physically.”

Harry was quiet a moment. “I have all this power, Ron.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“No, more than it used to be. I’m – I’m a bit scared of what I might do with it.” He glanced across quickly at his friend, and looked away.

“I think I might kill the person who did that to Hugo, and Neville, let alone Ginny’s murderers,”
Ron said, the harsh turn of his voice making Harry’s head shoot up. “I’ve been almost paralysed by trying to do the right thing. Well, that’s a risk I have to take. Both of us,” he used a finger to indicate the two of them. “And you’ll look out for me and I’ll look out for you, just like always. And Mione’ll keep us both in line.”

Harry snorted. “Yeah.”

There was an easy silence, whilst they both thought about it.

“How’s Hannah holding up?” Harry asked. “I hated that I couldn’t go to the funeral.”

“She’s shut The Leaky.”

“What?”

Ron nodded.

“But how are people getting in and out of Diagon Alley from the Muggle side? God, don’t tell me they’re not?”

Ron shrugged. “Hadn’t thought of that.”

“But – but Ron, that matters.”

“I’ll go check out what’s happening before I pick Dad up.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, unable to hide his annoyance.

“Hey! I only heard a couple of days ago!”

“Good thing it isn’t the start of term at Hogwarts, is it?” Harry said. “All those Muggle parents who’d never be able to get their children any uniform, or supplies, or -” He stopped abruptly.

“What?” Ron said sharply, waiting for further sarcasm, but Harry swung himself off his seat and squatted in front of Ron, his hand on his arm.

“Ron,” he said urgently. “Take Hermione to King’s Cross.”

“You what?”

“She’s of Muggle blood. See if she can get through to Platform 9¾. Oh my god, what if they’re shutting the Wizarding World down?”

Ron stood up, face grim. “I’m straight on it. Can I apparate from here?”

“It’s a long way,” Harry said tentatively.

Ron nodded. “I’ll go get the floo.”

“I’ll come back with you. Severus and Kingsley need to know.”

The twin clap of their apparitions resounded for a moment or two, and then only the settling dust and the abandoned picnic basket showed that anyone had been there.
It had been a long day at work.

Usually, James enjoyed his job. Selling holidays was about selling pleasure and happiness and a respite from normal life, and he seriously felt like he could do with one himself. Somewhere, far, far away.

In the past, customers had been thrilled to find that they were doing business with Harry and Ginny Potter’s son, but after several days of seeing the horrified look in client’s faces, and their quick withdrawal to ‘think about it’, he just called himself James, and left it at that. He hadn’t really thought about it, until Albus had brought it up, that he’d probably found business so easy because of the deferred fame from his family.

He’d just accepted it.

Now, he was just himself, no different from the next person, when he was at work.

It was a relief, really, to get away from everything and throw himself into it. Into other people’s plans, other people’s lives.

People who were thinking happy thoughts and planning happy futures.

They didn’t have a mother who’d slept with at least a couple of quidditch teams, and been murdered handcuffed to her bed.

They didn’t have a father who fantasised about other men.

Who was famous for killing the world’s biggest bastard, and wasn’t it just logical that he’d bump off his faithless wife?

Except…his father had lived for years, it seemed, knowing that their mother was with other men. He’d never let on. James couldn’t remember sharp words at home, and the only impatience was the odd moment when his parents had got muddled over their work schedules. He had had a brilliant childhood. He remembered his parents laughing in the kitchen, or at a film. How had his father been able to do that?

And according to what his Dad had said in court, he hadn’t had sex for years and years, which he found impossible to imagine. His father had done that because he wanted the family to stay together. He’d done that for them.

Bill had made out that homosexuals were predators, but if his father was one, where was the evidence of that? And as far as he could see, Scorpius and Andy were monogamous. And Severus and Kingsley seemed to have been together for years.

Albus, the little shit, was right. He needed to judge people himself. Even if he got it wrong. It would be his mistake and no-one else’s.

“Are you coming for a drink,” Pete asked, “instead of sitting there miles away?”

“Hmm?” James looked up at the wizard who worked at a desk just across from him.

“Pub? Drink? Fancy it?” Pete mimed downing a pint. “It’s six thirty. Time to give up for the night. Or have you plans?” He waggled his eyebrows.

One thing James could say for Pete was that his interest in girls and booze far outweighed anything else, and he never looked at James with the pity that he saw in some of his other colleagues.
“Definitely,” James said, shuffling the parchments on his desk into some semblance of a pile, and shoving a paperweight on top.

An hour later, he bid Pete goodbye. There were a group of girls in the corner of the bar, giggling, but he really wasn’t in the mood.

He slung his cloak on and headed back to his flat, picking up a Chinese at the take-away on the corner.

He ate it in front of the telly, the voices filling the silence, but once he’d finished, he switched it off and took his plate and the containers out to the kitchen and cast a few tidying and washing-up spells.

His thoughts strayed back to his mother.

He didn’t know how she could have cheated with all those men.

But his father said they weren’t – *compatible*, he supposed, was the right word.

How many girls had he slept with himself?

Who was he to judge?

Had she ever let him down?

He smiled, thinking of her taking a group of his friends from school to meet all her team mates after a match, and the kudos that had given him.

He thought of her stroking his brow when he’d had nightmares after Teddy had told him chocolate frogs were real frogs which’d been changed by magic, and changed back into raw frog in your stomach.

He thought of how she’d lied to Gran and said he’d got homework to finish one holiday when he really didn’t want to go over and spend yet another Sunday at The Burrow.

She’d been a great mother.

And it wasn’t for him to judge his parents’ marriage, when they’d done everything they could to make things good for them.

He owed it to her to find out who’d killed her, now that it was obvious that the Ministry weren’t going to do it.

They needed to get the group together again and working on it. Regardless of who that meant working with.

And if he wasn’t a twat like Albus had said, he’d keep an open bloody mind.

He looked at the clock; it was 9.30pm.

On an impulse, he put a floo call through to Hogwarts.
He’d been prepared to fabricate a question about a lost book of Lily’s, but he was relieved to see the person he wanted at the other side of the fire.

“Mrs Banton? Do you have a moment? I wonder if I could come through?”

“What took you so long, Mr Potter?” she answered, and he stepped through the flames.

Kingsley and Hermione stepped out of Benningdean’s office.

“Yes!” Hermione said, pulling her fist down in a movement that would have looked much more appropriate on Ron. Then she laughed, and hugged Kingsley, who picked her up and twirled her round, grinning.

The secretary looked at them over her glasses, their delight causing her lips to quirk in a smile.

“Alright if I come straight back and tell him?” Hermione asked, untangling herself, and blushing despite knowing Kingsley was gay and attached. It was impossible not to notice the muscular strength of his body, the ease with which he’d picked her up.

“I’ll come with you,” Kingsley said. His face sobered. “We need to think of the ramifications.” Hermione nodded.

They floo-ed in moments later.

“Ron!” I didn’t know you were here!” Hermione said in surprise.

Snape looked across at Kingsley, who raised an eyebrow at him.

“I was just about to go. I told Harry about The Leaky being closed and he said what about the Muggle-borns trying to get through? And what about at King’s Cross? I was going to get you and do a test run.”

“The Leaky’s shut? When did that happen? Is Hannah alright?”

“I don’t know. I suppose – I just assumed she needed a break.”

“Damn!”

“Are you both here for a reason?” Snape asked.

Hermione’s shoulders relaxed. She came over to the table, and plonked her bag down, then looked at Harry.

“They’ve dropped all charges.”

“What –what?”

“Kingsley and I were just called to a meeting with Benningdean. Atkins was there too. They’ve
dropped the case.”


“That’s brilliant, Mate,” Ron exclaimed.

“Just like that?” Snape asked.

“Draco’s done a brilliant job with the press,” Mione said.

“You sure Draco isn’t sweet on you?” Ron asked, making Harry’s head whip round.

“Just sayin’,” Ron shrugged, but he was grinning, and cuffed Harry amicably on the arm.

“There’ve been stories every day about how you were treated,” Hermione continued, giving her husband a look, “analysis on the evidence, and so on and so on. That Neville was forced to give testimony under duress – he wasn’t teaching the afternoon Ginny was killed, but they slipped up there – he’d visited a nursery in Portugal and the owners have given a statement confirming it – so that completely destroys the credibility of the Prosecution on that score. They were foolish to bring him in at the last minute like that. And then Neville was killed by a member of the Wizengamot in the court, in full view of everyone. The case was shot to pieces at that point. There could be no argument that the trial was fair or that the members judging you were unbiased and of sound mind, which is, of course, a requirement when they sit.”

“So…so what happens now?” Harry asked. “I mean, it must be the Wizengamot’s decision, surely?”

“No, but you do have to go to court again,” Hermione said.

“What?” Ron demanded. “Oh – for the Judge to direct them, I suppose?”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed. “They have to sit, but the Judge will inform them that the Prosecution has withdrawn its case, and you’ll be free to go.”

“Wh –when?”

“As soon as they can reconvene. They’re aiming for the day after tomorrow. Anglehurst has been presiding over another trial, but it should finish tomorrow.”

“Oh god,” Harry said, shakily.

“So it’s all over?” Ron asked, beaming.

Hermione sat down. “Not exactly.”

Harry’s eyes shot up.

“They can bring the case again,” Hermione said flatly.

“Oh Merlin, no,” Harry said.

“It’s very unlikely,” she went on. “They’d have to have a really good case, and they won’t, because you didn’t do it,” she said firmly.

“But…people won’t know I didn’t do it,” Harry said. “Will they? I’ve not been cleared.”
“No,” Hermione said gently, “but you will be free. And we can concentrate on finding the real murderers rather than fighting this.”

Ron and Harry glanced at each other.

“That’s pretty much what we were saying this afternoon,” Ron said.

“There is one issue,” Kingsley said.

They all turned to look at him. He moved over to the cooler and brought out a jug of fruit juice, pulling out some glasses from the dresser.

“Kingsley,” Snape prompted.

Kingsley poured himself a glass and swallowed it down, throat bobbing.

“If you’re out, you’ll be in danger.”

“Rather less danger than I was inside, about to be offed,” Harry shrugged the concern away.

“There is that,” Hermione said, lips curving in a slight smile, and Harry looked at her and laughed.

“I’m serious,” Kingsley said.

Ron threw himself into a chair, reached over for the jug and poured some for himself and his wife. “If I was Harry, I’d take my chances too,” he grinned. “You can come and stay with us if you like, Mate,” he said.

“You could stay here,” Severus slid in.

Harry looked from one to the other, and tried not to blush. “If Grimmauld Place is safe enough for Albus, it’s safe enough for me. Not that I’m not grateful,” he said quickly, looking around at everyone. “Thank you.”

“Damn,” Ron said, “thought I’d got an extra pair of hands to help with Dad.” He leapt out of the chair. “Shit! Shit! I’m supposed to be picking him up!”

“Give my love to your Mum,” Harry called, as Ron strode to the floo.

“Yeah, sure. I – we need to check out The Leaky,” he said again. “We ought to get together. We need to plan.”

“Why don’t you get everyone together for tonight?” Kingsley suggested.

“Here?”

“Harry’s under my jurisdiction until the Prosecution formally withdraws its case,” Kingsley reminded them.

“Ah, Kingsley? Your mother’s arriving –“

The floo flared and Ron leapt back as a large, brightly dressed woman with the most enormous magenta headwear stepped through.

“- now,” Snape finished, standing up, and heading over to the fireplace. “Welcome, Gloria,” he said, bowing over her hand and kissing it. “May I introduce you to our friends?”
Odont sat in one of Lucius’ ornate gold chairs, gulping down a fine Burgundy. He’d called on Lucius three days after the dinner party, apologising for his unexpected arrival.

Lucius, had of course, been expecting him, and made his guest welcome.

The conversation had grazed several superficial subjects before Odont said, “I hope you weren’t offended by Brouchard, the other night. He can be a little – sharp.”

Lucius crossed one leg over the other, and put his glass down. He had barely touched the contents, though Odont was almost through his second glass. “I would have been less – interested – in – allying myself - with his views, if he had been less thorough.”

Odont spilt a drop of the wine on his chest, cursed, and withdrew his wand, attacking the stain with a quick spell. “You – then – well, that is good,” he said at last, tucking his wand back into his pocket.

Nothing said a lack of magic as much as a man who couldn’t cast an effective cleaning charm, Lucius thought with disdain.

“He - we - wondered if you would care to meet other like-minded individuals?” Odont continued, his jovial manner somewhat strained.

“I am past the age of being interested in idle talk,” Lucius said coolly. He examined at his fingernails. “I think there are several people who might find a more – active – approach, under my leadership, more – inspiring, shall we say.”

Odont’s eyes widened. “That – there are – that is, you may be underestimating – ”. He took a breath. “I think it might be useful for you to meet with us, before you go down that route. It would be unwise to step on people’s toes –”

Lucius’ steely gaze cut Odont dead.

“That is, I mean to say,” Odont tried to backtrack, “it would be – a waste of energies for two groups of like mind to be tackling the same areas, don’t you think? Allies can achieve so much more, isn’t that so?”


Lucius waited, saying nothing. He could see that Odont looked very uneasy, and he barely restrained himself from curling his lip in disgust. The man liked to think he was a central figure, but in truth, would soil himself if he actually had to point his wand at anyone.

The elf reappeared. Lucius nodded at it. The cups were poured and handed to each of them.

“I will meet with your friends,” Lucius said, making it sound a concession. He had no doubt that Odont had arrived thinking that he was bringing him a great gift; now he had turned the tables on him.

“I don’t think you will regret it,” Odont said, once he had fortified himself with another mouthful of wine. “We – traditionalists - need to stick together.”
“Perhaps,” Lucius said. He savoured the coffee.

Odont looked uncomfortable. “Nanette sends her thanks for bringing her home last night,” he offered. “I am grateful too, of course.”

“Artur is an interesting choice,” Lucius said, blandly, refilling Odont’s glass. Very interesting, after what he had discovered, following the boy two nights earlier. “You have a longstanding arrangement – or alliance, perhaps – with the Brouchard family?”

“No, no, it is quite recent. That is, I have known the family for some time, but not well. The lad is a little wild, perhaps, but these things change with time. Once he assumes his responsibilities in the new order, Nanette will be in an excellent position.”

“She seems a little – anxious – about her fiancé. Forgive me if it is inappropriate to mention it,” Lucius ventured.

Odont looked away. “He will not bother her. It will prove satisfactory.”

Hmmm, he knew, then. “Of course,” Lucius murmured.

“It’s a good match,” Odont said, as if he could not let it go.

He took another long swallow. Half the glass was gone already.

“As you say. Although I am sure that such a lovely girl would be prized by any suitor.”

Lucius was surprised by Odont’s reaction. He had expected that the man would be delighted at the praise. Instead, he looked – embarrassed.

“I should not have commented,” Lucius said. “Forgive me. I have grown fond of the girl, not having had a daughter or grand-daughter of my own to coddle.”

Odont gave a half-hearted laugh.

Lucius waited.

“He will do well,” Odont began.

Lucius had had enough. He drained his coffee, and stood up. “My apologies, Henri, had I known you were coming I would, of course, not have arranged to meet some friends –”

“You’re going out now?”

“Why not? Your daughter is out now.” He paused, seeing Odont’s face. “If I see her after my meeting, I’ll bring her to you at home, should she be disinclined to join her fiancé for his further activities.”

“I – thank you.”

Later, when Lucius returned Nanette, Henri insisted on him coming in.

“A small coffee,” Lucius said. “That is all.”
“It’ll be with you in just a moment,” Nanette smiled, hand on his arm. “Go and sit with Father.”

And again, she kissed them both good night.

Henri was three sheets to the wind. And it was obvious that he was keen to talk.

“Artur treated her well, yes?” he asked, almost at once.

Lucius sighed. “What are you looking for from me, Henri? Are you hoping I will say he was charming and attentive? I think you know he is not. Do you truly wish me to be honest?”

Henri nodded, his hands over his cheeks.

“She is fortunate if he ignores her,” Lucius snapped.

“Then – but – he does not hurt her?”

Lucius stood up. “If you had any fear of that, I cannot understand how you would countenance such an arrangement.”

He headed towards the door.

“She’s barren. What was I to do?”

Lucius stood with his back to the man.

“She won’t get a better offer. But Artur can give her a place in society. You know – you know that he – ”

“Fucks Muggle men in alleyways?” Lucius turned round to face him.

“I – he – he does?”

“Don’t pretend you did not know of his - interests. What I don’t understand is why he would accept Nanette. He will want children in the end. He knows, I take it?”

“These young people,” Henri said. “You understand, I am sure. Your grandson – ”

“Does not, to my knowledge, whore himself with strangers. He is not part of this discussion,” Lucius said flatly.

“Of course not. My apologies. I only wanted to say that young people are more difficult, these days, are they not? Headstrong. Artur is willing to marry to prevent his malaise becoming known. He says he will not touch her. He is not the heir, so his father is not concerned about the line. His older brother already has two sons. And if Artur comes to his senses as he grows older, he will divorce Nanette on the grounds that she hasn’t given him a child. No-one will be any the wiser about his – condition.”

“You seem more concerned for him than for your daughter,” Lucius sneered.

“He is drawing many young people into the cause…”

“And that matters more.”

“She’ll be important. Have a role in society. After the divorce, it will be quite acceptable for her to be a single woman.”
“Because everyone knows she is infertile?” Lucius strode across the room to stand by the fireplace. “Has she been medically assessed? How are you so sure?”

“She had a quidditch accident at school. That was why I withdrew her – the mediwitch at Beauxbatons did not do a full survey of her injuries. It was only later, that Nanette realised something was wrong.” Henri fidgeted. “Her mother died when she was an infant. She did not have anyone to discuss it with. By the time she confided in her aunt, one holiday, it was too late. She has seen all the best medical practitioners in France. What could I do? With the extent of the dowry I have placed on her, Artur’s parents agreed to the match.”

“Oh, I’m sure,” Lucius looked down his nose at him. “You did not think she might be better off having the money herself, finding her own way in life?”

Henri’s brows drew together. “She will need a place in society,” he said again. “Had I realised that you would ally to our cause – your grandson – it might have been a better match –”

“I will not repeat this, Odont. My grandson is not part of this discussion,” Lucius grated, with unexpected fury.

“Of course, of course, my dear friend: I meant no offence. But don’t you see? Once we have put the Muggleborns and half-breeds back in their place, we will need to rebuild. Purebloods will need to reproduce. That is the way forward, of course.” He shook his head despairingly. “Nanette will be at a disadvantage. I had to find her a position to carry her through.”

Lucius felt a chill in his bones. “And you, Henri? Why have you not remarried yet? Where is your commitment?”

Henri choked on the glass he had just raised to his lips.

“You are young yet. Did you think you would be excused?” Lucius asked.

“I – I have not found anyone – since my wife - ”

“However much we might miss our spouses,” Lucius said, “perhaps we have both been guilty of enjoying our freedom too much, eh? At present, my – incarceration – does not make me a good prospect,” he said, “though of course, that will change. But you, Henri? What is holding you back?”

“Nanette – I did not want to replace her mother –”

“Nanette will soon no longer be your concern. It is time to consider your position, Henri, and what you can offer to the cause.”

He strode to the door, leaving his host sitting there with his mouth open.

“I will see you shortly,” Lucius said, inclined his head, and left.

Outside, he chose not to apparate home. Instead, he began to walk. The streets were quiet at this time of night.

His thoughts whirred, and after a half mile, he forced himself to put some order to them.
Firstly, although he hadn’t yet met the ringleaders of the new group, it was clear that Pureblood elitism was at the heart of it. His own belief in the superiority of Purebloods hadn’t waned.

Although…Potter wasn’t entirely a Pureblood. Neither was Snape. And both of those were incredibly strong wizards.

And both apparently homosexuals, as was, unbelievably, Kingsley Shacklebolt. And Artur. And Scorpius.

Had some spell been cast on the Wizarding World? It was unnatural. And yet, not recent, judging from the different ages of the men concerned. No spell could have an effect over such a long period, over continents.

Scorpius. At least his grandson had the courage of his convictions, and did not hide behind the skirts of some unsuspecting woman, he thought.

Although…wasn’t that exactly what he would have expected of him? Wouldn’t he have been happier if Scorpius had hidden his perversion, as Artur was doing?

Before, it had never occurred to him to think of what such a marriage would mean to the woman concerned. Of course, he could see the advantages that Henri spoke of, regarding Nanette. But she seemed such a warm girl. He could feel the touch of her hand on his arm…Narcissa had not been a person who countenanced any form of casual touching. In the bedroom, of course, things had been different… Nanette, however, would receive no warmth from her husband, nor even know the pleasure of intimacy. And as for suggesting that she would be a bride to Scorpius…Henri was completely unbelievable!

Lucius walked slowly. There were thoughts he had to face, and it was difficult. There was his duty to Potter, for a start. It was that duty that had brought him here.

What was he to make of Potter? His power was immense, and yet he chose, in general, not to use it. He had always considered such behaviour a weakness. To have advantages and not to use them…and yet…Potter had different priorities than he did. If he had been working to cover up his homosexuality, he had done a good job. He had kept out of the public eye, married, and had three children. They were not in the press as hell-raisers, and, from what he had seen, appeared to be pleasant and well brought up. Potter had conducted himself with dignity, and yet a determination to find the truth at all costs. But he was also ruthless.

And he owned Lucius.

The people he had met so far – Artur and his friends, Henri, Brouchard senior and so on, were not people that…but…their sort was familiar. He moved easily amongst them. And…if he was to admit it to himself…the obnoxious, heavy drinking, charismatic Artur reminded him, unpleasantly, of himself. He too had persuaded others to join Voldemort, had thought he was going to be a leading light in a brave new world.

But what did they have to offer any more than Voldemort had? He hoped they had learnt something from the fall of the Dark Lord. But where did that leave him? He was not the same man as he had been when Voldemort first came to power, or indeed, at the end of Voldemort’s second bid.

Perhaps it was time to decide what he believed in.

And whether he could have any role in bringing that about.
The next day, Lucius once again visited George Weasley. He told him of the planned meeting, and gave him a list of the names he knew already, and their roles as far as he knew them.

Nanette’s name was not on the list.
Harry couldn’t believe the relief he felt when James came through the floo. The joy of it flooded through him, much more so than hearing earlier in the day that he was to be free.

James hesitated a moment, and then walked over to his father, hovering a pace in front of him. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

“Is it true?” he asked. “Ron said they’re dropping the charges.”

“So Mione and Kingsley say,” Harry said mildly. “It has to be officially confirmed.”

“Good. That’s good,” James said. “You’ll be going back to the house?”

“Yes, as soon as I’m free. Not that it hasn’t been brilliant here - ” he said, and then halted.

James nodded. Paused. “Better weather than at home: it’s been raining for days.”

“More people wanting to take holidays, I expect?” Harry suggested.

“Yeah, business isn’t bad,” James agreed.

“Bloody hell, can’t you just hug and make up?” Albus came up beside them. “Or is that too gay for you, James?” he added challengingly.

Harry wanted to thump him. It was enough that James was here, talking to him. But –

James snorted, and bumped his shoulder under the pretence of making room for Albus. “It’s good to see you again, Dad,” he said quietly. “Sorry I was a dickhead.”

Harry smiled, and just gave his back a pat. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’ve got some information, too,” James said, awkwardness forgotten.

“Then let us sit down,” Snape said, smoothly, coming up behind them. “Although do let me introduce you to Gloria.”

Snape gave Harry an amused look: Harry had had first hand experience of Gloria for the last few hours, and she was a force to be reckoned with.

Her personality seemed as bright and ebullient as her clothes, and he didn’t think he had ever met anyone whose name suited them better. Gloria was like a marvellous ship carving its way through the ocean of life, enjoying every minute. She had loved the new room Harry had made, fussied over him and Kingsley and Severus, taken a tour of the vineyard, and then put her feet up in the garden for a fortifying afternoon snooze.

They could hear her snoring from the kitchen.

Harry had nearly fallen over when she’d said she was a hundred and seven; she had more life in her than most people a quarter of her age.

Now she swamped the boys in huge hugs, ruffles over her huge bosom half covering their faces. She tousled their hair, told them they were poor sweet boys, and then sailed across the floor to moor herself at the head of the table.

Family
“Mother,” Kingsley began.

Everyone turned to watch.

“You need a fresh pair of eyes and ears on this, you surely do,” she said. “I told Harry so this afternoon, and he agrees, don’t you, chicken?”

There were choked coughs behind hands as the Saviour of the Wizarding World took this term of affection in his stride.

“If no-one minds?” he looked around the room.

No one dared.

They all settled at the expanded table. There were olives, and nuts, and some little pastries Gloria and Severus had knocked up, and wine, and iced water with lemon slices.

Harry had just thanked Draco for his part in helping him gain his freedom when the floo flared, stopping the conversation, and Charlie, followed by Bill, strolled out.

James, Albus and Harry both glanced from Bill to the hosts, but Bill just headed towards to the table, alongside his brother.

“Hey! Who’s looking after Mum and Dad?” Ron said, getting up.

“They kicked us out,” Bill said. “Told us they needed some time alone after being apart for so long,” he waggled his eyebrows.

“Molly’s home?” Harry exclaimed.

Ron nodded. “When I got to the hospital, they said she was free to go. No messing about with Mum, she wanted out that minute, in her nightie.”

“And she’s well? That’s great!”

“Yup. She’ll still need help with Dad, of course – Merlin knows, it’s hard work.”

“So you’re going back to work?” Andy leant forward and asked Ron.

“Ah. That’s another question. Only if we decide me being there can be of any use. Otherwise – I’m done.”

“Good,” Charlie said, pulling up a chair further down the table.

“What? Really?” Ron looked at his older brother.

“Even though looking after Dad’s been hard on you, you look a mile better than you did at work. So, yeah. But we’ll talk about that later. Sorry we were late, Kingsley. What’ve we missed?”

“I’m presuming you know the case against Harry is going to be dropped, which means we can all concentrate on finding Ginny’s killers. And who set up Neville. We’ve received some very good information through our spy, which we’re following up, and so is the spy. My own operatives are continuing to work on the wider picture: I know that seems frustrating, but I think that’s another strand that not only might prevent future attacks, but will, I hope, also lead us to the killers. Dorothy Atkins – she’s the Head of MLE,” he said, glancing at his mother, “was at the meeting Hermione and I had with Benningdean today about Harry’s case. She says Felton has been fired –”
“Good riddance!” George said.

“- and several Aurors including Franklin and Hencliffe have been given formal warnings because of their conduct.”

“What was that, then?” Gloria asked.

Harry prayed that Kingsley had not discussed the strip search with anyone.

“A number of poor calls, including ‘forgetting’ to tell Harry’s family that he’d been arrested –”

“Forgetting?” James snapped. “There was no ‘forgetting’ about it! It was deliberate. They kept Dad’s details off –”

“I know and understand your frustration,” Kingsley said, looking at the young man, “but unless Harry wants to press charges that’s all that’s going to happen. And I think it would be counterproductive to tie up any more time in court.”

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry you had to worry,” he said, looking from James to Albus, “but there’re bigger issues here.”

“Well, I think that’s shitty. One person has got the sack and the others have had their knuckles rapped? They were going to kill Dad!”

“You let it all out, boy,” Gloria said, patting his hand kindly.

James shut up at once.

“I think it’s important to focus on justice for those who did die,” Kingsley said quietly. “Ginny and Neville. The Ministry have the man who shot Neville,’ Kingsley went on, “but he’ll probably get away with the Imperius defence.”

“What about using Veritaserox on him?” Scorpius suggested.

Kingsley shook his head. “I think we’d end up in the same situation we had when we thought about using it for Harry’s trial. Because Severus invented it, and was employed by Harry, rather than the court, in your father’s trial, its use might seem to be compromised.”

“But didn’t you say a couple of other guys are authorised to administer it?”

“They are,” Snape said, “but because it had never been used before in Britain until Harry hired me for Draco, it’s inevitable that people will feel insecure about it, and that the evidence will be compromised by my association with the people involved. The case must be seen to be entirely above board.”

“Okay, but who is he saying Imperiused him? They must have got something from him?” Charlie asked. “I mean, he’s our first real, live, brain-active connection, isn’t he? And who is he, anyway?”

“Albert Thruxton,” Draco said. “We’ve been preparing a profile of him for The Prophet. Obviously, we can’t run it yet in case it influences his trial.”

“When did that ever stop The Prophet before?” Ron muttered, behind his hand to George.

“I’m trying to improve The Prophet,” Draco said, superciliously, picking him up on it. “To provide a paper that has standards –”
“And what standards were you applying in that ‘Which Witch Makes You Whizz?’ article last week?” Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“Minimum standard: 34D,” Charlie suggested, causing all the men around the table to laugh.

“That was a fun article,” Draco said, blushing. “In the entertainment section. We had to do an extra print-run that day: we sold out in an hour and a half,” he defended himself.

“Can you do a follow-up on Camilla Darling? She was scorching,” Albus grinned.

“There may be something in the pipeline,” Draco smirked.

“Bet she got a few pipelines going,” Teddy sniggered.

“I forget how young you all are,” Gloria sighed. An embarrassed silence fell.

“I beg your pardon—” Charlie began, but was cut off.

“In my day, men liked women who were an armful, not just a handful,” Gloria went on, crossing her arms under the weight of her embonpoint, drawing all eyes to the very full cleavage spilling out over the ruffles.

All the men stared, and looked away quickly. Kingsley rolled his eyes.

“I don’t think men these days would be able to manage a woman like you, Gloria,” Snape smiled.

“Manage me, boy? I can do the managing, I do assure you!”

Snape laughed, an easy, clear sound, and Gloria too, followed by the others.

“You are a wicked old woman, Mother,” Kingsley said, handing her a glass of wine.

“Not as wicked as I’d like to be,” she grinned. “Now, young man,” she said to Draco. “You were saying?”

Draco bowed at her. “I was just saying that I’m working towards a more honest and clear reporting on important issues, whilst maintaining our readership—”

“Yes, of course you are, my lovely, but what were you going to say about the Thruxton fellow?” Everyone watched Draco trying to come to terms with being called ‘my lovely’.

“ThruXTon is 65, married, has worked for Twilfit and TatTINGS since he left Hogwarts. Front of shop. You’ll have met him if you’ve shopped there?” He looked round, but everyone shook their heads. He nodded. “The shop’s become quite outdated: it seems to cater for the older generation these days: there’s been no movement with the times. But the customers tend to be from the old families—”

“Pureblood, you mean?” Teddy asked.

Draco nodded. “Yes. I think Thruxton might well have met a lot of old-school, like-minded wizards there. He has one daughter, Harriet, married to Paul Farnleigh. Three sons—”

“Oh, Merlin’s shiny cauldron! Hugo Farnleigh was in my class!” James exclaimed. “Less brain
than a flobberworm. I don’t think he passed any OWLs at all. He was still doing resits when we were doing NEWTS.”

“That could explain a lot,” Hermione said.

They looked at her.

“Anyone know what he’s doing now?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Hold on. I’ll be straight back.”

She went over to the floo. Everyone looked at each other.

“So what will you do if you give up being an Auror?” Draco asked Ron.

The conversation waged for five minutes, with various suggestions being made.

The floo flared, and Hermione stepped out, carrying a book.

“He’s ‘Travelling in Europe’”, she said. “I think we can take it that means he’s unemployed. His brother’s last three comments are ‘Flipping good night at Fred’s’, ‘Beat Archie at bingo!!!’, and ‘Nearly got hit by a boat when I jumped in the Thames, bloody freezing too! Brill!’ My betting is neither of these guys can find work.”

“What on earth is that book, dear?” Gloria asked.

“This?” Hermione held it up, open at a page where they could see a grinning boy making rude signs at them. “This is ‘Where’s that Wizard?’ It’s a bit like the old Facebook.” She looked at their blank expressions and tried to explain: “Umm, that was a worldwide computer thing Muggles used to use for keeping contact with friends, and finding out what everyone was up to without actually having to speak to anyone. But obviously this is for Wizards. You can subscribe and update your profile as and when you want. Then your friends can find out what you’re doing. Mostly young people use it to boast about the exciting things they’re up to. Oh,” she said, looking round. “I haven’t asked if any of you use it: sorry if I’ve offended you.”

The younger ones looked at each other and shook their heads. “Mobiles have far better applications,” Scorpius said, patting his pocket.

Hermione nodded, relieved. “It’s mostly used by wizards that have been less willing to accept the crossover with Muggle technology,” she said.

“And you have one, why?” Victoire asked.

“Needed it for a case,” Hermione shrugged. “A couple of years back. Most of the people that use it are too stupid to realise that it keeps a record of all their statements.”

“So, what are we thinking? That grandad was enraged because his kids couldn’t get jobs now that there are so many Muggle-born children around?” Bill asked.

“That’s what I’m thinking,” Hermione agreed. “He walked straight into a job from school and has it for life. He mixes all day with Purebloods who are, perhaps, moaning about the state of things these days, how their grandchildren can’t get work. Nothing to do with the fact that they’re so inbred they haven’t got two brain cells to rub together.”
“And he’s either got involved in this organisation or been used by them,” George said.

There was silence.

“Either way, he’s going to know who’s involved,” James leant forward, “isn’t he?”

“God, Grandfather shops there,” Scorpius said, looking quickly at his father. “I saw him coming out of it – ”

“Recently?” Ron asked, sharply.

“Last year, I think.”

“I shop there,” Draco said, making them all look at him. “Now and then. Their formal robes are excellent. One cannot assume all customers -”

“Of course not,” Snape said. “Nevertheless…I presume you didn’t notice anything untoward when you lasted visited, Draco?”

“I haven’t been there for…three years,” Draco said. “I just regard myself as a customer because I would have used them again next time I needed new formal attire.”

“Do you think that you might need something shortly?” Kingsley suggested.

Draco looked at him. “You want me to go and scope out the situation? You don’t think the fact that it might have been people there who set me up for Ginny’s murder might alert them to the reason for my interest?” he asked sarcastically.

“I cannot believe that if that was their strategy, there wouldn’t be some dissenting voices,” Snape said. “You are, after all, the son of Lucius Malfoy, and if you’ll forgive me for bringing it up, however unwillingly, you played a role in the war. The Dark Lord asked you, after all, to kill Albus Dumbledore.”

There was a silence round the table, taut and painful.

“You think some of them might feel guilty enough about the fact that I was chosen to take the rap that they might talk to me?”

“It’s possible.”

“I’m sorry,” Scorpius interrupted. “Apart from the whole fact that Dad has lived a – an honest and…and good…life, ever since, who are these people that he’s going to see? Thruxton is in prison and I don’t suppose all the others are just sitting around a tailor’s shop, having their inseam measured and plotting.”

Albus snorted a laugh, and there were smiles around the table, lightening the atmosphere.

“Well, I needed a new project,” Gloria said, sitting back.

“And just what do you mean by that?” Kingsley asked, an edge to his tone.

“I’m between jobs. And I sure as hell can measure an inseam. And I’ve got style,” she said, flinging her arms wide.

There was a moment’s silence.
“Perhaps rather too much of it,” Kingsley said, eyeing up the dazzling all-over wizard-made print of flowers bursting into bloom before withering, dropping off and new buds appearing. “And what do you mean, between jobs? You haven’t needed to work for fifty years.”

“Son, they sound as if they could do with a shake up there, and there’s obviously a vacancy with their man in prison. I’m the obvious choice.”

Everyone regarded her. For an old-fashioned tailors, Gloria’s …well…glory…hardly sprung to mind.

“You youngsters are all so…conservative,” she sighed.

“Yes, but so are the customers at Twilfit’s, I’m afraid, Mrs Shacklebolt,” Draco said respectfully.

“Nonsense! Old men? Nothing they like more than a bit of innuendo and a heaving bosom!” she exclaimed. “And I am certainly not Mrs Shacklebolt any more, and you’ve given me a good idea there, young man,” Gloria said. “I think I’ll use my third husband’s name.”

Kingsley thumped his head onto the table.

“And who was that?” Harry asked, eyes twinkling. He’d come to love Gloria already.

“May I introduce you to Her Highness Princess Gloria of Mtebeland,” Snape said, standing and bowing, an arm out as if presenting Gloria.

Gloria chuckled. “You remembered!”

“How could I forget? We had roasted hippogryph decorated with alligators’ eyes at your wedding feast.”

“And you said it was a terrible waste of an expensive potions’ ingredient,” Gloria laughed. “Ah, the Prince was a dear.”

“And fifty years younger than you, and you still wore him out,” Kingsley groaned.

“Even wizards have heart attacks,” Gloria said, sadly. “It was unfortunate that it was a triflingly embarrassing situation…”

“Yes, let’s not go into it,” Kingsley said quickly. “Do you really want to do this, Mother?”

“Of course I do! I’ll accept every invitation to go out from the customers, and I’m sure we’ll have some useful information in no time!”

Mouths were open all around the table.

“Now what?” Gloria said. “You think I’m too old to attract that sort of attention? Let me tell you –”

“No, don’t, Mother, please,” Kingsley begged.

“How many times have you been married?” George prompted.

“Only seven,” Gloria said. “I’m very choosy,” and she winked at him.

It was impossible not to laugh. Gloria had the most infectious personality Harry had ever come across. He could see now where Kingsley got his warmth from, and his ease at accepting all sorts of odd situations.
“Only one question,” Albus said. “Won’t they look you up and know that you’re Kingsley’s mother?”

“Bless you child, aren’t you the clever one? But that’s the extra bonus of using my Prince’s title: he was worried that any hint of his wives having a past might be a taint on the crown, but he wasn’t prepared not to have what he wanted. So he spelled it so that anyone looking us up cannot find any of our history at all. Oh, I loved that man,” she chuckled.

“You are one wicked woman,” George said in admiration.

“Oh, there’s life in the old girl yet,” Gloria waggled her eyebrows.

“You’re married, George,” Bill teased.

“Damn!” Gloria laughed. “Why are the best ones always taken?”

“Right,” Kingsley said, with a look at his mother that made everyone snigger, “let’s round up what else is new. Anyone got anything?”

“The Aurors have been in several times to see Daniel Poulter,” Teddy said straight away. “Since Neville mentioned him.”

“How’s his condition?” Albus asked.

“No change,” Teddy shrugged. “I don’t think there’s any hope there.”

“What about at Hogwarts?” Harry asked. “Any news on who set up Hugo and Neville?”

“Atkins said that the intruder wasn’t caught, but that security at the school has been tightened,” Kingsley reported.

“I’ve been to Hogwarts,” James said.

They all turned to look at him.

“To talk to Mrs Banton. The school housekeeper,” he said.

“On your own?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Dad, on my own,” James rolled his eyes.

“And?” Albus asked, intervening quickly.

“They have a map, but it’s not like ours. You can see people moving on it, but not who they are. I asked Mrs Banton how it worked, and you won’t believe this!”

They all looked at him.

“Well?” Teddy asked.

“The elves put something in the wash! So really it’s their clothes that show up. Everyone uses the house-elves for laundry, so the system works. And they put something just slightly different in the teachers’ wash, so they show up as a different colour.”

“That’s quite ingenious,” Snape said coolly.
“I bet you’re already wondering what they’re using,” George grinned at Snape.

“Several possibilities come to mind,” Snape said, and George laughed.

“But what about strangers? Does that mean they don’t show up?” Victoire asked.

“No, because they’ve got the whole place sort of sealed. So people who come in – apart from those who fly –” he grinned at Snape, “get given a Visitors’ name label.”

“Which has the potion, or whatever it is, on it,” Hermione deduced.

James nodded.

“So you could fly in on a broomstick,” Harry suggested. “Seems a bit odd to have left that option open.”

“Understandable, because sealing the sky is overwhelmingly difficult. We – Alb – Professor Dumbledore and the other staff – had discussed it several times. On the other hand, there was always warding on the perimeter,” Snape said. “That would be open to adaption quite easily.”

“So, anyone could have flown in,” Hermione sighed.

“Well, here’s the interesting part,” James leant forward. “As far as Mrs Banton knows, that was never suggested to the investigating team from the MLE.” He looked around the table.

“Because to do so would have revealed the weakness of the defences,” Ron said. “Bloody hell!”

“But – that means that they’re saying someone inside was guilty,” Victoire said, frowning.

“With all the hundreds of people at Hogwarts, that’s a safe option,” Hermione said. “It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“The security – and the secrecy element – are worrying me,” Snape said.

“Too right – it’s a school,” Ron said. “I mean, I can understand if they implemented extra security after the attack on Hugo, but before? And not to mention it?”

“Another thing I want to know,” Snape said, looking at James, “is why Mrs Banton is suddenly revealing all this to you.” He saw James startle back, and added, “I do not mean that offensively. But it is odd, is it not, that she should tell you, rather than, say, the Aurors, or even someone such as Neville, who, I am sure, would have discussed this if he had known what was going on.”

“I think it’s because of Dad,” James said, looking at his father. “And because I asked.”

“Because you asked?” Ron gawked.

“I think she was concerned before, when she hinted to me about the security on the post and everything, but with Hugo having that done to him, and Neville – well, I think she thought enough was enough. But she also isn’t sure who to trust. She probably would have told the Aurors, but she was never questioned.”

Ron’s lips were tight. “Ed was sent back to the office. It wasn’t his – my – team that were allocated the case. Not even an Auror team. It was a SHIT job.”

“Certainly sounds like it,” Draco said, then held up his hands when Ron looked at him. “It’s no criticism of you, Ron, for Merlin’s sake! And you can’t take responsibility for the whole
“Especially as you haven’t even been there,” Hermione said, putting her hand over her husband’s.

“I suspect with the Headmaster and that prat Donnelly to contend with, and interviewing pupils and other members of staff, the housekeeper didn’t register on the horizon as someone to bother with,” Bill said fairly. “Anyone who was at school in Filch’s time wouldn’t think of the caretaker being an important source of information. “

There were definite snorts of amusement at that.

“And there’s another thing,” James added.

They all quieted down and looked at him again.

“Well, she’s made a second map, for starters.”

“Ye-es?” Kingsley queried, wondering where James was going with that.

“She’s really – picky, I suppose – about doing her job properly. And the person on duty overnight has the map. Well, she got a bit fed up with it and made her own copy.”

“She must have fairly strong magic,” George mused. “Filch was a squib.”

“Yeah, that’s probably why the school is cleaner and there aren’t broken toilets flooding the floors and all that crap,” Ron said. “What? I took a leak when I was there, alright? I don’t think any of the toilets ever had all its loos in working order when we were there, did it?”

“True,” Harry grinned.

“Anyway,” James continued, “she didn’t tell anyone, and then she noticed that there’s a meeting every Thursday evening in one of the unused rooms on the fourth floor. It’s not on the schedule, and the new management are all for schedules and plans. So she kept her eye on it, and a staff dot joined the others just before the meeting broke up.”

“Probably just a teacher on rounds telling them all to go to bed,” Snape said. “What is attracting your interest on this, James?” he added, with remarkable restraint, Harry thought.

“Well, she was interested because it occurs on her night off, so if she didn’t have the map she wouldn’t know about it. The meeting isn’t listed, and the teacher always turns up at the end.”

“So she suspects some sort of secret club,” Severus said.

James nodded. “I don’t think she would have been bothered if the teacher didn’t always show, and if it wasn’t conveniently when she shouldn’t know about it.”

“How many pupils are involved? Did she say?”

“Seven.”

“And how long has it been going on?”

“Well, she noticed it a month ago, and she’s been keeping her eye on it.”

There was silence, while people thought about it.
“So,” James said, rubbing his hands on his thighs, “I thought I might borrow the invisibility cloak, Dad, fly in and have a look.”

There was an even deeper silence, as James obviously waited to be shot down.

“You have an invisibility cloak?” Scorpius asked. “That’s – I mean – wow.”

“Or you and I could fly in on our brooms, and go under it together, Harry,” Ron said enthusiastically. “Merlin, we had some fun with that cloak, didn’t we?”

James opened his mouth.

“James has obviously set up a rapport with Mrs Banton,” Kingsley said. “Her help might become crucial if a problem arises.”

“Do you think the old secret entrances are unwarded?” George asked.

“No. No, no no,” Scorpius said, shaking his head. “Dad, you never mentioned secret entrances, or invisibility cloaks, or mer-people. And how come we didn’t have any of that when we were there?” he turned to Andy.

“Too busy doing other stuff?” Albus leant forward, waggling his eyebrows, a smirk on his face.

Scorpius and Andy turned to look at him, and grinned.

“True,” Andy said, his hand touching Scorpius’ on the table for just a moment.

“You know,” Scorpius said, looking away from Andy at last, “I have to say, the Headmaster was really good about us.”

“In what way?” George asked.

“Oh, some guys objected to Andy visiting in my room, or vice versa, whereas any straight guys could go into another boy’s room. And girls could. When we were in the sixth form. The Headmaster refused to change the rules, which meant we could still see each other.”

“That was fairly forward-thinking for the wizarding world,” Hermione said. “Or maybe the wizarding world was more –accepting – in the past, and it had never been an issue,” she wondered aloud.

“Well, it was good news for us,” Scorpius said. “I think he had to fight flack from the parents too.”

“His attitude has either changed, or he is seriously influenced by Donnelly, then,” Severus said.

Everyone looked at him.

“Donnelly as good as implied I might be a child molester when I was helping Hugo walk,” Severus shrugged.

“Oh, Severus! I’m so sorry!” Hermione apologised.

“The Headmaster didn’t actually say anything,” James looked away.

“True,” Severus agreed. “I only mention it because of Scorpius’ comments. His silence spoke loudly. How long has Donnelly been at the school? Was it after Brown made his judgement?”
Scorpius and Andy looked at each other. “Probably, yeah.”

“It’s just another avenue to explore,” Snape commented.

“I’ll go with you,” Harry said, looking at James. He’d been silent for a while.

“What? Oh, into Hogwarts? We both can’t fit under the cloak, whatever Ron thinks,” James said. “Have you tried it on recently?”

“I don’t need to,” Harry said, quietly. “I don’t want you to do it, but I have to accept that you’re grown up. We’ll both go, and cover each other’s backs. I think you could tell Mrs Banton, but I’d rather we didn’t place her in danger.”

“But – what’s your plan here, Harry?” Kingsley said.

Harry scraped back his chair. “Back in a mo’,” and he left the room.

“Has he gone to get something? He hasn’t got another cloak, has he?” Victoire asked.

Hermione snorted. “That one is one of a kind,” she grinned at Ron.

As the seconds moved into a minute, and then two, Gloria got up and put the kettle on. “I think we could all do with a good cup of coffee,” she said, “if we’re going to be here all night.”

“Has he just gone to the loo or something?” Teddy asked, after another minute.

Victoire giggled.

“Knowing – FUCK!” Ron leapt out of his chair, twisting round as he drew his wand.

Instantly, all the older wizards and witches at the table had theirs out, and were standing, tense.

And then, Harry appeared before them.

“Sorry, Ron. Didn’t shit yourself, did you? Oh, sorry, Gloria,” Harry said in embarrassment.

“When the bloody fucking – Merlin, sorry, Gloria -” Ron said as well, “hell did you learn to do that?”

“You can make yourself invisible?” Draco asked for confirmation as he pocketed his wand.

“Albus – Dumbledore - could do it,” Snape said, looking at the younger man with narrowed eyes. “Did he teach you?”

Harry shook his head. “I knew Albus could, so – well – a few years ago, I started playing with magic a bit, trying to do bits and pieces, and I remembered Albus could do that, so I looked it up in a book at home.”


“Er, it was in the library. One of the Black collection. I think it was called, ‘The Inner and Outer Eye, and How to Deceive Them’, or something like that. Most of the stuff in there seemed rubbish, sort of Trelawney-type crap, but there were a few interesting spells that I had a go at.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?”
Harry shrugged. “We tended to just talk about the kids in those days when we got together, or quidditch matches, or everyday stuff. I was just playing with magic in my spare time.”

Snape snorted, and looked at Kingsley.

“Did you learn anything else useful?” Kingsley asked.

Harry shrugged. “You don’t really know a thing’s useful till you need it, do you? I learnt some helpful stuff about varnishes.”

“Varnishes?” Victoire said blankly.

“So they can cope with the flexing space-creation entails,” Harry explained. “Most of it wasn’t anything I thought anyone else would be interested in.”

“Quite,” Draco choked. “Not exactly on the same level as making yourself invisible, though, which I would have thought would be quite useful.” He looked at Harry sharply. “Especially given – ” he paused. “Did you follow Ginny? Spy on her?”

There were gasps around the table.

“I did not,” Harry said with dignity.

“Why not?” James asked.

Harry turned to look at him.

“Because I didn’t, alright?”

“You must have been tempted, Mate, right?” Ron asked.

“Sometimes we choose not to know things,” Gloria interjected. “Very wise too, young man.”

Harry looked down. “It wasn’t as if – I mean – until Draco – Ginny – it was away. Not – not at home. I was hardly going to chase her round Europe spying. Finding out – for sure – wouldn’t have made any difference, anyway. I – we – had a family. I wanted us all to be together,” he swallowed.

The silence was profoundly awkward.

“Thanks, Dad,” Albus said. “It – for us it was good. Thank you.”

Harry nodded. “Good,” he said tightly.

“So why did you go out of the room?” Hermione asked, changing the subject.

Harry gave her a grateful nod. “That’s an important question. If you see me do it, you can see me. If you don’t know I’m there, you’re not looking for me.”

He waved his wand over himself in a complicated movement, and was gone.

Except –

“Oh! I can see you! Just,” Victoire said.

“That’s – well, that’s cool,” Andy nodded with admiration.

“So, that’s a spell worth teaching us,” Scorpius put in cheerily. “Can we start the lessons again? I
really miss them.”

“It is weird that you leave Hogwarts and that’s it,” Albus nodded.

“You do learn stuff in your field,” Teddy interjected. “I’ve learnt lots of medical spells and potions.”

“I think starting the lessons again are a good idea,” Hermione said. “Though – Ron and I have talked about this…” she looked to her husband.

“We were just saying,” Ron took up the thread, “that this isn’t like last time. I mean, we don’t have a defined enemy, as yet. Their targets so far have been individuals. Or, more to the point, they’re achieving their objectives, or what we perceive to be their objectives, by targeting individuals. We may never have – and I hope to Merlin this is the case – a battle like The Battle of Hogwarts, or the destruction that there was last time. If we can just nip this in the bud….”

“I agree,” Kingsley said. “Seeking information is a big part of what we’re doing at the moment. Having said that, I think it’s a good idea to be prepared.”

“Even if we were at peace, properly, I’d really like the chance to keep learning some new stuff,” Scorpius said.

Most of the young people nodded in agreement.

“How’s Tuesday night’s for everyone?” Hermione asked. “Once a week, and practice on your own in between. Any adults - that is, I mean us older lot - who can help teach, come along, and then everyone else join us after for a catch-up session like this?”

There were nods of agreement.

“I’ll come as long as my shifts allow,” Teddy said, “and I’ll catch up with one of you on anything I miss,” he looked at Victoire and the other youngsters.

“And we’ll go to Hogwarts on Thursday, Dad?” James asked.

Harry looked to Kingsley and Severus. “Yes.” He turned to Albus. “Would you come along as well? In your cat form? We could do with you keeping guard for us, and as a cat you’d have the awareness, as well as being able to prowl around without attracting attention.”

“You’re not just saying that?” Albus swallowed.

Harry shook his head. “I don’t want to put anyone into danger, but if we are going to do this, let’s do it with as much caution as possible, and use our resources. We need you.”

“Yes,” Albus grinned. “Do I fly in on my own broomstick?”

“Oh my god,” Hermione chuckled. “Harry, you ought to dress as a hag and have Albus in cat form at the back!” she startled laughing hard, covering her eyes.

“What am I missing?” Draco asked, after a moment.

Hermione looked at the blank faces in the room, although Snape and Harry were also smiling.

“Muggles always have this picture of witches riding on broomsticks with a black cat on the back,” Snape explained.
“How on earth does it hold on? It must be agony on the claws,” Albus commented.

Hermione was giggling so hard she had to scrub away tears. “Oh, it doesn’t hold on, it just sits there.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” Albus expostulated. “How is it supposed to do that?”

“Magic?” Hermione chuckled.

“What nonsense!” said Albus. “I shall ride my own broomstick. How anyone can think a cat could ride like that –“

He was cut off by Hermione laughing even harder.
Everyone had gone, and Harry had, perhaps, thirty six hours left.

Thirty six hours, and then he could resume his previous life.

Although he couldn’t.

Not the life that he’d been living before all this had begun.

He didn’t know what sort of life he could have: anything was on hold until Ginny’s killers had been found, until this new threat had been dealt with.

And yet, the small things of day-to-day life went on. Eating. Paying bills –and thank heaven that wasn’t a worry! Making cups of tea. His children. Friendships.

And that brought him to now. Here he was, for another thirty six hours, with Severus and Kingsley.

And Gloria.

He was glad of her presence. He had excused himself, and left Kingsley and Severus with Gloria, still sitting at the kitchen table, talking. He didn’t want to interrupt their family time any more than he had done already.

He couldn’t sleep.

He lay in his bed, facing the window. The night breeze played over his shoulders, though he had a sheet and light blanket pulled up to his waist, giving him a sense of cosiness. From below, he could hear the sounds of conversation, if not the words. Gloria’s voice rose and fell, almost constantly erupting into laughter. Kingsley’s deep tones had some of the pattern of her speech, whilst Severus spoke less, but usually caused Gloria to laugh when he did.

He heard the sounds of glasses clanking into the sink, Gloria wishing them goodnight, and then Kingsley’s and Severus’ footsteps on the stairs.

It was ridiculous that hearing them should make him feel lonely. Maudlin that it should make him wonder whether he would ever again be walking up a staircase with someone else.

Draco had said that he would move on, despite having loved Ginny.

Kingsley and Severus had made comments about welcoming him before, but nothing further had been said. He really didn’t understand what they were suggesting. Three men couldn’t live together, could they? Not….live together? Sleep together? And even if they could, he couldn’t see himself…because…how would it work? He shifted in the bed, realising that he was getting hard just thinking about it. But, as he knew, fantasy and reality were two different things. Kingsley and Severus fitted so well together, were so close, in that casual, worn-in way long-term couples had. He’d just be in the way. And…they’d get frustrated with him. Even if he could…even if…He shifted again, his cock brushing against the sheet. He stifled a groan, and the urge to wrap his hand around it. He heard the bathroom door shut, and then the door of their bedroom. The creak of the bed springs.

Kingsley and Severus had a large, mahogany bed. When they weren’t in it, they left the door open
so the air could circulate, and it was impossible for him to go to the bathroom without seeing it. He wondered if they were making love. Did they do it every night? Surely they couldn’t? Did they sleep wrapped in each other’s arms? Unconsciously, he pulled the sheet up, over his shoulders, as if the cool cotton would compensate for the lack of human warmth, comfort.

They’d said – they’d offered…that he could be their lover, or try sex with them to see if he was gay.

He didn’t think he could do that. If it didn’t work, the trying thing, then surely he would have ruined the friendship in the process? He could just imagine the awful embarrassment.

They’d told him he could stay as a friend, just a friend.

The idea warmed him. He knew it was an escape here, from all the things he didn’t want to have to deal with, but he didn’t think that was all it was. When he was working in the bothy, he was genuinely content. He used to be content working away in the back of his shop too, to be fair, but here, there was something about the cool interior and the warmth outside, the sun lurking to brush his skin and delight him. There were the lunches when Severus appeared and shared crusty bread and ripe cheese and olives with him, or Alejandro or Rosita stopped in to talk to him, or a couple of their children came giggling to sit and share a drink of juice with him. There were the evenings with Kingsley and Severus, cooking, eating, talking. He liked it all.

But…if only…if only he didn’t feel this…this lust, this desire all the time. If only it wasn’t lurking in the background, flaring to life at the smallest things: the bulging movement of Kingsley’s bicep when he shifted a chair, or the slimness of Snape’s hips as he moved from chopping board to pan. He didn’t think he could just come and be here all the time, just as a friend.

And there were his children. His life in London. His shop.

And Ginny’s murderers, and the bastards who had set up Neville.

His first task, when he was free, if they really did set him free, was to go and see Hannah. He didn’t know what he could say. Well, he knew from Ginny’s death, that there really wasn’t anything anyone could say.

But just the fact that they’d tried, meant everything.

With one thing sorted out, he fell, at last, into sleep.

The next day was surprisingly, and pleasantly, ordinary. Kingsley had gone to work, and Gloria announced over breakfast that she was going to go and introduce herself to the management of Twilfit and Tatting’s. To this end, she was wearing a most astonishing outfit in canary yellow, with headwear that appeared to have a huge sapphire in the centre. Sapphires and diamonds, set into six hoops, sparkled at her ears. Several rings dazzled on her fingers. Harry had never seen anyone who looked less like they needed a job in a shop, but Gloria was a woman who was used to getting her way, and if anyone could do it, wearing a vaults-worth of jewelry, she could. He wished he could be a fly on the wall at her interview.

Severus had disappeared into his laboratory, and Harry made his way across the fields to the bothy. No-one troubled him all day, and he concentrated on the piece he was working on. As the afternoon drew in, he left his tools tidy, as he always did. He could not assume that everything
would be over tomorrow, that he would be leaving. Nevertheless, he could not help looking around the bothy, a brush of farewell in his gaze.

He opened the door of the kitchen to find Severus, as usual, at the cooker.

“Merlin, that smells fantastic,” he breathed in deeply, delighted that Severus was making one of his favourite dishes.

“I can smell linseed on you,” Severus said, looking over at him. “Go and have a shower and then come and give me a hand.”

Harry grinned and bounced up the stairs two at a time.

He came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel to see Kingsley at the top of the stairs, leaning over the banister as Gloria’s voice floated up to him. He turned, hearing the door. Harry felt Kingsley’s eyes slide over him, and even as heat rose in his cheeks blood was pooling elsewhere. He felt inordinately glad that he was fit again.

“Yes Mother,” Kingsley said, in a sing-song voice, his gaze not leaving their perusal.

Harry had to force his legs to move, to take the few steps to his bedroom. His hands clutched at the towel, his rising erection shifting the fabric.

Kingsley straightened, turning towards him. Harry’s hands dropped, and his legs stopped moving.

He saw Kingsley drag in a breath, take a step…

“Kingsley!”

Even Harry heard Gloria.

With a shake of his body, as if to release the tension, Kingsley’s foot dropped back. He flashed Harry a smile, and then was gone, down the stairs,

Harry almost fell into his bedroom, leaning back against the door as he shut it behind him.

God!

He dragged in a breath, felt the fabric of the towel dragging over the heavy weight at his groin.

He had ignored his responses last night, but now…he fell to his knees, dragged the towel open, and took hold off himself. He’d tried so hard not to think of them, but now – all that was gone. He shut his eyes, his teeth gritted. Images of smooth dark skin and bulging muscles flooded his senses. His left hand came up and pinched his nipple…he could see a white arm across his chest, imagine the lean press of Severus behind him, long supple fingers, grasping his throat, tilting his head back…his head thumped into the door…his hand squeezed, flew, his thumb smeared precome, he imagined a tongue…he had to shove his fist in his mouth to muffle the involuntary moan that was wrenched from him as he convulsed…

Two minutes passed; three, as Harry leant forward, then back against the door, breath slowly returning to normal. He was just standing up, legs tight from the position, when there was a knock.

“Hold on!”
He grabbed his jeans, and pulled them on before opening the door.

Kingsley stood there, one arm leaning against the door frame.

Harry had a moment of horror, wondering whether Kingsley had been standing like that on the other side the whole time.

“You didn’t hear us calling? Severus says hurry up, or it’ll burn.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Harry nodded. “I just need to get a clean shirt –”

Kingsley leant forward as he turned away. The edge of a finger scooped something from Harry’s chest. He watched as Kingsley popped his finger into his mouth, all the while looking at Harry.

“A cleaning charm might be a good idea, as we have company,” he murmured. “Not that I don’t prefer you as you are.”

His gravelly voice stirred in Harry’s stomach, but he looked down at himself. His come had spattered his chest, and he felt his cheeks going bright red as he looked at Kingsley.

“Fucking hell!” Kingsley groaned. “Do you have any idea how adorable you look?”

“I’m sorry – ”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there watching you,” Kingsley cut in. “And forgive me for breaking the rules, but – ”

He stepped forward, looking for permission from Harry, and the next moment, his tongue lapped over his chest, little movements, like a cat, licking up the evidence.

Harry moaned. He couldn’t help it.

Kingsley stood back, lipped his lips.

Harry’s eyes were glued to his tongue. His cock was already twitching again.

Kingsley adjusted himself blatantly, a hand down the front of his trousers, followed by a detumescence spell.

Shakily, Harry turned away and performed a cleaning spell.

“I –” he swallowed.

Kingsley stepped over, and picked up the shirt Harry had laid out on the bed. He stood behind him, helping Harry into it, then turned him round and did up the buttons.

It felt silly, being dressed. Harry couldn’t remember anyone ever dressing him, not even Petunia, when he was little. And yet... Kingsley made it feel so natural.

“Come on,” Kingsley said, easily, a hand in the small of his back leading him out of the room, “or Severus will kill us twice: once for doing anything without him, and again for ruining his meal. And he’ll kill me a third time for breaking the agreement.”

And that was that.
Down the stairs, Gloria had one of Rosita’s children on her lap; Alejandro, Hermione and Severus were discussing something standing over by the cooker, and Albus, James, Ron and Rosita were cheering Rosita’s two older children who were having a sword fight with some wooden swords Harry had made them. One of the children instantly threw the sword down, when she saw Harry, and dived across the floor to hug him round the legs.

“Is it happening then?” Harry asked, picking her up and giving her a peck on the cheek, even as he turned to Kingsley.

“You didn’t tell him yet?” Gloria asked. “What on earth else did you talk about up there?”

Harry felt the blush rising, and Severus glancing sharply at him, but Kingsley just said easily, “Getting him into a shirt,” and as Severus raised an eyebrow, he added to James and Albus, “Good thing you brought some clothes over for court tomorrow, this is the only shirt he has. The boy lives in tee-shirts,” he chuckled.

“What’s wrong with this one for court?” Harry asked, looking down. He’d be wearing a robe on top, after all.

“That stripey collar is not going to look good peeking over your robe in all the photos,” Gloria said. “I told your boys to bring your robe, and a shirt, and I took the liberty of ordering you a new set in the right size.”

“What?” Harry said.

“You’re my first customer, now I’m a new employee at Twilfit and Tatting’s,” Gloria’s big grin was infectious. “They’ll be delivered to your house in the morning.”

“Merlin’s knickers, Mother, what have you done?” Kingsley buried his face in his hands, to much laughter.

“Just cementing my place in the company,” she beamed. “Harry and his new clothes are going to be in all the papers tomorrow.”

“Mother, the man who killed one of Harry’s best friends worked there. If anyone else in the company is responsible for this, are they going to want to dress Harry Potter?”

“I’m not going to be wanting to wear their clothes, that’s for sure,” Harry said seriously, kissing Amelia on the top of her head before putting her down again.

“They could poison the fabric or something, couldn’t they?” Albus asked, looking to Snape.

“It’s difficult, but possible,” Snape said slowly, “though it would destroy the company reputation.”

“But if Harry wears their clothes, it will show that he doesn’t suspect anyone else there,” Gloria suggested.

“There is that,” Kingsley brushed a hand over his chin.

Harry shook his head. “I’m sorry, Gloria, I just can’t.”

“Oh well,” Gloria said. She looked at Harry. “I like a man of principles,” and she crunched up the parchment that was in front of her. The child on her lap started wailing. “Shhh,shhh,” Gloria soothed it, spreading out the paper again and smoothing it with a wave of her hand. “Good thing Matteus here had drawn all over it,” she hugged the child. “I hadn’t actually got around to sending
“And with that, I think we’ll eat,” Severus said.

The evening passed with laughter. All too soon, Rosita and Alejandro rounded up their children to take them home to bed.

“You’ll come and see us, Harry? Come and meet our little one?” Rosita patted her belly.

“I’ll look forward to it,” Harry smiled. “Thank you for everything, you two.”

“It is us who should be thanking you,” Alejandro said.

“Thank you!” one of the children piped up, and the others joined in.

“There: all done,” Harry grinned. They all kissed him, from child to adult, and were gone.

“Do you want a party at home?” Hermione asked. “You know, tomorrow night?”


“Some people have suggested you might want to celebrate your freedom,” she said tentatively.

“With Ginny’s killers still out there? No,” Harry said.

She nodded, “I thought not, but I needed to check.”

“I’d offer to come round for a few beers, but I’ll probably be sick of the sight of it,” Ron said.

“Seems unlikely,” Harry grinned. “Why’s that, then?”

“I’m going to be working at The Leaky for a bit,” Ron said, slightly defensively.

Harry looked between Ron and Hermione.

“Seriously?”

Ron nodded. “Hannah had shut it because she needed a break, and I talked to work today and frankly, they’re willing to pay me not to go in until Ginny’s case is sorted, so I’m going to go and do some shifts at The Leaky. Keep the passage open: one of my mates at the Ministry said the word was that the Ministry were thinking of taking it over: shutting The Leaky and having some sort of official border going on.”

“I don’t believe it!”

Ron nodded. “So I went to talk to Hannah, and we’re trying to get two or three of us to take over the day-to-day business, while she works out whether she wants to keep it on or not.”


Ron looked at Hermione. “I’m going to do days,” he said. “The evening shift is more popular, so we should find some cover more easily. And working the day, I can be home with Hermione in the evening.” He slung his hand over her shoulder.
“Think of the muscles he’ll get from hauling barrels around,” Harry grinned at his friend.

Hermione rubbed a hand on Ron’s stomach. “After scoffing himself non-stop whilst he was home, he could do with a bit of physical exercise,” she teased.

“Hey!” Ron said. “I’ll give you physical exercise!” He looked up and winked at Harry and the men behind him. “Now I haven’t got Dad in the next room…”

“Never heard of silencing charms, Ron?” Snape asked, eyebrow raised.

“Growing up in the Burrow? Of course,” Ron smirked. “But just having him there on the other side of the wall – it didn’t feel right.”

“He’s a prude,” Hermione gave him another pat.

They all laughed, and Ron said, “I’ll show you who’s the prude,” and gave Hermione a kiss right on the lips.

“Enough! Be gone!” Snape proclaimed, making them all laugh.

“We’ll be off then,” Ron gave a little mocking bow. “Thanks Severus, Kingsley,” he shook their hands. “Lovely to see you again, Gloria.”

Hermione hugged them all, and they were off.

Albus and James stood up too. “Will you be home tomorrow?” Albus asked tentatively, looking at his father.

Harry was aware of the pregnant silence that filled the room.

“Yes, assuming they really do free me. I won’t believe it till it happens. But I’ve some visits I need to make.” He turned to Snape and Kingsley. “Will it be alright if I leave my stuff here till after the hearing? Just to be sure?”

The silence was a moment too long.

“As we’ve said before,” Severus said, getting up and taking glasses to the sink, “regard this as another home. You may leave anything here you like.”

“No need to stand on ceremony: our door is always open to you,” Kingsley added.

Harry wondered if the others could hear the undertones in Kingsley’s voice. It was a common enough expression between friends and families, but he couldn’t help thinking of the bedroom door upstairs.

He couldn’t help thinking that Snape was…chilly.

“If I am freed, I’ll probably be busy tomorrow – I need to call on Hannah, and Molly and Arthur, for a start. But if I could drop by the next day for my tools…?”

“As Severus said, regard this as your home. Come and go as you will. If we’re out we’re out, if we’re in, we’d be delighted to see you.”
Harry lay in bed, later, knowing that he had hurt his hosts, but it was the best way.

Wasn’t it?

Twelve hours later, he stood in the court, as the benches emptied, and the cheers of his friends died down. A free man.

Harcourt strolled over and shook Hermione’s hand, then turned to Harry, holding out his hand.

Harry stared at it.

“No hard feelings?” Harcourt said. “Your Mrs Weasley did an excellent job. Congratulations.”

“If you’d won, I’d be dead, or worse,” Harry said bluntly.

The hand dropped, and the smile fell from Harcourt’s face.

“It’s a job, Mr Potter. Someone has to do it.”

“I don’t have to like it,” Harry said.

“No, of course,” Harcourt shoved his hands into his pockets, and turned to walk away.

“You were good,” Harry said.

Harcourt turned. “I am good.”

“That can be dangerous, if you don’t have a conscience,” Harry went on.

“It isn’t about my conscience,” Harcourt said. “I don’t get to pick and choose. It isn’t for me to decide who is innocent or guilty: only to present the case I’ve been given.” He gestured around the emptying room. “The Wizengamot are there to decide. Usually,” a slight grin curved his lips.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I know. Nervewracking being on the other end of it when you’re innocent, though.”

“I can understand that. I’ll be doing exactly the same when your wife’s killers come to trial, though. I wish you luck in finding them, Mr Potter,” and he turned away.

“Harcourt.”

Again, the man looked back.

Harry held out his hand. “Do that,” he said, as they shook.

“That was well done, Harry,” Hermione said, as the man walked away.

“You work was well done,” Harry said. They’d already hugged once, but he took her hands and they sat down, still holding them. “Seriously, I – I’m lost for words. I can’t thank you enough - ”

“And you can stop that right there,” she said, squeezing his fingers. “We’ll always do everything we can for each other, alright? It’s an indisputable truth. And when we can’t be there, Severus always is, and now we’ve passed it on to the children,” she smiled.
Harry grinned, and snorted, and felt tears suddenly coming into his eyes. He pulled his hand away, fumbling for a hanky, and knowing he didn’t have one – but it seemed someone had put one in his pocket.

“Oh, Harry,” Hermione said, as he blew his nose furiously.

The court had emptied.

Harry pulled himself together. He knew the press would be waiting outside.

But so would his family, and the people he loved.

As they entered the atrium, they were blinded by the lights of the cameras going off.

“A statement, Harry! Give us a statement!”

“Who d’yer think killed yer wife, Harry?”

“Are you going to take the Ministry to court for their treatment of you, Mr Potter?”

“Are yer shackin’ up wiv Lucius Malfoy, now, ‘Arry?”

Harry held up his hands. He should have made a statement. Hermione had told him he should have written one, but he hadn’t been able to do that, not knowing that it wasn’t certain, not committing that hope to paper. So he had to wing it.

“Firstly,” he said, “I want to thank Hermione Weasley, my learned friend here, for everything she’s done,” he paused, and clapped. From the back of the crowd, others could be heard clapping too. “Secondly, I want to thank all my friends, and they know who they are, and my family, whose love and support has been such a...a relief,” he said, “such a blessing. Thank you all.”

“Cheers, Mate, you owe us a pint,” someone called, making people laugh.

Harry smiled, then went on, ”Much as I’d like to share a pint with you, there isn’t going to be any partying till we find out who killed my wife, and who did their best to torture my nephew to death within the confines of Hogwarts itself, forcing a wonderful, honest, and honourable man, which my good friend Neville Longbottom was, to perjure himself in court in order to save that child’s life, at the loss of his own.” He looked around the atrium, and though he couldn’t see much beyond the flashing bulbs, the silence told him he had everyone’s attention. “I’m sure none of you want to live in a society where such terrible actions can go unpunished. I’m sure all of you, like me, want our schools to be safe places for our children and indeed, for everyone who works and lives within their walls. So I ask you, if you know anything, anything at all, however tiny, can you please bring me that information, send it anonymously, whatever – so that we can investigate.”

“Send the information to you and not the Ministry, Mr Potter?” someone called out.

Harry looked down, and then up, straight into the crowd. “I’m sure that 99% of the people in the Ministry are doing a good, honest job,” he said, “but I think you can understand why I am reluctant to trust them at the moment.”

“Wise choice, Mate,” another voice said, causing a ripple of uneasy laughter.

“I’m not standing against the Ministry,” Harry said, “and this isn’t a witch hunt,” he went on, “but I will find out who killed my wife, and did these dreadful things. I hope that the Ministry will be continuing their investigations too, but as I see it, the more people working to find these killers fast,
the better. Before anyone else is hurt.”

And with that, he began pushing his way through the crowd. People patted him on the back as he went. More questions were fired at him, but he kept walking. And then he was surrounded by friends. Family. Ron patted his arm. Draco Malfoy shook his hand. Scorpius hugged him. James and Albus were there, smiling. Harry had told them not to tell Lily – he didn’t want her missing any more school. Didn’t want her worrying if it hadn’t gone as expected. Snape wasn’t there, although Harry had seen him in the gallery, but Kingsley was.

He enfolded Harry in a bear-hug, saying, “Good. Good. We’ll see you soon,” before he headed off.

At last, the crowds dispersed, and Harry and his sons made their way out onto the street. Harry breathed in the London air. Traffic fumes mingled with the scent of rain. It was good.

“Right,” he said. “You two better get back to work before you lose your jobs.”

“Yeah, I’d better,” James said. “Shall I come round tonight, or see you Thursday?”

“Thursday,” Harry said. “I’ve got visits I need to make.”

James nodded. “Good to have you back, Dad,” he said, then loped off.

Harry’s shorter legs could never achieve that easy stride.

“What’s up?” he said to Albus, who was standing with his hands in his robe pockets, trying to look untroubled.

“Don’t get mad,” Albus said.

“Alright,” Harry agreed equably, making his son choke a laugh. “Walk?”

They started heading along the road.

“I chucked in my job this morning. I’m going to help out at The Leaky until I can get into medical training. I went to see Hannah before coming to court.”

“Sounds a good idea,” Harry said.

“You’re not cross?” Albus asked, turning to study his father.

“Why should I be?” Harry said. “You’re a man now, Albus. Merlin knows, you don’t want to do a job you hate, and whilst I might have said it’s best to stick with it until you have what you want lined up, you’ve got work, and a plan, and you’re helping a friend out to boot. Well done.”

Albus laughed, then sobered. “I didn’t get into St. Mungo’s.”

“You applied already? That’s bad luck. So where will you try next?”

They discussed it whilst they walked along, and then, when a convenient alley appeared, apparated directly into their home, and headed down to the kitchen.

There was a pan of water on the stove, but no sign of Mitty.

“I asked her to have some soup ready for you,” Albus said, eyebrows drawn together. “She was really excited that you were coming home. Something must be wrong. Mitty!” he called.
There was a load groan from the room off the kitchen.

Harry and Albus both moved stealthily across the floor, wands out.

They stood on each side of the door. Albus nudged it open with his foot, and Harry stepped in, wand at the ready.

“I’m sorry, Master,” the elf wailed. She was crouched in the corner, rags wrapped around her. Harry could see blood.

“Mitty!” both men dropped down beside her.

“Where are you hurt?” Albus asked gently.

“I is hurting all over!” the elf wailed.

“Who did this to you?” Albus said, his hand stroking the elf’s arm gently.

“Dinky did it to me!” she howled.

“Dinky?”

But Harry began to smile. “It’s going to be alright, Mitty,” he said. “How far apart are the contractions? Is your tummy squeezing?”

“She’s having the baby?” Albus screeched.

“Yup,” Harry said. “Good thing there’s a would-be mediwizard in the house,” he grinned at his son.

“What? I can’t – I mean – oh shit!”

“You can, and we will, won’t we Mitty?”

“Yeeeeeeeeesssss!” the elf gritted, as another contraction hit.

Ten minutes later, both men were sweating.

“I’m going to get help,” Harry said.

“Arrrrrggh!” yelled Mitty.

“Hurry up!” Albus squawked.

Harry strode out of the room and up to the floo. He dithered for a minute. He knew Polly, Hannah’s elf at The Leaky, but didn’t think it would be fair to call on her. Instead, he threw in some floo powder, stated the address, and called: “Hetty!”

The elf appeared instantly.

“Master Potter! Master Malfoy is not being at home!”

“That’s okay, Hetty, I’m hoping you can help me.”

“Hetty? Help Harry Potter?” squeaked the elf, poking herself in the chest.

“I hope so,” Harry said urgently. “Hetty, have you had a baby? Or do you know -”
“Of course Hetty is having babies. Hetty is being poor Dobby’s mother! And Farlane, and –”

“You’re Dobby’s mother?” Harry reeled back in surprise.

The elf nodded, her head wobbling.

“Then I owe you very belated condolences, Hetty, but first of all, I really need your help. Our elf, Mitty, is in labour –”

“Hetty is coming through at once!” the elf said, and the next moment was hurrying down the corridor next to Harry, much to Harry’s relief.

Within moments, she had everything under control. She scolded Mitty for worrying her masters, and then, when they protested, turned and gave a very deliberate wink to Harry. And surprisingly, her stern tone and gentle hands seemed to calm Mitty.

Harry hadn’t been sure whether they ought to leave them to it, but Hetty seemed to think it was very helpful in bonding the newborn to the family – “and it isn’t happening enough, I can tell you! If Master Malfoy had been at Dobby’s birth, Dobby would never have gone behind his back to you, Master Harry Potter!”

“Well, Hetty,” Harry said, after Mitty’s next contraction, when she almost crushed his hand, “I think you should be very proud of Dobby. He was the most marvellous, brave, and wonderful elf, and I count it a great honour that I had the privilege of knowing him. And wonderful though Mitty is, I miss him very much.”

Both elves looked at him with huge, unnerving eyes, and Mitty said, “Mitty is having the bestest of bestest masters – eeeeeeeeee –ouw!”

“You is,” Hetty said, “and you better be looking after them properly.”

“Mitty is great,” Albus said, “she’s been looking after me whilst Dad was away, and everyone else who’s been in and out. She’s been worked off her feet.”

“An elf is never worked off her feet,” Hetty said firmly. “Elves is having very strong feet.”

Harry and Albus exchanged a glance, trying not to smile.

And then things started rushing, and before they knew it, Harry held the tiny elf baby in his hands – and he fitted in his cupped hands – and marvelled at the wonder of life and birth.

“He’s beautiful, Mitty,” he said, and actually meant it.

Albus was helping Hetty get Mitty into a clean pillowcase. He’d already held the baby, and been allowed to tie the cord himself. Harry had commented that Albus wanted to become a Mediwizard, and that the experience of being there was very useful to him, and that had been it: both elves were thrilled that the experience was helping a master, and Albus was made to feel the contractions on Mitty’s tummy and actually help with the delivery.

Hetty was twisting the pillowcase in such a way that it made a little pocket to carry the baby against Mitty.

“So she can feed it and do her work at the same time,” Hetty said, in explanation.

“But – surely she should rest?” Harry said. “We can manage –”
“Of course wizards isn’t managing without house-elves,” Hetty said firmly.

“Well, I think Mitty ought to have a little rest and feed her baby,” Harry said, “and if she would help Albus by showing him how she does it, perhaps you would help me in the kitchen for just a moment, Hetty? I know you’ll need to get back.”

Albus sat down beside the elf, a mixture of horror and curiosity on his face, and Hetty followed Harry into the kitchen.

Harry washed his hands at the sink, even though he’d performed several cleaning charms on them during the last couple of hours. Then he sat down and pulled a chair out for Hetty.

“Elves is not sitting at the table with wizards,” Hetty said, horrified.

“They do in this house, when we invite them,” Harry said, voice serious.

“May Hetty not be making Master a cup of tea?” the elf offered hopefully.

“Only if you make enough for all of us and sit down with me while it’s brewing,” Harry said.

The elf gulped.

Slowly, she turned, looking around the kitchen.

“You don’t have to do that, you know,” he said. “You could let me. I need your advice.”

“Master Harry Potter is Hetty’s Master,” the elf said. “Of course I is doing it.”

Harry leant forward. “Hold on – I am your Master?”

“Of course,” the elf nodded.

“Since….?” Harry thought he knew the answer, and it was confirmed when Hetty answered.

“Since Master Malfoy ceded to Master Harry.”

“Did – did Mr Malfoy tell you?”

“Master Malfoy is not needing to tell. Elves is knowing these things.”

“I see,” Harry said slowly. “And is that alright with you?”

“Hetty is pleased to serve her new Master,” she bobbed a curtsey. “And especially pleased to be in service to Dobby’s Harry Potter.”

“I’m very pleased to make your acquaintance properly, Hetty,” Harry held out his hand.

The elf stared at it.

“I’m afraid you might find me a rather less formal master than you’re used to,” Harry said, “but I do hope you’ll get used to me.” His hand stayed out.

Slowly, the elf came forward and shook it.

“Now,” Harry said, “I’d really rather you didn’t tell any other wizards or witches that you are in my service.”
The elf looked crestfallen. “Harry Potter is ashamed of Hetty –”

“Not at all,” Harry said quickly, reaching out and touching the house-elf’s arm. “But Master Malfoy is doing some very important secret business for Har - me, and it could be dangerous if anyone knew that…that…”

“Master Harry Potter owned Master Malfoy?”

There was a choked sound at the door from Mitty’s room.

“Come in, Albus,” Harry said with a sigh.

He looked at Hetty. “Master Albus is now part of your family, isn’t he?”

“Yes, but the elfling will be the best to be in Master Albus’ service when he is grown up,” Hetty said. “Mitty’s elfling will always want to serve Master Albus above all others.”

Albus stared from his father to the elf. “But Dad held him as well.”

“Master Albus cut the cord from his mother. He is bonded to Master Albus.”

Albus sat down heavily. “I need a cup of tea,” he groaned, his head thunking on the table.

Harry got up and went to the cool cupboard. “I don’t know about you two, but I’m starving. It’s long past lunch time.”

Hetty was at his side in a moment, sorting through the contents. “You is needing some more food.”

And with that, she disappeared, and a moment later was back with a laden tray.

“Have you taken Malfoy’s food?” Harry gawked, looking at the silver serving dishes.

“He is not there eating it, and it is Harry Potter’s food now,” Hetty answered.

Albus opened a lid.

“Oh god, that looks good! Pie! Steak pie? Yum!”

The next moment, the meal was in front of them, steaming hot, with water and a pot of tea besides.

“You and Mitty need to eat,” Harry said. He saw the elf open her mouth to deny it, and said, “It would please us if you both ate.”

“Mitty needs it for the baby,” Albus said.

“She is already making what the baby is needing, but I is taking her some food to please you,” Hetty said, and disappeared from the room.

Albus shoved in a forkful of pastry and rich gravy. “So. What’s with you owning Draco Malfoy? Is this some gay BDSM thing? I thought you weren’t into that?”

Harry choked. Albus slapped him on the back.

“Not Draco, you twit. Lucius.”

“You have a Master/Sub relationship with Lucius Malfoy? Is that why he came to court?”
“Albus! How come you know about all these things?”

“I read up a lot after Mum and the handcuffs and stuff.”

“Oh my god.” Harry took a big swig of water, then poured himself a strong cup of tea, as if that would fortify him more. “Look,” Harry said. “I was trying to keep this a secret, but I’ve obviously made a mess of it.”

“You don’t trust us? Trust me?” Albus sounded wounded.

“Of course I do! But sometimes, not knowing is your protection. And his.”

“Er…?”

“To cut a long story short, and I suppose I should have told you and James anyway, because it might affect you…Lucius offered his life for Draco’s. It was a traditional thing we’d seen in the Trials. I could have had him killed instead of Draco, had Draco been found guilty.”

“But Draco wasn’t guilty. You knew that.”

“Yeah. I did tell him he wasn’t.”

“Then…what? I don’t understand.” Albus forked up a huge chunk of steak, and popped it in his mouth.

“I…might have led him to believe that I might not have freed Draco. He made the offer still. I accepted. He became mine.”

“But…”

“He’s spying for us. To help find who killed your Mum. And set up his son.”

“You – forced him to spy?”

“Rather than die. I offered him a chance to retrieve his family’s name.”

“Draco’s done that.”

Harry shook his head. “Draco’s been doing well, but older people – and given how long wizards live, that’s a lot of people – remember Lucius. And everyone remembers the worst, both sides. The pro-Voldemort lot – well, he was Voldemort’s right hand man, and then he fell right out of favour. Voldemort took over Malfoy Manor and treated them all like shit. And our side hated him too, for what he had been. But I didn’t see why he couldn’t do something to improve things, and I think he feels that way too. But…I couldn’t have trusted him; not without the oath.”

“Wow,” Albus said. He slid his fork around his plate, scooping up the last of the gravy.

“You’re surprised.”

“Yeah, I suppose. You – I don’t think of you as – ruthless.” Albus glanced at his father.

“He came to me,” Harry shrugged.

“You could have let him walk away. You were going to do everything to free Draco anyway.”

“Yes.”
“So. So…you got him involved in George’s business?”

“George is acting as contact.”

Albus poured himself some tea from the pot, and looked to Harry to see whether he wanted a top up. Harry pushed his cup over.

“So are there any other secrets you’re keeping to yourself?”

Harry snorted.

“It’s not funny,” Albus said sharply, and Harry sobered immediately.

Albus stood up. “It hurts that you didn’t trust us with this.”

“God, Albus, it’s not about trust!” Harry swung his chair out to sit facing him. “It was to protect him. To protect you all.” he repeated.

Albus crossed his arms.

“Don’t you realise how risky it is being a spy? What they could do to him if they found out? What they could do to any of you, if they knew there was a spy? Look what they did to Daniel Poulter! They’d torture the name out of you, Albus. I’ve – Jesus, I had to sit and listen to Hermione being tortured. Do you think I’d put anyone in that position?”

“Hermione?”

“Yes. In fucking Malfoy Manor. So excuse me if I’m not letting anyone I love go through that again if I can do anything about it, and excuse me if I don’t have any soft and kindly feelings towards Lucius fucking Malfoy.”

Harry had stood up, and grabbed the plates, crashing them into the sink.

“Hetty can be doing the washing,” the elf piped up.

Harry hadn’t seen her returning.

“I like washing,” Harry snapped, then took a breath. “I’m sorry,” he began, looking at the elf.

“Master must be doing as he wishes,” Hetty said, “but Mitty is wishing she could be showing the elfling to Dinky, so that they can be naming him.”

“Yes, Dinky was who I wanted to talk to you about,” Harry said to the elf. “Just a moment, please.” He looked across at Albus, who was as pale as a sheet. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to shout,” Harry said, quietly.

“There’s so much you haven’t talked about,” Albus said, sinking back onto his chair.

“You don’t want to remember some things,” Harry shrugged. “But honestly, Albus, this isn’t about trust. And I should have done something about Malfoy, because if I die, he becomes James’ responsibility.”

“What?”

Harry nodded.
Albus quirked a lip. “I wonder who would hate it most? Well, let’s hope it’s never an issue.”

Harry sat down too, and at last pulled up the chair for Hetty between them. “Now, Hetty, can you help us? You’ve been an elf to a noble family for a long time and know the ropes. We want to buy Dinky from his owner so that he can come and live with us, but before, we put it off because I didn’t seem very respectable, being under arrest for murder, even though I hadn’t done it. Now the charges have been dropped, do you think it would be alright to approach Mr Wilkes? And how much should I offer for Dinky?”

“Mr Wilkes cannot be taking money for Dinky,” Hetty said. “Elves is not being things that can be bought, Master Harry. Elves is giving their services to their Master.”

“But – Dinky can’t just leave, can he?” Albus asked.

Hetty shook her head. “But good Masters is honouring the service too. Usually, elves is having babies with elves in the same household, but in cases when they isn’t, good Masters are giving their elf clothes so that they may leave and teach the little one how to be a good elf.”

“So – we just tell him, and he has to let his elf go? Just like that?” Albus asked, frowning.

“Not all Masters is being good Masters,” Hetty shook her head. “And many Masters is doing nasty things to their elves so they is not having elflings,” she added.

“You is not understanding. Elves is knowing how to manage their masters, Master Harry, Sir. I is knowing an elf most suitable! Please, wait.”

And she snapped out and reappeared again ten minutes later. In the meantime, Harry and Albus had been to peek at Mitty and the elfling.

Mitty was wide awake, to Harry’s surprise, and tidying her room, making a little nest for the baby. She looked reproachfully at Harry.

“Master Harry is not needing Mitty any more?” she said, with a big sob.

Harry and Albus were reassuring Mitty and explaining the situation when Hetty returned.

Having been coached in all that needed to be said, Harry apparated to Thomas Wilkes’ home, and half an hour later, returned with Dinky.

Thomas Wilkes was not a man that Harry particularly took to, but he was obviously a traditionalist, and after a few private words with the elf – and Harry was pleased to think that he might be asking his opinion – Dinky appeared with an old glove.

Hetty returned to Malfoy’s home, with Harry’s thanks, and Harry spent two minutes scrawling a
note to Malfoy telling him what he’d done, and thanking him.

Albus came out of the little room. “They’re going to call him Allie,” he grinned, “after me!”

Harry laughed, then rubbed his hands over his face. “Merlin, I’m knackered already and I haven’t done any of the things I wanted to yet.”

“Can’t you put them off?”

Harry shook his head. “I need to go and see Hannah, and Molly and Arthur. You alright on your own? I’ve no idea what time I’ll be home.”

“I’ve been alright on my own every other night,” Albus smiled. “If you don’t mind, then, I’m going out for a beer with Scorp and Andy and Teddy. Victoire and some girl from the hospital too,” he added, as Harry raised an amused eyebrow.

“Well, have a good time,” Harry nodded. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

“I’m starting at The Leaky at ten,” Albus said. “Hannah’s going to show me the ropes.”

“I’ll see you when I see you then,” Harry said. “Don’t drink too much – you won’t impress your boss if you arrive with a hangover.”

Albus laughed, and Harry headed upstairs to change before facing his in-laws and Neville’s widow.
Weighing People Up

Lucius sipped a rather good burgundy, as the screams echoed around the room. Tall ceilings and wooden floors always encouraged a resounding echo, of course, though an oak floor had the advantage over an Aubusson rug in the cleaning department.

His uppermost feeling was one of outrage.

The screams died down, reduced to sobbing.

“Come, my dear Lucius, I am sure you have been waiting impatiently for your turn,” René Laval challenged him.

Lucius looked at the heap of bloody flesh sitting in a pool of its own piss. The tang of blood, and the sweet acidity of urine could not disguise the fact that the man had also lost control of his bowels. The wizard stared at him out of terrified eyes.

Artur was still standing over him, wand out, eyes gleeful. Lucius looked around the table. Brouchard was smiling encouragingly at his son. Gilbert was ostensibly cracking a nut. Henri Odent had spilled a little of his wine, his hand shaking. Benôit and Dumas were looking at him.

Lucius turned, flicked his wand at the man, and said, “Avada Kedavra!” before turning back and cutting himself a sliver of Bleu d’Auvergne.

“Why did you do that?” Artur snapped. “He was nowhere near ready for that!”

“With apologies to my host,” Lucius looked at Laval, “I prefer not to be assaulted by bodily odours whilst I’m eating.” He popped the cheese into his mouth.

“Mon dieu, you are a one!” Benôit said. “I agree entirely. And the noise! So distracting!”

“Just so,” Lucius said. “Why spoil such a delicious meal?”

Artur threw himself into his seat. “What else was I supposed to do with him?”

Lucius felt all eyes on him again. “You are very young, and lacked subtlety,” he said.

Artur flushed.

Lucius was well aware that his contempt would come as something of a surprise to Artur, given that he had fostered and dropped little dashes of praise on the young man up until this point. Now, he did not need him. He had gained entrance to the inner circle.

“What would you have done, then?” Artur demanded.

He was not good at holding his drink or his temper, Lucius thought.

“I am far too old to waste my time on such trivial games,” he said. He stood up, throwing his napkin onto the table. “Thank you for a most…interesting…meal, Laval, but I fear it is time to depart. I have no wish to offend you with my views.”

“But your views are of interest to me, and I have a thick hide,” Laval said, eyes sharp.

“Perhaps we might have an…adult…conversation at some point, then,” Lucius inclined his head.
Laval’s eyes darted to Artur, and he laughed.

“You are surely late for your appointment with your friends, Artur?” Paul Brouchard said, after a moment, his face flushed with embarrassment.

“I don’t have – ”

“Henri, I am sure you said Nanette was meeting with Artur tonight?” Brouchard prompted.

“Hmm?” Odont looked up, realised he was supposed to be helping in the obvious fabrication, and nodded. “She is awaiting you at home, I believe. To…to discuss the wedding flowers.”

Artur looked at the steel in his father’s face, and put down his glass. “Of course. Posies not being my greatest interest, it had slipped my mind. My thanks, René,” he wielded the first name antagonistically. “A bientôt, Messieurs,” he nodded to the others, and left the room at speed.

An awkward silence followed.

Lucius helped himself to more cheese, and a couple of grapes.

Laval clapped, and two house elves appeared. “Remove that,” he said, indicating the body, then turned back to the table.

“Well, Lucius: have you lost your stomach these days?”

“As I said, I am past youthful games. I rather thought you were offering something more… substantial. Let us talk of it no more. We need not let a little difference of interest spoil the evening.”

“Do not be so hasty to judge us,” Dumas interjected.

Lucius said nothing.

“You are not troubled by all these Muggle-borns and half-bloods infiltrating our society?” Benoît asked.

“If you intend to eliminate them one by one on your dining room floors, then I’m afraid I am not your man,” Lucius said.

“You have…other ideas?” Laval asked.

“Oh, ideas, of course,” Lucius said. “Ideas are easy, are they not? Talk. Action – plotted, careful, purposeful action – that is another matter.”

“You have…plans?” Dumas asked, sitting forward.

“I had thought to find…friends…that already had some. I mean no offence, of course.”

“This,” Benoît waved a hand towards the area of floor, now as immaculate as it had been before the hapless young man had been dragged in, “was nothing.”

“I disagree,” Lucius said.

Laval raised an eyebrow. “Would you care to elaborate?”

“No, I don’t think so. Manners preclude offending one’s company,” he touched his napkin to his
lips, and slid his wand into his sleeve holster, as if readying to depart.

“I’m sure my guests are as…robust… as I am,” Laval said. “Speak freely, s’il vous plaît.”

Lucius looked around the table. He could not deny that there was something intoxicating in the thrill of danger. “Where did that man come from? This – what was he called? Baldent? Balcon? How did you pick him? He will undoubtedly be missed. He was a wizard –”

“He was a Muggleborn,” Brouchard sneered.

“Yes, yes, but he went to wizarding school, I don’t doubt. People will know him. Wizards who are not sympathetic to your ideals. You stir up trouble by so doing, and for what? You get yourself a bad name. You make people fearful.”

“And what is so bad about that?” Laval asked, voice edgy.

“You know of the Dark Lord, but here in France, you were insulated from what occurred,” Lucius said, looking down his nose at them. “You lived on the coat-tails of his objectives, hoping to benefit from his achievement when he rose to power, without any of the effort. You knew nothing about him.”

“And what do you think we need to know?” Laval demanded.

“The Dark Lord had charisma and purpose when he started. He attracted the most powerful wizards in England. We all flocked to him. But after his return, he started behaving in just such a manner as I have seen here, and where did it get him? Defeated by a child!”

“Harry Potter was a very powerful wizard –”

“He was a schoolboy,” Lucius said flatly. He looked around the table. “As for you, Messieurs, I cannot be sure, from what I have seen, that you even have a clear objective, a clear plan. I do not see an organisation, but some woolly-headed individuals playing minor power-games. I have seen plenty of that, and I know exactly where it leads. The Dark Lord was beaten not because many in our community did not believe in what he stood for, but because he lost sight of how to achieve it. Potter was a boy, and yes, he had the makings of a powerful wizard, but that is not why he won. He won because he and those behind him never wasted time on the trivial. They won because they were determined, and focussed.”

“We are all that,” Benôit said.

Lucius pushed his chair back, and stretched out his long legs. “Forgive me, but I see no evidence of that.”

“What evidence are you looking for?” Laval asked.

“What evidence is there in society of your existence?” Lucius shrugged.

The men looked at each other.

Lucius waited. He would be very surprised if they hadn’t agreed what they were willing to say in advance. Laval was obviously the spokesman, and, he was pretty sure, the ringleader as well.

“You are probably not following French politics,” Laval said.

“Try me.”
“Three of the twelve Ministers are our men,” Benôit gloated.

Lucius looked at him. “What impact are they having?”

“I’m sorry?”

Lucius shrugged. “I don’t see any change.”

“These things take time.”

Lucius gave a Gallic shrug. “There is not much to convince me in that.”

“You would prefer to see more action?”

“We have groups in Spain and Britain,” Brouchard said. “They are more radical than here.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Dumas frowned in incomprehension.

Lucius sighed. “Why are they more radical? Is it an experiment?”

“We have different groups. It is a personality matter, perhaps,” Gilbert explained.

“You have no central guiding…figure? Organisation? Plan?” Lucius sneered.

“Are you looking to be that man?” Laval queried.

“Maybe,” Lucius said.

Someone gasped.

Laval laughed. “You don’t lack for nerve, Malfoy. Or confidence.”

“I know what I am capable of,” Lucius said coolly. “So who are my competitors?”

“Competitors?” Dumas asked.

“The men I need to kill to ensure my position,” Lucius said.

The silence was shattered when Odont knocked over his glass.

Laval laughed, again, and the others joined in. It was a very uneasy sound.

“You have a very…English…sense of humour,” Laval inclined his head.

“Perhaps,” Lucius said.

“I think it would be unwise to name anyone after that,” Laval grinned.

“Oh, most assuredly,” Lucius agreed. “But I will find out.”

“You will just kill them?” Odont choked.

Lucius looked at him. The man really was not cut out for this sort of company. “It depends on whether they are doing a good job. There is much to be done,” he said mildly.
“Indeed,” Laval said. “On the other hand, not all of us see this as an area where…unification…is necessary. Each country has a different culture. Those of us in France take a different route to those in England, for example.”

“I do not see any headway being made in England,” Lucius said. “England is becoming a nightmare for Purebloods. Ginevra Potter was murdered in her own home. A Pureblood. Neville Longbottom was murdered in court, in the very Ministry itself! A Pureblood. My son was accused of murder! And what is being done about this…this persecution? This decimation? Nothing!”

“I agree, I agree,” Odont shook his head, but it was not his reaction that Lucius was looking for. Laval and Dumas were…discomfited. That meant that they were more aware than the others about what was going on in England. They were the ones to watch, then.

“The Muggleborns and half-bloods are taking over our society – even the Minister for Magic is a half-blood,” Lucius went on, steering the conversation away from the personal. There was too much dangerous ground there. He raised his glass to his lips, took a sip, and shrugged. “They don’t care about the old ways. They can’t keep order. There is no guarantee of work anymore, for anyone, and though many of our older families have their own means, of course, a life without…interests… is a dull one indeed.”

“It’s the same everywhere,” Gilbert nodded. “That is why we must act.”

“Indeed,” said Lucius.

Shortly after, Lucius stood in the receiving lobby at his Paris home.

He took off the robe, handing it to the house-elf waiting patiently, performed a cleaning spell on himself, put on the plain but elegant black robe held out to him, and walked through the hall and along to the servants stairs that led to the ground floor.

George Weasley was already waiting for him, the door open. He was silent as he led him through to his office, and Lucius steeled himself for the diatribe sure to await him there.

Instead, Weasley merely indicated the floo. “We’re going straight through to Kingsley’s HQ,” he said.

So. He was to be arrested, then.

He was surprised at the frustration he felt, rather than anger. Not even relief. He was getting somewhere, and he could achieve something. And now that was going to be taken away.

“This way please,” a girl said at the other end, and they followed her down a corridor to an office.

Shacklebolt sat at a large desk, looking at various papers, but rose as they arrived.

“George, Lucius, take a seat.”

Concealing his amazement that restraints were not instantly put on him, Lucius settled onto the chair.

“Well,” Shacklebolt said, “I think George’s button worked rather well. George, were you listening
“Yes, everything came through loud and clear. Your heartbeat a little too loud, unfortunately, but in a way that gave us an idea of your responses to things that we couldn’t actually see. I’m not sure if we can improve it — if we put it nearer your throat, there might be too much interference from chewing and swallowing; lower, and the table might block the way. I don’t know if a cuff button would be better, or an epaulette,” he mused.

Lucius looked from one man to another, astonished that they were discussing the listening device that Weasley had designed, disguised as a button on his robe, identical to all the other buttons.

“You did very well, Lucius,” Shacklebolt said. “What else can you tell us? Facial expressions, and so on, can give a lot of information. Or leads, at least.”

“I killed a man,” Lucius took the bull by the horns.

“I’m sorry,” Shacklebolt said. “You were put into an impossible position. We’ve been able to trace his family. We can’t notify them yet, without letting the cat out of the bag that there was a spy at his death, but once they report him missing, we’ll be able to go into action. We’re watching the location, and watching for how they will dispose of him. We’ll be looking into how they selected him. All these avenues will give us information which we can use as evidence against them in the course of time.”

“But I killed him,” Lucius said. “Are you telling me you’re going to hold this over my head until it’s convenient to you to prosecute me for it?”

“It was a mercy killing,” Weasley said. “In your situation, I would have done the same.”

Lucius’ head whipped round, astonished at the support.

“We knew this would be a dirty and dangerous job,” Kingsley said. “And we promised you that you weren’t on your own. This is not a carte blanche to kill anyone who takes your fancy, but it was quite obvious that he would have been tortured to death. It took courage to kill him.”

Lucius felt dizzy. How many times, when he had been in awe – and if he were honest – fear - of the Dark Lord, had he taken part in activities that he had been disgusted with himself for doing? He had told himself that it was for the greater good, for the bigger picture, that Muggles were worthless.

But he hadn’t liked it.

And Voldemort had progressed to killing wizards too with abandon – he would never forget that Burbage woman hanging over his dining table at the Manor. Charity Burbage. She deserved her full name. She had been a witch – a witch whose job was to teach about Muggles, and who’d written about Muggles in the paper. Today’s organisation had more call to hate her than the Dark Lord ever had. So what would he do today, if she were hanging over his supper? Sit back and let it happen? Dispatch her quickly out of mercy, as he had done with that boy? Or should he stand up and cut her down and risk his own skin?

Was he a coward?

It was a question he’d never faced. Never believed he was. He’d thought he’d been a man of principle. But what were those principles, exactly?

“Lucius?” Shacklebolt asked.
He glanced up. The man had summoned a house elf. A moment later, there was a tray with a teapot and the aroma of Earl Grey tea wafting from it on the desk.

“I find it’s easier on the digestion at this time of night,” Shacklebolt said easily, pouring them all a cup.

Horrified at showing his weakness, Lucius took the cup rather than refusing it. Shacklebolt had one too, though Weasley shook his head.

“Potter won’t like it,” Lucius said at last.

“No, he won’t,” Shacklebolt agreed. “I’ll talk to him about it. He knows that finding information is not without risks. He placed a lot of responsibility on you – and confidence in you – when he asked you to do it.”

“I’m sure he didn’t expect – ”

“You to have to kill? Maybe not. But don’t underestimate his capacity for understanding. Now, what more can you tell us?” he said, and his business-like tone was surprisingly helpful.

“Laval and Dumas. They have some idea of what is going on in England. I could tell from the way they responded.”

Kingsley nodded, writing something down. “You steered the conversation well at that point. Do you think they suspect that your interest might be – more personal?”

Lucius thought about it. “I hope that they believe I think that the deaths and my son being set up were done by those with a grouch against Purebloods. Until I said it, it hadn’t really struck me that they were indeed all Purebloods. If I hadn’t caught their reaction, I might have doubted that an organisation such as theirs would have done such a thing. It is surely counter-productive?”

“Hugo is a half-blood,” Weasley said. “If Snape and James hadn’t got there in time, he would have been dead too.”

“True,” Shacklebolt agreed. “It was close. Another twenty minutes, and if Longbottom hadn’t been so clever, Harry would have been completely in the shit, Longbottom dead, and Hugo dead, apparently as a result of accidentally wandering into a restricted area. Had anyone queried what a plant that dangerous and of that size was doing at the school, the blame would have come back to Longbottom. Very neat.”

“What is the Governors’ view of the situation?” Lucius asked.

Weasley’s brows drew together. “Nothing, as far as I know.”

“I’m surprised there’s been no comment of any sort,” Lucius said. “When I was a Governor, an incident like that would be a gift for any Governor to criticise the management of the school.”

“Perhaps the Governors don’t feel there is anything to criticise,” Shacklebolt commented.

Lucius sat forward. “There is always a Governor wanting to criticise,” he said, seriously. He looked at the two men, and seeing their bemusement, explained: “There is a board of thirteen Governors: the Headteacher is answerable to them. There are two each from each of the Houses – they hold the post for life, and ex-students have the right to vote to elect their House Governor when one dies, or gives it up for any other reason.”
“Such as being sent to Azkaban?” George asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Yes,” Lucius agreed, without comment. “And frankly, there’s a lot of ‘fixing’ that goes on when there’s a vacancy.”

“People want to do it?” Shacklebolt asked.

“To have some control over what is taught in the school and influence future generations? Of course,” Lucius refrained from sneering.

“Do they get paid?” George asked.

“Certainly not,” Lucius said.

“So, is there much commitment? Could you afford to do it if you weren’t well off?” Kingsley asked.

“One is expected to be a benefactor of sorts,” Lucius said. “Most Governors are from old families.”

“Purebloods, then.”

“Yes, but then there is a goblin from Gringotts, who oversees the school’s investments and checks the financial reports, one Governor appointed by the Ministry, to oversee educational plans, one member of staff, elected from amongst his peers – he, or she, serves five years, not life - and the school Matron, to advise on the pupils’ wellbeing. And the Headmaster. And I can tell you, there is always criticism, house rivalries, and so on. I would expect that the Matron, the members representing your nephew’s House – Gryffindor, I assume? – and the Governor from the Ministry would be up in arms.”

“How often do they meet?” George asked.

“Once a term, but when there is something like this, a special meeting would usually be called. At least, it was in my day.”

“I presume they keep minutes of their meetings?” Kingsley asked. “And there is a list of current Governors lodged somewhere?”

“Yes,” Lucius said. “The minutes will be kept at the school, as is the list of Governors. But I can tell you that several of them – at least four of the House ones I served with - are still alive and didn’t go to Azkaban, so I assume they are still Governors. And the goblin was called Rigbod.”

“Write me a list of the others,” Shacklebolt said.

“Very well,” Lucius agreed. “It doesn’t answer the question as to what is the motivation for attacking Purebloods at all.”

“Ron thinks that the whole point is to throw the blame onto the non-Purebloods; Harry thinks it’s about disrupting our world as we know it. Destroying the media, through Draco, the Ministry, sports, the old heroes – all the things that mean comfort and security to people,” George said. “Throw the two together and you have a situation primed for a new regime to slip into power. Don’t think it will be you,” he added. “We heard all your ‘take over the world’ comments.”

“You need have no fear on that score,” Lucius said stiffly. “I would not ally myself with that pack of…loatsome cowards.”
“And the British contingent? Do their more organised machinations appeal?” Shacklebolt queried.

“If all that has happened is part of their plot, they would have allowed my son to be sacrificed to their cause,” Lucius said. “I do not know what sort of man you think I am, but my son suffered before as a result of my…ambitions. I will not make the same mistake again.”

Both men looked at him.

“I didn’t think there was much love lost between you,” Weasley said.

Lucius sucked in a breath. “Do not presume to understand how I feel about my son,” he bit out.

“He’s here – doing this – because of him,” Shacklebolt pointed out to Weasley.

There was a moment’s uncomfortable silence.

“Are you willing to continue?” Shacklebolt asked, breaking it.

“There is much still to learn,” Lucius said.

“Yes, but it’s also getting more risky,” Shacklebolt said. “You’ve done very well so far. If you wish to stop – ”

“I have an agreement with Potter – ”

“I don’t believe Harry is expecting you to put your life in unnecessary danger,” Shacklebolt said.

“I’ll ask him, if you’re not happy,” Weasley said, surprising Lucius.

“The charges were dropped against him today,” Shacklebolt added.

“That explains the note,” Lucius said.

“Note? He contacted you?”

“He called on my – his – house elf. To help deliver an elfling. She fed him food from my house. He apologised.”

“To deliver an elfling?” Weasley’s eyes were alight with laughter.

“That’s our Harry,” Shacklebolt chuckled.

Lucius had never experienced the kind of warmth and humour that lit up Shacklebolt and Weasley as they thought about their friend. It was unsettling. His relationships had always had undercurrents of power-play and positioning. He’d always enjoyed that.

Now, he was seeing something he knew nothing of. He was self-aware enough to know that it wasn’t only curiosity he felt in the face of it, but he wasn’t sure if what…lured…him was the affection in which Potter must be held, or simply the easy camaraderie between the two men.

Well. He was unlikely to find out.

“I will continue,” he said. “Despite their protestations that the different countries are not operating cohesively, Daniel Poulter links the two countries, does he not? He had been living in France, made his contacts there.”
“Yes. Anything else you can find out on that score would be very valuable.” Shacklebolt was suddenly all business. “Let George know when you next have a meeting, so that we can monitor it. If you know where it will be, tell us: we can get in to help you if things turn bottoms-up. Anything we can help you with in the meantime?”

“I hope it will not come to such a scenario. If it seems that I am in danger, I would rather that my efforts were not wasted by an unnecessary attempt at rescue. Consider me expendable –”

“No. That’s not how I do business,” Shacklebolt said brusquely. He stood up. “If that’s all, my thanks for coming, Gentlemen.”

To Lucius’ utter surprise, he extended his hand.

After a moment’s hesitation, Lucius shook it.
Harry felt someone shaking his shoulder, and cracked an eye open. He suppressed a groan, shutting it again. His stomach recoiled. He became aware of dribble coating the side of his mouth, and raised a shaky hand, turning his face out of the cushions.

He reached out, trying to find his glasses on the table, and knocked them onto the floor. His stomach heaved as he leant over the edge, fumbling for them.

Feet approached. A hand touched his.

“Here.”

His glasses were shoved into one hand, and a vial into the other. Harry sniffed it, then gulped the Hangover Potion down, turning over to lie on his back with an arm over his eyes whilst it worked its magic.

“Thanks, Mione.”

Even as he said it, he knew that it wasn’t Hermione. In one fell swoop, his stomach settled and his brain cleared. He scrambled to shove his glasses on.

“Oh god.” He leapt up, racing to the loo, but nothing came up. The Hangover Potion had ensured that. Harry leant against the sink, sucking in great gulps of air.

“Nice to know I have that effect,” she said, leaning on the door jamb.

Harry straightened up, and was suddenly conscious that he was naked. He grabbed a towel.

“It’s a bit late for that,” she said, with a hint of hysteria.

“Oh my god. Hannah –” Harry began.

She seemed to fold in. “I know,” she said, voice low. “I can’t believe we did that either.” She breathed in. “Do you want to shower?”

Harry didn’t want to do anything but erase the last ten hours. He shook his head. “I need -” he gestured to the loo.

She nodded. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

Harry relieved himself, then splashed his face and hands with water. He stared at himself in the mirror.

He had had sex with Hannah.

Shit.

He went back into the sitting room. Hannah had disappeared, but Neville’s photo waved at him from a side table. The urge to vomit rose again. Hannah had put his clothes in a pile on a chair, and he pulled them on quickly, needing their protection. He cast a Scourgify at the sofa, as if that would wash away the actions that had taken place on it last night.

He made his way to the kitchen.
Hannah was sitting at the table with her head in her hands.

Harry swallowed. The kettle started to whistle and he poured the water into the pot that Hannah had ready. He fiddled with the cups, adding milk, and brought them over, putting one down in front of her.

“I don’t know what to say,” he said. “Sorry isn’t big enough.”

She looked up at him. Her eyes were red, and her face pale. Harry noticed some threads of grey in the thick black hair she’d tied into a pony tail. He remembered it being in his face last night, when he’d – they’d…

“I’m sorry too,” she said.

Harry’s eyes jerked to hers.

“It was a mistake.”

Harry couldn’t help the snort that made him choke on his tea.

“I mean, neither of us would have done it in our right minds,” she explained.

“I can’t believe we drank that much –” Harry began.

“I don’t think we can blame it on the drink,” she shook her head. “God knows, I see enough of that. We – it – we both needed – consolation. To – feel. I don’t know,” she cradled her cup in her hands, seeking warmth from inanimate china instead.

“Yes,” Harry said. “I hadn’t intended – I never meant –“

“I know,” she said. She touched his hand briefly, but her fingers jerked away, as if she couldn’t bear the feel of his skin anymore.

“I’m so sorry,” Harry said again.

Hannah nodded. “It happened. We’re both going to forget it.”

Harry looked at her, and thought he would never be able to forget that he had betrayed Neville.

Hannah looked at him. “Neville would have understood, I think,” she said.

“Er –”

“He knew what it was to feel lonely,” she went on. “I – he never blamed me for anything I did. He was the most understanding man I ever met.” Tears formed in her eyes, and she scrubbed them away.

Harry felt worse than ever. He couldn’t even put his arm around her now, as he would have done before the previous night.

“If it had to be someone, I think he’d be glad it was you,” she sniffed.

Harry stood up. He couldn’t – he couldn’t bear –

“I ought to go,” he said.
She nodded. “Your son is coming to see me this morning: I think it’d be better if you weren’t here.” She laughed, too high pitched.

“Hannah –”

“I’m alright,” she said. “I am. I will be. I – in a way – this sounds stupid.” She looked down.

“What?” Harry said, sitting down again, close but not touching.

“I felt so – so frozen. Like I was a pillar of ice, or something. I began to wonder if I’d ever really loved him,” and a huge sob left her.

It was no good. Harry took her in his arms, and allowed the storm of tears to wash over them. “Of course you loved him,” he whispered, stroking her back. “And he loved you so much. You know that.” He repeated it, soft words, trying to soothe her agony.

“It – not that you – I felt – nothing, Harry. Not even when you were inside me. I wanted to feel so warm, and I felt so cold. But you weren’t him. I miss him so much!”

“I know,” Harry said, gently, still stroking her back. “I know.”

“You don’t feel the same way about Ginny,” she said into his shirt.

Harry stiffened.

“Oh! I’m sorry! I thought –”

Harry shrugged, pulling away. Hannah grasped at his hand. “I didn’t mean to hurt you –”

Harry shrugged. “We’re both hurting,” he said. “We just somehow managed to add hurting each other to the mix.” He squeezed her fingers. “I – I need to go.” He extracted his hand.

He stood with his back to her, at the door. “Hannah. Is there anything I can do for you? Putting aside what happened last night. That’s why I came to see you.”

“No,” she said.

Harry turned back to her.

“I’m probably going to pack in The Leaky. When we’ve found a new landlord. I was thinking of going to stay with my parents for a while. They live in Durham. It’s a nice city. There’s a good wizarding community.”

“If you need help to get your own home – or just packing, or anything –”

“You’re sweet. I’ll be fine –”

“But I don’t think you can inherit the Longbottom estate while Neville’s parents are alive –”

“Harry! I don’t want Neville’s money! I never married him for his money.”

“I know,” Harry said, wishing that he wasn’t such a useless idiot, going from appalling to insulting. “But if I can help –”

“I’ve made a bit here,” she said. “I don’t have money worries. Now, go. I need to look respectable before I go downstairs.”
Harry nodded, and reached for the floo powder.

“Harry? Don’t – don’t treat me differently because of this, alright?” She bit her lip.

Harry nodded again, and was gone.

To his immense relief, there was no sign of anyone when he got in. Harry dashed upstairs, and had a long shower, but water couldn’t wash away his guilt and shame.

He dressed, and headed downstairs. He was stretching his neck as he walked into the kitchen.

“You’re home,” Albus said flatly. “Are you hurt?” he watched his father.

Harry’s heart lurched. He was horribly aware of the family clock on the wall behind him. Albus would have known that he hadn’t been home, then, if he’d looked before he went to bed. “Just got a crick in my neck. I’m sorry if you were worried. I fell asleep on the sofa.”

“I thought you might have gone back to Spain,” Albus said. “Tea in the pot.”

Harry poured himself his second cup of the day. At least it would help with rehydrating him.

“I’m going back today to pick up my things,” he said.

Albus nodded. “Will you miss it?”

“Spain?”

“Being at Kingsley’s and Severus’.”

Harry didn’t think he was up to his second difficult conversation of the day. It was only eight thirty.

“Yes, I think so,” he said, shortly.

Albus nodded. “I thought you seemed more relaxed there than I’ve ever seen you.”

Harry’s stomach tightened. “It felt like – a - not a holiday, but – time out – from all the worries. Because I couldn’t do anything about them while I was there. Real life’s not like that.”

“S’pose,” Albus shrugged. “So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

“It’s Thursday tomorrow,” Albus said. “Hogwarts. You’re still half-asleep, aren’t you? Why don’t you go back to bed?”

“Too much to do,” Harry said. He got up and got himself some cereal. “I want to go into work, check over the post –”

“Alright, alright,” Albus grinned, getting up and taking his bowl to the sink.

An elf popped up right in front of him.
“Dinky is doing washing up for his Masters,” the elf bowed low.

“Oh, alright,” Albus shoved the bowl at him. “How’s Mitty and the baby this morning, Dinky?”

“Mitty is feeding the baby and will be doing her work and showing Dinky the jobs very soon, Master Albus,” Dinky bowed again. He was obviously still rather in awe of his new family.

“Well, I don’t want her working too hard,” Harry said, “so I hope you’ll be giving her all the help you can, Dinky?”

“Yes, Master Harry, Sir,” the elf’s nose scraped the floor.

“I’m relying on you to tell me if she needs anything,” Harry said sternly. “Or the baby. And I want you to be happy here too. Do you need bigger living quarters? I can sort that out – ”

“Dinky and Mitty is very happy indeed in their home,” Dinky shook his head, but then, Harry could see him steeling himself.

“What is it?” he asked gently.

“We is needing to have our elfling’s naming ceremony, when it is convenient to Master, of course,” he bowed.

“Of course,” Harry said. “I’m sure all the family would like to be there. James and Lily haven’t met your baby yet, and I’m sure they can’t wait. I’ll need to contact Lily’s school, so can I get back to you as soon as I can on that, Dinky?”

Dinky started to cry. “Master’s family are so noble, so generous, to want to – to wish – ”

“Of course we all want to be there, Dinky,” Albus said heartily, patting the elf on the back. “Lily has been excited about the birth for ages! I wrote to her at once, yesterday.” He bent down and whispered, “I don’t suppose we could have cake to celebrate?”

Dinky was instantly all action, bowing and then gone in a clap.

“It’s going to be exhausting, isn’t it?” Albus said.

Harry’s voice cracked as he laughed.

Harry went into his shop and sifted through the post. Toby had sorted it into cancellations, bills, queries and letters of support. Harry found he couldn’t concentrate on dealing with any of them, so after yet another cup of tea, he headed to the floo, then paused, and instead, apparated.

He landed in the yard outside the house.

Severus wandered out, wearing the apron that he usually wore when brewing.

“Needing to burn off energy already?” Severus asked, after a look at him.
Harry shrugged.

“Have you time for lunch, or must you hurry off?”

“I – I ought to be getting on,” Harry said, awkwardly. “I just came to get my things, if it isn’t inconvenient. And to thank you.”

“Coffee and biscuits at least,” Severus said, and walked back into the kitchen.

There were fresh biscuits just out of the oven, and the aroma was delicious. Coffee wasn’t far off ready.

“I was just about to have a break,” Severus said, shoving the biscuits onto a plate and readying cups.

Harry leant against the dresser, watching. Snape was usually very soothing to watch, but today he still felt edgy.

“I helped deliver a baby yesterday,” he said.

“So I heard,” Snape said. “That was rather unexpected, I imagine.”

Harry snorted. “Not quite how I was expecting to spend the day.” He sobered, remembering how he had ended it. “How did you know?”

“Kingsley had a report from Lucius; I gather you borrowed his house elf?”

“Yes, we were feeling a bit desperate.”

“We?”

“Me and Albus. Albus actually delivered it. Bit of an eye-opener for him, but it seemed a good idea as he’s thinking of Mediwizardry.”

“Did he survive?” Snape’s lip quirked. He put the coffee on the table and sat down.

Harry stayed standing.

“Yeah, once he had Hetty there so he wasn’t panicking about hurting Mitty or the baby, he was really in his element. I think Mitty and the baby are now his devoted - well, not slaves, but you know what I mean.”

“Adoring fans?” Snape’s lips quirked.

“Definitely. So I left them to it and went to negotiate for the father to come and live with us. Now that I’ve been freed. Good timing, huh?”

“Impeccable. Were you successful?”

“Oh yes. There’s all sorts of elf family laws, or something, according to Hetty. I didn’t much like Dinky’s master, though.”

“Does it matter? You won’t need to have any future dealings with him, I assume?” Snape pointed out, inhaling his coffee.

“Yeah, point. Though Mitty’s brother still works for him.” Harry scrubbed his nose. “Not sure why
I didn’t like him, really; he didn’t just hand Dinky over without talking to him, which was good.” He shrugged. “I’m getting to be a grumpy old man.”

“Join the gang,” Snape snorted.

“Nah, you’re much less grumpy than you used to be,” Harry said.


“And I don’t think Kingsley’s ever grumpy, is he?”

“He can be tetchy. He’s not perfect. Thank Merlin,” Snape said.

Harry smiled, and sat down, picking up the coffee. It was strong and perfect, and he sighed.

“I understand you might feel we’ve come on too strong,” Snape said. “Kingsley told me about what he did,” he added, his eyes flickering to Harry’s chest.

Harry felt the blush rising in his cheeks. He couldn’t deal with this as well –

“But we meant it when we said that you’re welcome here on any basis. Friendship is good. You’re easy company. Mostly. Why don’t you leave the piece you’re working on here? Whatever tools are duplicates? Then, if you need a retreat, you can come and plane away over in the bothy to your heart’s content.”

“I – you have expectations of me that I can’t – ”

“No.”

“Kingsley does.”

“Kingsley is like a bull in a china shop. He’s into being up front and straight with you. With anyone. But he’s also easy-going and able to let things go. Neither of us expect anything from you. We enjoy your friendship, and hope to keep it. If you want anything more, that’s up to you.”

“Yeah, but see, that’s pressure, and right now –”

“Of course you have other things on your mind.” Snape stood up, and took his cup to the sink. He turned to glance at Harry. “All I’m saying is, don’t cut off the friendship out of fear. There is nothing to fear from us.”

Harry nodded, and stood up. “You’ve been very good to me –”

Snape sighed. “You don’t understand. This is not about ‘being good to you,’ like you’re a charity case or something. This is a two way thing. An equal thing. We enjoy your company. Go and sort what you need, leave what you don’t. Now you’ve made Gloria’s room, you can leave any stuff you want in your room. If we have more than one lot of guests to stay, I’ll shove it away.”

Harry nodded, and went up the stairs. Snape’s words were so tempting, but…his actions of the previous night were like the last brick in a glass wall between him and life here. He could see to the other side, the possibilities, the enticing vista…but the bricks were stacked against it: his children, his old life, his own inability…but there had always been a window, an opening. Until now.

He glanced over the bits and pieces on the bedside table and the chest of drawers – the photos of the children, Lily’s letters, his comb. He pulled open the drawers and flung open the wardrobe.
Then, he *accio*-ed everything, directing them into a bag and shrinking the lot. He slipped it into his pocket, quietly shut everything up, and after a last glance around the empty room, he headed downstairs.

Snape had gone; Harry could see his laboratory door was shut, as it always was when he was working on potions.

Giving him some space.

He headed to the bothy.

Allie’s naming ceremony was delightful.

Harry was conscious, as this new family started their life together, of how wonderful it was having his own around him. They celebrated with elf wine and chocolate cake and lots of chatter and passing round of the youngest member of the household. Harry thought of Dobby and Kreacher and Hermione’s work on the rights of elves, and wondered again about the symbiotic relationship that seemed to exist between elves and wizards.

Later, after Lily had been bustled back through the floo in time for quidditch practice, and Albus had departed for his first evening shift at The Leaky, James said, “Want to do some training?”

In the past, ‘training’ had been purely physical, using the equipment in their home workroom, but now they added in some spellwork and duelling. After a shower, they sat down to a meal anxiously prepared by Dinky.

It was still only 9.30pm when Harry found himself alone in the house. He trailed through to the sitting room and the library. Lights flared as he entered the rooms, but all they showed was that they were empty. He caught movement as he left the sitting room, and turned back, but it was only the reflection in the mirror above the fireplace.

He turned away from the sight of himself, alone.

In the cold expanse of his bed, he could no longer avoid thinking about the previous night.

He’d undoubtedly done too much – there’d been the hearing, the press, Allie’s birth, negotiating with Wilkes, then a visit to the Burrow to see Molly and Arthur. That had taken longer than he’d intended, but they were both well, and glowing with a happiness in each other’s company that was heart-warming.

It had been late when Harry had arrived at The Leaky Cauldron, and Hannah had just grabbed him into a hug and whisked him upstairs before any of the patrons could approach him, asking her staff to close up when it was time.

They’d sat and drunk wine and firewhisky, and it had quickly gone to Harry’s head. They’d both been sitting on the sofa, laughing and crying, and Hannah had sort of fallen into him, and they’d laughed, and then she’d snuggled against him and he’d cuddled her, and suddenly, he hardly knew
what had sparked it off, but she turned, and her breasts brushed against him, and everything changed, and then they were kissing, and Hannah was begging him, and their clothes were gone, and nothing else had seemed to matter but seeking completion and oblivion.

And then they’d both fallen asleep.

At least, he had.

And he remembered shifting in the night, and feeling the weight in his arms, the warmth, the breath against his chest, and he’d just held her tighter and fallen back to sleep.

It had felt utterly inexorable at the time.

Now. Now he knew it was the worst thing he had ever done. He was disgusted with himself.

A thought fired into his brain, so shocking that he sat up in bed. What if he ended up in court again? What if they asked him again when he’d last had sex? They’d ask who he’d last slept with. He couldn’t have that.

He flung his legs over the side of the bed, head in his hands. He’d have to…he’d have to…how did one find a prostitute?

God. He didn’t want to have sex with a prostitute.

It wasn’t as if sex was that…worth it.

Maybe he’d been too drunk, too tired, to appreciate it. It had been…warm…mindless…relieving. For all the frenzied excitement, it hadn’t been any more…any more…anything…than when he and Ginny had used to make love.

Maybe sex was hyped up. Maybe he just wasn’t a sexual person.

It had been easier, not having to think about it.

But he had been thinking about it, hadn’t he? He’d been thinking about Kingsley and Severus, and what they did behind the shut door of their room, for weeks. He’d been taking himself in hand far more – and feeling it far more intensely – than he’d ever done. Even as a teenager, there’d seemed to be too many other things happening. Wanking then, and after, had almost always been an almost mechanical thing in the shower, a relief, a pleasure to be sure, but…not something that he’d really taken time to savour.

He thought of Kingsley kissing him, and the shock he’d felt. Snape’s body in the bothy. He shivered as he remembered Kingsley’s tongue lapping, rough but gentle on his chest. God. He thought of Snape and Kingsley kissing in the kitchen. How would it feel to have Snape’s lips on his, Snape’s tongue exploring his mouth?

But – he couldn’t. He’d panic. He’d disappoint them, that was for sure.

He could cope with this…this longing. He could.

Snape said they still wanted him as a friend. He loved being with them, in their house. He wasn’t going to throw away the pleasure of that friendship for a bit of sex. He’d ruined things with Hannah.

He wouldn’t make that mistake again.
Harry, James and Albus stood huddled together just outside of the Hogwarts’ boundaries. Harry had side-alonged them, despite their protestations that they could do it themselves.

“You’ve got all the effort of doing your animagus thing,” he’d said. “I feel bad enough about putting you at risk by letting you come. I know you’re both strong wizards,” he’d added quickly, seeing the objections brewing, “so just let me do it to salve my conscience, please?”

So here they were.

“Okay,” Harry said. “The important thing, James, is not to be heard. You’ll need to concentrate on that. And we’re just there to look and listen, not to do anything. Albus, if someone tries to pick you up and take you away, scratch them or whatever, ok? But hopefully you’ll blend in, no problem. If something happens and we get separated, come back here and wait. Kingsley’s team are listening in on George’s buttons, but we don’t know how the ones you two are wearing will respond to the transformation, so if in doubt, get out, wait out here. If you think something is seriously up, send a Patronus to Kingsley, alright?”

Both boys nodded.

“Okay,” Harry said. “I’m proud of you both, but this is serious. No heroics, okay?”

Half an hour later, Harry and James were sitting beside each other on a couple of broken desks at the back of a disused classroom. Albus had left them to have a quick prowl around before finding a spot where he could watch from. As the most recent pupil, he was the only one likely to recognise anyone.

“Are you sure you’re invisible?” James whispered. “I can sort of see you.”

“Because you saw me do the spell,” Harry whispered back. “It’s better if you know where I am.”

“But you can’t see me.”

“I know. So stay safe. Whoever is coming should be arriving any minute.”

Soon, footsteps could be heard, though they sounded strangely muffled. Harry felt James tense beside him as they both recognised the first arrival. He put his hand on James’ arm briefly, in warning.

Within five minutes, there were seven. They knew two of them, and Harry wished with all his heart that he wasn’t wearing the button. However things went, someone was going to be upset.

One of the students began transfiguring desks into comfy armchairs and low tables, which she then manoeuvred into a circle to one side of the room, with a central low table, on which she placed cards and some other items. On a side-table, she set up a small burner and kettle, tea-pot and cups and saucers.

“Is that really necessary, Sarah? No-one’s ever noticed we come here,” one of the teenagers said. “We’re wasting time.”
“The time we don’t do it is the time we’ll regret it,” Sarah answered primly.

Harry saw her feel in her pocket, but she didn’t take anything out.

“You’re right,” Fred said. “You’re so good at transfiguration that it doesn’t take any time, anyway.”

Harry could hear the admiration in his voice, and wondered if George could, wherever he was, listening in. He was sure he would have recognised his son’s voice, anyway.

“Can we start? I’ve got a real Divination paper to do,” a boy said, causing a few laughs.

“I hope you brought it with you,” Sarah said. “More cover.”

She reminded Harry of Hermione. Sort of bossy but always right.

The boy dragged it out of his bag, flapping it.

“I think you’re really mean about Divination,” another boy said. “I mean, I know Trelawney puts it on a bit, but she has made some real prophecies, hasn’t she?”

“The trouble with prophecies,” Sarah said, “is that even if they’re true, what use are they? Unless they tell you day and date, they’re rubbish.”

“Maybe if we all actually put some effort into it, we might be able to predict better,” the other girl argued. “We don’t just expect to be able to transfigure a cup into a mouse at the first attempt. Why should Divination be any different?”

“Well, that’s a good point,” Roxanne said, “but I’d rather concentrate on some defence right now. Everyone ready?”

There were mutters of assent. No-one had sat in the chairs, or taken any tea.

And to Harry’s astonishment, they set to work.

The group appeared to be a new version of Dumbledore’s Army, led, it seemed, by George’s kids, Roxanne and Fred. Harry felt torn on whether he should throw off his invisibility and help them, but it was interesting just to watch. They were both obviously clever, and quick too. There was no nonsense in the group. Harry wondered who the other kids were. Had they felt under personal threat? Had their families? Were they just friends? Why hadn’t the kids told George what they were up to?

His arse was just beginning to get numb when suddenly, Roxanne broke off mid-speech.

“My spell’s activated!” she said. “Someone’s coming!”

“There was a cat around as I came along the corridor, it’s not that, is it?” the tall boy asked.

“No, it’s definitely a person. Quick!”

They threw themselves into the chairs. One poured the water from the kettle into the pot, swirled it, and poured it straight out into the cups, then passed them round. The third boy dealt out the cards between himself and Fred. Sarah pulled the stuff out of her pocket. She lit something, then leant back and put drops in her eyes.

“What the hell are you doing, Sarah?” Fred demanded. “That smells like - like - almost like weed.”
“It’s something similar. I want to look like I’ve been using it,” she leant forward, blinking. “Are my eyes dilated?”

“Yeah,” Fred said. “You are going to be in so much shit.”

“Distraction,” she shrugged. She stubbed out the burning thing and pitched the stub into the corner, where it hit Harry’s leg before rolling off him onto the floor under the desk.

Suddenly the door banged open.

“What is going on here?”

Even Harry found it almost automatic to cringe at that teacher-tone.

“Professor Brown! We were just doing some extra work on Divination,” Roxanne said, standing up.

A cat shot in behind him, came to a halt, and dove into the shadows.

“Divination?” He came over, staring at the tea-cups, and cards. “You haven’t even got a crystal ball.”

“No sir, Professor Trelawney won’t lend them out, but we thought we could work with what we’ve got.”

“I got tarot cards for Yule,” the boy said. “They were my great-grandmother’s. You know, Lucia Dunwoody? She was very famous in her day. She had 372 prophecies put into the Hall of Prophecies at the Ministry.”

“Really, Lurgan? I didn’t know that,” the Head said, looking round. He sniffed. “What is that smell? Are you – Merlin’s garters, you are! That is….”

“A secret recipe,” Sarah said, staring up at him with black eyes. “It’s only me; I read in ‘The Modern Witches’ Divination Database’ that it was used in the past for astral projection, and was an essential tool for serious diviners. Professor Trelawney wouldn’t let us use it in lessons, though, so I thought it best to have my friends around me to take care of me whilst I travelled, in case I needed bringing back. Did you know that you’re very handsome, Professor?”

Harry only just managed to hold back a choke of laughter. Beside him, he felt James shift too.

“Excuse me?” Professor Brown squawked.

Harry looked at him. He was quite handsome, he supposed.

“You have lovely eyes and I think you should take your robe off. It’s really quite warm in here,” Sarah went on.

Her friends were boggling.

“Uh, Sarah, I think that stuff is affecting you in a different way than –” Roxanne was trying to turn her friend to look at her, but Sarah had already stood up and thrown herself into Brown’s arms.

“My book says the best Divinations are made when you’ve just …you know,” she said, in a husky tone, her head rubbing against his chest, and her hands sliding up to his shoulders.

“Sir, she really –” Fred was on his feet.
Brown thrust the girl away from him. “I think you ought to take Miss Flyte to her room, Miss Weasley,” he said. “In fact, I think all you girls ought to go with her. And don’t let her get near a man!”

“But I’m not into girls,” Sarah pouted, twisting on her ankle.

“And I said ‘Now!’” Brown said, looking thoroughly harassed.

The girls hurried Sarah out of the room.

Brown rubbed his hands over his face, and looked at the boys, who were all standing there, looking desperately awkward.

“I do hope that was the first time that she’d used that?” Brown demanded.

“Yes, Sir,” Fred said.

The Professor looked at them. “I’m very surprised in all this interest in Divination,” he said. “Or were you hoping to take advantage of those young women when they were under the influence of that…herb?”

“No, Sir!” All the boys said, quickly.

“We’re friends, is all,” Lurgan said. “You can’t really do Divination practice in the main hall when everyone’s doing their homework, or in the library; you need to be able to relax the mind, Professor Trelawney says. But she doesn’t take revision classes like some of the other teachers, or let you use her classroom, so what were we to do?” he demanded.

“Will Sarah be alright?” Fred asked anxiously. “Perhaps she should have gone to the Infirmary.”

“She should be fine,” Brown said, surprising Harry. “As she said, it was common practice in the past to use potions or inhalations to release one from this plane. Unfortunately, it tends to release one’s inhibitions, as you saw, which is why we don’t encourage the use in school,” he said with amusement.

Harry was astonished at his easy manner. This was not the man that Hermione, Ron, Snape and Bill had reported dealing with, when Hugo was at death’s door in Greenhouse 3.

“I’ll speak to Professor Trelawney,” he was saying. “Or perhaps we could get one of the centaurs to come and run a club…well, I’ll see,” he said. “Your concerns are noted, boys. For the present, if you stick to the cards and leaves, I’m happy for you to continue using this room. I’ll see if I can get you a couple of crystal balls too,” he winked.

“Thank you, Sir,” Lurgan said.

“You get me those top grades then,” Brown said. “We’ve never scored highly in Divination compared to our competitor schools, but maybe you’ll be turning that around this year, eh?”

“We’ll do our best, Sir,” Fred said.

Harry felt the transfigurations on the kettle and cups begin to slip, and sent a burst of magic to prop them up.

“Good, good,” Brown said, looking round.

Harry kept utterly still.
“Did I see a cat dart in here earlier? I saw it in the corridor.”

“Best leave it here, Sir,” Fred said quickly. “I think I heard mice earlier.”

“Leave the door open when you go, then,” the Headmaster said, and sailed out of the door, shutting it with a click behind him.

Everyone in the room stood absolutely still for a moment.

“Merlin’s manky knob!” the third boy gasped. “Sarah is so going to be in the shit tomorrow!”

“Shssh,” Fred said, and swung round, wand out.

The other boys fell silent, and followed suit.

“Albus!” Fred hissed. “What the hell are you doing?”

Harry and James turned to look at each other.

“What?” Lurgan was saying. “You know that cat?”

“That isn’t any cat,” Fred said, hunting round the edges of the room.

Harry realised that Albus didn’t know that Fred and company were not up to plotting against them, but working to defend themselves.

With a sigh, he dropped his invisibility, at the same time as throwing a silencing spell on the room. If he’d been the Headmaster, he’d be listening in for a minute or two.

“Harry!”

“Harry Potter? Have you escaped?”

“He was released, twat. Don’t you read the papers?” Fred said, coming over, not sure whether to hug Harry or shake his hand.

Harry grinned at him, and they sort of patted each other’s arms.

“Wow. You’re smaller than I expected,” Lurgan said, then gulped. “How – did you just apparate in here?”

“I’ve been here all the time,” Harry grinned.

“Was that – is that what your invisibility cloak does?” Fred asked curiously.

“You have an invisibility cloak?”

Harry smiled. “Yup, but this is what the cloak does. James?”

James pulled it off.

“ Fucking hell – oh, pardon me, Mr Potter,” the other guy said.

“No problem,” Harry smiled at him. “I’m sorry, I didn’t catch your name.”

“Josh. Josh Nott.”
Harry could see the boy steeling himself, and yet he couldn’t prevent his withdrawal.

The shoulders slumped.

“Well, Theodore is your father?”

The boy nodded. “I should get back to the dorm—” he said.

Harry stepped forward. “I beg your pardon,” he said, quietly. “If Fred and Roxanne trust you, I suspect I should. I know what it’s like to be judged on a name, and yet I’ve done the same to you.”

“It’s not as if my father was—involved in anything,” Josh said.

Harry nodded. He had never known Theodore really. He hadn’t fought with them, but he hadn’t stood against them, or been a pain at school like Malfoy. Nott senior, however…Harry thought of the remains he’d seen at the bottom of the sea, and wondered what to say.

“Where the hell is Albus?” James voice held that note between annoyance and panic.

Harry turned round.

And then Albus trotted out from the far corner, a mouse in his mouth.

“Oh, you are not going to eat that!” Fred mimed puking.

“He won’t, will he?” said Lurgan.

Albus looked up at them, then dropped the mouse.

“Thank Merlin for that!” Lurgan said.

The mouse’s heart was thumping in its side, as it lay there, as if paralyzed. And then…it flipped over, and dived for cover.

Albus sprang.

They all heard the crunch.

“Oh, that is disgusting,” Josh had his hands up by his face.

“I’m never going to let you forget this one, bro’,” James laughed.

The cat ignored them, and swallowed the mouse down in a couple of gulps.

“Totally gross,” Lurgan said. “Are you sure that’s your brother?” he looked at James.

The cat strolled over and rubbed against Harry’s legs. Harry reached down and gave it a stroke. It arched its back into it, then turned tail, took a couple of steps, and the next moment Albus stood before them. He licked his lips.

“Oh,” Fred hit him on the arm. “Just—urgh.”

“At least it’s not a worm. James had one half out of his mouth when he transformed back one time.”

“That is—” Lurgan shuddered.
“So,” Fred said. “It’s nice to see you, but a bit – unexpected.”

Harry laughed. “We thought you might be a group of quite another sort,” he said, sobering.

“The sort that would try and kill Hugo and set up Neville Longbottom,” Albus explained.

“Do you think pupils did it?” Josh looked stunned.

“Do you have other ideas?” Harry looked at the three of them.

“We’ve talked about it, of course,” Fred said. “Everyone has.”

“And?”

“We decided to defend ourselves,” Josh said. “To share what we knew. And…” he looked at the others.

There was an awkward silence.

“There’s a teacher who helps?” Harry suggested.

“How come you know so much?” Lurgan asked. “Have you watched us before?”

Harry shook his head. “No, but others can. If you meet, you need to wear your own clothes.”

“What?”

“You can be tracked by the clothes you’ve got on. Here in Hogwarts. Bring something and don’t wash it. It’s in the washing powder.”

“You’re – you’re serious?” Fred looked stunned. “I – that’s – how can they do that?”

Harry shrugged.

The door opened, and they all whipped round.

Harry couldn’t believe he had let his defences drop so low, though he stood there, wand out.

A young woman stood in the doorway.

Her wand was out too.

“Professor Hart,” Fred said, walking forward. “It’s alright.”

“Where are the girls?” she said, not moving, or lowering her wand.

Harry slowly lowered his. He saw her taking note, but she still kept her guard.

“Boys,” Harry said.

“She still has hers up,” Albus pointed out.

“Very wise of her,” Harry said, not taking his eyes from the woman. “Do introduce us, Fred.”

“Professor Hart, my uncle, Harry Potter, and my cousins, James and Albus. Harry, this is our Defence against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Hart.”
“Thank you, Mr Weasley,” she said, her eyes still moving over them but her wand up. “And where are the girls?” she repeated.

“The Headmaster caught us. We had the plan in place. Sarah pretended she was spaced out, and he insisted the girls take her back to her dorm.”

“So you’re all okay?” she asked.

“Yes, honestly,” Fred answered.

She lowered her wand.

Harry stepped forward. “You’ve been helping them?” He held out his hand.

She pocketed her wand and shut the door behind her. “Your defences weren’t good.”

“You’re right,” Harry said, dropping his hand.

Suddenly, she smiled, and held out hers.

“I’m rather surprised to see you here,” she said, glancing at the three of them. “Was the Headmaster expecting you?”

“He doesn’t know,” Harry said. “I hope you won’t inform him?”

“That depends on why you’re here,” she answered, her face serious.

“Well, we were just getting to that,” Harry said. “Obviously we want to find who hurt my nephew, Hugo, and set up Neville Longbottom.”

“Surely that’s the role of the MLE?” she said firmly.

“I’m afraid I’ve rather lost confidence in them,” Harry said implacably.

“Vigilante justice?” she sneered.

“Just justice.”

She looked at him, and the boys. “Good. I admired Professor Longbottom, and even if I hadn’t, what happened was utterly unacceptable.” She looked round. “Time you went to your dorms, boys.”

“The Headmaster has given us permission for our Divination revision club,” Lurgan grinned.

“Has he indeed?” she said. “You do realise that you’ll actually have to do some Divination now?”

Nott groaned. “Bugger!”

“And none of that language, thank you, Mr Nott, or I will be forced to take house points.”

“Sorry, Professor,” he smirked.

She nodded. “Well. Do you need to speak to the boys, Mr Potter? If not, I suggest you and I have a brief discussion in my chambers, while your boys talk to these hooligans.”

“It would be better if we all spoke together,” Albus said, stepping forward. He held out his hand. “Albus Potter,” he reminded her. “We’d just asked the boys if they had any suspicions of who
might be responsible.”

Her eyes twinkled for a moment.

“Too risky,” Harry said. “She’ll show up as being here.”

“I was right,” she said, a look of satisfaction on her face. “I want to know about that.”

Harry nodded. “Let’s go. Boys, come and find us in thirty minutes. Where are your rooms, Professor?”

A minute later, Harry had ‘disappeared’, and closed the door behind them. They’d agreed the boys might as well stay where they were, as they were in different houses, and had permission to be there anyway.

“How come the gay guy gets the hot babe?” Lurgan complained.

“That’s our Dad you’re talking about,” James said stiffly.

“True. Miles older than her as well, then,” Lurgan sighed.

“Don’t mind him,” Fred said. “He’s had a crush on her ever since she arrived.”

“She only noticed I existed when she caught us here, the first time, and she still treats me like I’m just a kid.”

“I wonder why that is,” Albus muttered.

“No good you getting your hopes up either,” Fred said. “She’s really into her stuff – your Dad is probably heaven on a stick to her. Vanquisher of Voldemort and all that. The invisibility on the end was probably icing on the cake. Hey, I wonder what it’s like doing it with an invisible person?”

“You can see them, if they disappear in front of you,” Josh said, Harry having demonstrated the fact. “I suspect you might notice someone getting it on with you.”

“Yeah,” Fred grinned, “but imagine walking in and watching an invisible man doing it with a woman! I mean, would you be able to see her tits through him?”

“You do know you’re seriously weird?” James asked.

“I’d love to see Professor Hart’s tits,” Lurgan practically drooled.

“Look,” Albus said, shortly, “we haven’t got long. Got any ideas of who you think might have had it in for Hugo and Professor Longbottom, then?”

Harry walked down the corridor beside Professor Hart, conscious of the need to pace his footsteps to hers to cover the sound.

“Splendid evening, Professor,” Nearly Headless Nick said, as they rounded a corner and found two ghosts drifting down the corridor towards them. “What a pleasant surprise to see you with a young man. You look familiar too,” the ghost said, peering at him. “My goodness! Harry Potter! What a pleasure to see you again! He was in my house, you know,” he said proudly, to Professor Hart.
Harry should have realised that the invisibility spell would have no impact on the ghosts. “Good evening to you, Sir Nicholas. You’re looking very well.”

“I am, I am. Pleasant to have company,” he agreed, turning to his companion. The second ghost had his head buried in the book he was carrying. Sir Nicholas nudged him, which looked bizarre. “Cuthbert! Where are your manners?”

“Hmmm? Oh!” the elderly professor looked up.

“Good evening, to you too, Professor Binns,” Harry said. “How wonderful to see you out and about.”

Behind Binns back, Sir Nicholas pulled a face, shaking his head so that it wobbled alarmingly.

“Not by my choice!” snarled Binns. “I was fired! Fired! After all my years’ service….”

“Oh!” Harry said, trying to sound surprised, whilst thinking that it must be the most tremendous relief to the pupils. If only Binns had ever shown such emotion in his classes, things might have been different. He tried to think of something positive to say. “But… but now you have the time to do some research yourself, perhaps? On… on Hogwarts…and its history? Who writes that book, anyway? Perhaps you can give them insider information—”

“Ha! There you have it! There you have it, young man! Dreadful editing these days! I wrote to the editor! Need to save space, he says. What nonsense! Is this a magical community or not? Hey? Hey?”

“Er, yes, of course it is,” Harry said. “They’ve not taken out the Goblin Wars, have they?” He held back a snicker.

“The Goblin Wars did not take place at Hogwarts! You should know that! Goodness gracious me, young people these days! At least the new professor is teaching that properly, I must say. I’ve been in to her class to check, of course.”

“Well, we really ought to be going,” Professor Hart said, walking forward a pace. “Mr Potter is only here for a moment or two—”

“What a pity,” Sir Nicholas said. “I’m sure the other ghosts would have loved to see you again… reminisce, you know…”

“Actually, Sir Nicholas, Professor Binns, I’d be grateful if you didn’t mention that you’d seen me,” Harry said.

“Hmm? Why ever not, dear boy? We all remember you with such affection—”

“You really are rather slow-witted, aren’t you?” Binns said, looking over his glasses at his companion. “It must be that head injury. Lady professors can’t be seen canoodling with young men, now, can they?”

“Oh! Oh indeed!” Sir Nicholas looked from one to the other.

Harry felt his face heating up, and Professor Hart stiffening beside him. He put a hand on her arm. “Thank you for your discretion, Gentlemen,” he said, in a conspiratorial tone. “I promise I shall treat Professor Hart with the utmost respect.”

“Charming! Charming!” Sir Nicholas beamed. “Perhaps we’ll see you again, young Harry?
Though you are getting a little older yourself…” and they floated through them and away.

In her chambers, Harry took off his invisibility, and turned to Professor Hart. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “I hope you don’t mind too much?”

“If it keeps them quiet, that’s a good thing,” she sighed. “Coffee? A glass of wine?”

“Er, coffee, thanks,” Harry said. “So, Binns has been retired. Who’s teaching in his place? I can’t believe Binns would approve of anyone.”

“Samantha Donnelly.”

“Donnelly? Isn’t the School Secretary – “

“Yes, they’re married. I think he was here first, though. She teaches Quidditch as well as History of Magic.”

“Wow. Really? That’s a weird combination. How does she fit it all in?”

“Well, History of Magic is a really small part of the curriculum here, isn’t it?”

“What?” Harry said, puzzled.

“This is only my second year here,” she said, “so I don’t know much about what went on before. As I understand it, History of Magic is taught for one lesson a week, for the first three years. After that, it’s optional for OWLS, and there’s no NEWT course.”

“Blimey, things have changed. However do the pupils catch up on their sleep?” Harry grinned.

Twenty five minutes later, a head pushed through the cat-flap in Professor Hart’s door. She spun round as her cat lifted her head from her position curled in front of the fire to look at the intruder.

“It’s Albus,” Harry said. “James will be outside.” He stood up. “Thank you very much for your help, Professor –”

“Laura,” she said, getting up too.

“Oh, thank you, Laura,” Harry said, smiling.

The cat got to its feet, stretching, then headed over to the intruder.

“Be careful, Albus,” Laura warned, “Splat’s not too keen on other cats.”

Splat circled Albus, who stood quite still, letting the other cat sniff him. After a moment, when there had been no aggression, he sniffed in turn. Splat waltzed off, back to the fireplace, dropping down into Sphinx position to oversee proceedings.

“Well! She’s never done that before!” Laura exclaimed.
Albus strolled over, brushing against his father’s leg, then tentatively prowled around Laura.

Laura laughed, and reached down. “It always amazes me how many characteristics of their form animagi adopt,” she said to Harry, then looked back down at Albus. “All right, boy, is this what you’re after?” and she started scratching him behind the ears. Albus stretched up into it, a rumbling purr emanating.

A quiet tap on the door interrupted them.

“James,” Harry said. “Thank you for agreeing to help, Laura: we’ll be in touch.”

She straightened and nodded, the door was opened, and then they were gone.

They were back home.

“I’m taking it off, Kingsley,” Harry said into the air. “We’ll meet Tuesday, unless you floo-call to go over it now, but I think you have everything we did. George,” he added. “if you’re listening in, I hope you’re proud of your kids. I would be.”

“Oh shit,” Albus said, looking at James. “Oops?”

James grinned. “Er, sorry, Uncle George. Don’t blast Fred out for the language, right?”

“You didn’t tell Fred that his Dad was listening in?” Harry asked, as he shrugged off his robe, and the others followed suit.

“Did you tell Laura?” Albus asked.

“Point,” Harry said. “But then, her Dad wasn’t eavesdropping. We need to think about that.”

James had a look on his face that Harry remembered from his childhood.

“Dinky,” Harry called, and the elf appeared instantly. “Can you put these into the special trunk in the training room? Thanks.”

The elf nodded and disappeared again.

“Did you remember and not say?” he said, to James.

“Beer?” James ignored the question, as they entered the kitchen.

“You prat,” Albus said.

“What? You didn’t even think of it.”

“True,” Albus said, “but still.”

Moments later, they were all sitting round the table, bottles in hand.

Albus rummaged in the cupboard and came out with some crisps and peanuts.

“Well, thanks for coming, anyway,” Harry said. “I’m glad you were there. Did you get anything from the boys?”
“Not a lot. There’re three boys they’re not sure about, but they’re honest enough to admit it could be that they just don’t like them, never got on with them.”

“Yeah, that can be a problem,” Harry said, thinking of Draco. Although that animosity hadn’t proved entirely without cause. “What about staff?”

“Again, people always hate the nasty teachers, but that doesn’t mean anything…”

“What about the Headmaster?”

“People seem to like him,” James shrugged. “I suspect he doesn’t have the sort of presence Professor McGonagall had. They were more sort of, ‘yeah, he’s okay’ and shruggy about him.”

Harry nodded. He’d been surprised at how – ordinary – Brown’d been with the group. He thought he’d taken the right approach with them.

“So, who do they regard as ‘nasty teachers’?”

They talked for a bit before James headed back to his flat.

“Don’t laugh,” Albus said, getting up from the table. “I’m going to go into my cat form and have a bit of a mooch round. I’d forgotten what fun mousing was.”

Harry couldn’t help laughing, despite the admonition not to. “Raw mouse: how does it feel when you come back into human form?”

“Once I’ve eaten it, I don’t really notice it,” Albus said. “And when I’m a cat, I don’t really notice the taste. It’s all about the chase, and the adrenalin, and the victory.”

“And the stroking?” Harry grinned.

Albus blushed. “Yeah, that’s good too.”

Harry laughed again. “Laura’s cat seemed to like you.”

“Laura seemed to like you,” Albus countered.

“Just picking my brains,” Harry said. He hesitated. “You seemed to like her.”

“Yeah, we didn’t have any teachers like that when I was there,” he said.

“My Defence teachers included a chap with Voldemort grafted onto the back of his head, Teddy’s Dad, who was a werewolf, of course, a woman from the Ministry who was the biggest bitch I ever encountered, and Snape, who was a complete bastard in those days. Count yourself lucky.”

“I’m going to ask you about Severus one of these days,” Albus said. He paused, and then asked, “Did you really not find her attractive? Professor Hart?”

“What? She’s very pretty,” Harry said. “And half my age, I should think.”

“Okay,” Albus said. “Well, I’ll say goodnight. I might be curled up somewhere rather than going to bed when I’m done, so don’t worry if you don’t hear me.”
“Okay, thanks for that. Ummm.”

“Yeah?”

“I’m going to head out, so don’t worry about me, either, alright?”

“At this time of night? Where’re you going? To Spain?”

“What? No, I should think Severus and Kingsley are glad of a bit of peace and quiet at last.”

“Has Gloria gone then?”

Harry snorted.

“Wait – you’re not going back to Hogwarts? Are you going to – to – with Laura Hart?”

“Of course not,” Harry said. “Where did that come from?” He looked at his son. Did Albus really like the Professor? “She’s a bit old for you, isn’t she?”

Albus shrugged. “She didn’t even look at me anyway. Apart from when I was a cat.”

“Be glad you don’t have the same form as James,” he said, trying to lighten the situation. “He doesn’t get anything like the attention you do when he’s transformed.”

“Be grateful for small mercies? I suppose,” Albus said. “So. You’re not off doing something dangerous on your own, Dad? I mean, take me with you. I can watch your back.”

Harry breathed in. It was difficult having to explain his actions, but he didn’t want Albus worrying all night. “I – I don’t think you’d like that. I thought – I thought I’d go to a gay club,” he said in a rush. “Or a pub, or something.”

Albus stared at him. “Wow.”

“I – I’m only saying so that you don’t worry about me being gone.”

“So – so you are, then?”

“I don’t know,” Harry shrugged. “I thought if I went and looked, I might find out.”

“That’s a good idea,” Albus said, rocking awkwardly on his feet. “So. You’re going with someone?”

“On my own.”

“But – I’m sure Severus and Kingsley would go with you. Or even Scorp and Andy – I mean, they’re a bit young for you, for company, like, but –”

“I’m going to go on my own,” Harry said firmly. “I – I might not like it at all. And then I don’t want to offend them. I can just leave.”

“I’ll come with you if you want,” Albus offered.

Harry smiled at him, his heart full of warmth for his son. “That’s really kind of you, but somehow that feels horribly pervy; people might think we were together.”

“Okay, that’s gross. But if I said I was your son…”
“Yeah, that would go down well with any men I might –” Harry shut up.

“Chat up?” Albus finished his sentence. “Oh my god, Dad. You’re really thinking about it! And you’re blushing!”

“We are so not having this conversation,” Harry said. “Go chase some mice.”

“What are you going to wear?”

“No. No, no, no. Don’t even go there. I am not dressing in some inappropriate ripped jeans and shirt, or something.”

“Wow, you have been thinking about this. But – you’re going somewhere Muggle, right?”

“Of course, and I know how to dress Muggle.”

“Yeah, but I was going to say you probably haven’t been in a club for years. If ever. Wear something light. If you’re going to dance, you’re going to get hot and sweaty.”

“Dance? I’m planning on a pint and a look round.”

“Go put on that shirt Mione got you for Christmas.”

“Buggering hell! My son is giving me fashion advice. I thought gay men were supposed to be the fashionistas?”

“Yeah, well if we’re judging on that you may well find you’re straight. Go on,” Albus shooed him out of the room.

Harry ran up and changed. He’d been thinking about going to a gay bar for a while. Somehow, what had happened with Hannah, and his reaction, or lack of it, to Laura Hart, just seemed to have crystallized the need to go and find out.

When he came back down, his stomach throbbing with excitement and fear, Albus was waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

“Here,” he said, smirking as he shoved something into his father’s hand.

Harry looked down. And almost dropped the two condom packets.

“Albus! I’m not –”

“Better safe than sorry. Now, go.” Albus leant forward, and gave him a quick hug.


“It’ll be tough,” Albus said. “But if you can be happy – that’ll be worth it, won’t it? I want you to be happy, Dad.”

“James will –”

“James is a prick, but he loves you. Go find out.”

“Don’t tell him. I –”

“You’re prevaricating. Bye,” and Albus transformed, brushed his cat body against his father’s leg.
in a show of affection, and trotted off to explore the kitchen.

Harry apparated, off to explore something rather more monumental.
Discoveries And Disappointments

It was late when Lucius strolled into Chez Albert. Artur Brouchard and his gang were holding court in their normal place. Artur looked over, gave a small acknowledgement and then looked away. Lucius was surprised, and if he was honest, both relieved and disappointed that there was no sign of Nanette, but a moment later, he saw her making her way through the tables from the ladies’ room.

He was disgusted with the small skip of pleasure that he felt.

A feeling that was crushed when he saw Nanette see him, start to smile, and then look away, hurrying across to Artur’s table.

So. She’d been told about him killing the wizard, had she?

Had Artur told her about his own actions? Did she approve of the violence? She seemed sweet and innocent, but she must have some idea of the people she was dealing with.

He positioned himself between them and the door, and with a good view of their table, picking up a newspaper to read with the pot of coffee that he had ordered.

It was not long before they got up to leave.

“Good evening, Léonie, Nanette, Artur,” he said, smiling too at the others. “Leaving so soon? You have other plans this evening, perhaps?”

“Yes, things to do, people to see,” Artur said, brusquely. “Bonne nuit,” he dismissed Lucius, and made as if to walk on.

“Ah, you are incensed with me,” Lucius said. “I spoiled your fun, perhaps?” He watched the reactions of the others.

Nanette was holding herself very tightly. She gave Lucius the quickest of glances, and looked away again.

Artur bent towards him. “I have no wish to talk to a murderer!” he hissed.

“Really?” Lucius said, sipping his coffee. “But surely you knew that about me already? What did you think I did as the Dark Lord’s most trusted - associate? Peel his apples for him?”

Léonie giggled.

“It is true, then?” Nanette whispered.

“That I killed a man?” Lucius said bluntly. “Certainly.”

The eyes of two of the other boys widened.

“But why so shocked?” Lucius asked. “So disgusted? You would have killed him soon enough, Artur. Or were you pretending to yourself that his death would have been – unexpected? Accidental? You cannot torture a man till his blood boils from his every orifice and not expect him to die, you know,” he said, voice gentle.

He heard a sob, but he could not distract himself by looking away from Artur. Was the boy really
such an idiot?

It seemed he was.

“If he’d lived, we could have obliviated him. Now, there is a body, with your magical signature all over it —”

“Ah. You want to dabble without consequences, do you? But what would be your purpose in torturing without either killing or leaving the memory? A mixed-blood wizard would still exist, and without memory of what had occurred, would go on just as before. I thought your interest was more than just a pretence. My apologies.” He picked up the paper, snapping it open.

Artur slammed his hand onto it.

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“You think my interest is a pretence? I’ll show you!”

“Really? How? More purposeless torture? There is a club on Rue Anton Étuille, that might provide an outlet for your…interests. Without all the risks that obviously concern you. And no need for pretence of a higher motive.”

“Oh! Can we go there?” Léonie asked, grasping the arm of one of the men, who looked rather less enthusiastic.

“Or perhaps you prefer less organised encounters…in dark alleyways,” Lucius said, and watched with satisfaction as Artur’s eyes widened in shock. “Well,” he said, shaking out his paper again, “I will wish you an enjoyable evening. Mademoiselles, Messieurs,” he inclined his head, and started reading again.

After a moment of silence, the group moved off.

“What did he mean, alleyways? That sounds erotic,” Léonie was saying. “Nanette, you naughty girl, you never mentioned —”

For the first time in many nights, Lucius had not offered Nanette the opportunity of escape, to take her home. It went against his conscience, but he was, perhaps, being foolish. Maybe she knew exactly what she was getting into. She had still been there, at Artur’s side, despite the revelations, after all. Well. The evening hadn’t gone as he had planned, although Artur’s hostility was perhaps inevitable. He would concentrate his efforts on the older generation. Nanette was not his responsibility: he might feel a fatherly concern for her, but she had a father, and he had seen exactly what sort of man he was marrying his daughter to.

It was not his business to interfere.

Harry was busy between that Thursday night and the next gathering the following Tuesday. He was determined to do everything he could to try and find who’d killed Ginny. He started visiting Ginny’s team-mates, and any friends that he knew of. Some he knew well, and they welcomed him. Some he knew well, and they didn’t. Team-mates seemed more willing to talk about her.

It felt like the more he got involved in their reminiscences, the further away Ginny seemed. She
was becoming a pastiche of everyone else’s memories, and the Ginny he had known was shrinking, shrinking, into the background.

Harry even visited some of her previous lovers, which was awkward, with much shuffling of feet, although the fact that it was out in the open seemed to help. Some, like Horst Jurgens, were genuinely upset and outraged at Ginny’s murder, and wanted to do anything they could to help. Others, like Phillip Stubbins, refused to speak to him: he had, apparently, already lost his wife and son over the affair, and had nothing to say on the matter.

When he wasn’t seeing people, he was reading or training, both physically and using the books in the library for ideas to increase his arsenal of spells.

By night, Harry was dabbling his toes in the gay scene in Muggle London. Sometimes he glamoured himself, and sometimes he walked out of one pub and made himself invisible before going in to the next. It took off the pressure to be someone, to respond, to be a participant. He could lean against a wall and absorb the atmosphere. He could go into the back rooms, and watch. On Monday night, he took his courage in his hands, and drew off the invisibility in one dark and dingy cellar, full of the groans of people giving themselves up to pleasure and release, and allowed a man to suck him off.

He was excited, thrilled, disgusted and disappointed in equal measure. The man didn’t seem to expect any return, and just wandered off, licking his lips, and in moments was down in front of another man.

Harry wondered who was using whom. They had both got what they wanted out of the situation, so maybe ‘use’ wasn’t the right word. Maybe it was. It had felt so cold, and devoid of anything except the physical sensations.

His experiences with Ginny had been fraught with feelings of inadequacy and failure, and yet at least he had felt something.

He had left quickly, headed home, and scrubbed himself in the shower.

He had to face facts though, he thought, as he lathered the soap and washed his cock for the third time: he might have felt dirty, but he’d been hard, from the noises and the sights of the other men, and he’d come in another man’s mouth.

He was gay.

Or at least, he was bisexual.

He wondered why he felt so disappointed about it.

He washed down his legs, then upped the heat and stood under the spray, enjoying its fierce sting.

The problem, he admitted to himself, was that it didn’t solve any problems.

Just added them.

It made him a social pariah again. Not that he wasn’t used to dealing with that. But even visiting Ginny’s friends – the coolness, the rebuffs from some of them: it may have been because they didn’t believe he hadn’t murdered her, or because they believed the old myths and blamed her infidelity on him for not making love to her, or it might be because of the gay thing. Whatever it was, didn’t really matter. He knew what it was to have people you’d thought of as friends, or at least neutral, turn a cold shoulder. Being gay would have that effect all the time.
On the other hand, until Ginny’s murderers were found and brought to justice, that would be there anyway, with those who doubted his innocence.

And there was, he supposed, a whole community of gay men. Well, he’d seen it, the last few nights, hadn’t he? Not that ‘gay men’ were necessarily a community. The men he’d watched over the last few days, with their honest and open attitude to seeking sex, the casual nature of it, seemed a different breed to people like Kingsley and Severus, who, as far as he knew, didn’t cruise bars and lived a rather domestic life. Not that their sexuality was any less honest, either. Just…well, of course, all gay men weren’t the same.

But he couldn’t really see that he belonged in either camp. He didn’t think casual sex was really his thing. Having his cock sucked was one thing, but he couldn’t imagine letting some stranger…inside him. The thought made him shiver. He didn’t know whether it was revulsion, after the body search at the Ministry, or…or what. His heart pounding a bit, he slicked his hands up with soap, and reaching back, just stroked a finger over…there. He had to force himself past a sudden memory of Petunia Dursley shouting at him in revulsion that he was ‘a dirty boy’, when he’d tried to master the use of toilet paper. The muscle twitched under his finger, and he jerked back, shocked.

A bit of exploring led him to understand why touching there…or using tongue on it, as he’d been horrified to witness…might be…nice.

He wondered if Kingsley and Severus did that. He felt the twitch again, the pooling tension in his balls. His cock seemed to have a will of its own, finding the idea very interesting. He thought of Kingsley’s tongue, licking his chest, and the next moment, knew there was no going back, as he gave himself over to the building pleasure.

Later, in bed, he thought about Kingsley and Severus again. He couldn’t deny how attractive he found them. How attractive he found them both, but perhaps even more, how much he liked what they had together. Surely, involving him would ruin that. Would ruin the friendship that they had so easily given him, and which, he had to admit, he had come to value so much. He wished…and it took a big bit of self-honesty to admit it…he wished he could be the sort of man who was just as comfortable in his skin, that he could walk up to Severus and just kiss him as Kingsley had kissed him. The very thought made him grin. He could just imagine Severus’ shock.

And that was the point, really, wasn’t it?

He wasn’t the sort of person who could do that.

He couldn’t imagine ever just going up to Snape and planting a kiss on him, just because he wanted to. He couldn’t imagine…his mind skidded as he did imagine it…having the nerve to walk up to Kingsley and drop to his knees in front of him. Like that man had done to him in the club. Unconsciously, he turned his head, rubbing his cheek against his pillow. He wondered what Kingsley would feel like, what anyone’s genitals would feel like, through soft, worn-in denims like Kingsley wore. How a cock would feel, hardening through the fabric, there but out of touch. How hard his heart would beat as he peeled down that zipper…what it would feel like to touch his tongue to it, to tease it into his mouth.

He groaned. He was hard again.

The next day, Harry apparated again to just outside of Hogwarts, a little down the road where a copse of trees provided shelter. He enlarged his broom, and then pulled on his magic to make both of them invisible. He knew what he was doing was a lot riskier than visiting in the dark of evening,
but something was going on at Hogwarts, and he wanted to find out what.

He flew carefully over the boundaries, landing near the quidditch pitch, and hid his broom, still with an invisibility spell on it, in the dim recess under one of the viewing towers, then walked up to the school.

He’d made a point to leave a notebook at home, in his drawer, detailing where he was, something that he’d done even when he’d gone out at night. He didn’t want anyone to have to suffer searching for him again.

There were pupils out playing football, which made him do a double-take, until he remembered Albus saying that it had been brought in during his last year by popular request. There was more emphasis on physical wellbeing than there had been in his day, one of the results, perhaps, of the influence of Muggle and half-blood students and their families. In his day, quidditch had been something for an elite few, with the rest of the school getting no physical activity at all, apart from the long walks between classes and going up and down all the staircases. One of Peter Brown’s reforms, though, had been the introduction of other activities, including football, dancing, and in the summer, swimming in the lake.

To his surprise, Peter Brown himself seemed to be refereeing the match. The teams had both girls and boys, and the kids were really going for it.

Harry watched for a moment or two, before heading into the castle. The doors were open. He headed first to the Defence against the Dark Arts classroom. There was a viewing panel in the door, which prevented the unwary walking in to a spell being fired, and he watched with interest for several minutes. Laura Hart appeared to be a good teacher. She was young, and Harry knew that he shouldn’t hold that against her, but when they’d talked, it had become clear that she had no practical experience at all, just her diploma in Advanced Defence from a Canadian university. Harry wondered why she’d been chosen; he was pretty sure there must be a whole list of Aurors who would see the job as a nice move when they were ready to retire.

He went down to the Potions classroom. The bell rang just as he arrived, and he stood well back, beyond the door, relieved that the majority of students crowded down the corridor in the direction he had just come. He entered the class, then cursed himself when the door was shut and he knew he’d have to sit through the whole lesson. To his surprise, he rather enjoyed it. It was an OWL level class, with the teacher explaining every stage clearly and carefully. All the students, bar one pair, made a successful potion. Harry thought of Snape. He really had been an appalling teacher – they’d all been safe, and learnt what they’d needed for the exams, but given his love of the subject, he hadn’t really been able to impart that. True, he’d had rather a lot on his plate at the time…Harry wondered if Snape had ever wanted to teach, or if Dumbledore had forced him to, so that he could keep an eye on him.

He waited for the students to leave, and had to hold back a snort of laughter as the teacher, who’d been clear and professional throughout, slumped into the chair, propped his elbows on his desk and held his head in his hands. He waved his wand at the board, without looking, to clear it, glanced at his timetable, groaned, “Double fourth years! Fuck!” and after fishing in his drawers, downed a vial of Pepper-Up.

Harry slipped out and headed up to Binns’ old classroom. To his relief, there was a queue of pupils waiting outside. With the reduction in timetable, he hadn’t been sure whether he’d manage to catch a lesson.

He slipped in with the other pupils, and headed to the back of the class. Professor Donnelly was a bit older than he was, he judged. He wondered how old Madam Hooch had been; everyone else
had seemed so old in comparison to her, at the time, that she’d been the object of much teenage lust. It had never really occurred to him that Severus had been much younger, or Lupin, come to that. Now, there seemed to be an awful lot of young staff. Was Trelawney the only person still at the school that had been there in his day? Samantha Donnelly had a strong look to her, a purposeful stride. He’d bet a galleon that her favourite quidditch position was beater.

Her lesson, however, was almost as boring as Binns’ had been. They were indeed covering the Goblin Wars, and Harry had to stifle a groan at the thought of sitting through it again. It looked like the school had really given up any hope of anyone having any real interest in the subject. Why didn’t they teach anything more relevant? About the Founders of Hogwarts, or more recent events? Grindelwald. Voldemort. Surely that was much more useful to know? Maybe it was part of the curriculum for older students, though he wasn’t surprised that there wasn’t much take up.

It was funny; he hadn’t liked history much himself at school, but he’d enjoyed reading some of the books in the Black library since. Surprisingly, not all of them were full of Pureblood propaganda. It had been quite obvious that many of the books the Blacks had bought had never been read.

Harry watched all the pupils, whiling away the boredom. They all seemed so young, so ordinary. When the bell rang, they bolted up and were away. Professor Donnelly tidied up, then strolled out of the room. There was something familiar about her, but Harry couldn’t place her. If she taught quidditch though, it was quite possible she’d played once, and he might have seen her at any of the many games he’d attended in the early days of his marriage.

He shut the door and rummaged around in the desk, curious to see what else was taught on the curriculum. To his surprise, there didn’t appear to be anything after the eighteenth century covered. Ridiculous!

Harry mooched around for the next period, then went to the Great Hall. To his astonishment, the entire staff, or so it looked, came in together, with all the pupils rising and standing in silence until they were seated. He made his way up till he was within earshot of the head table. Adrian Donnelly appeared to be at least a decade younger than his wife – though why that should concern him, he didn’t know. There was a much bigger age gap between himself and Severus and Kingsley, and that was one thing he didn’t regard as an issue at all.

Seeing all the unfamiliar faces at the staff table, it suddenly occurred to him how odd it was that despite having had children at the school for the last ten years or so, he didn’t know them. How ridiculous was it that parents just sent their children off to a boarding school without ever meeting the staff or going to Parents’ Evenings or anything?

It seemed the end of lunch was a looser arrangement. Some teachers began to leave, and pupils too, whilst others remained chatting. Harry filched a roll when he was pretty sure no one was looking, and headed outside. Again, students were out playing football, and some hoops had been put up on one of the courtyard walls, and students were practicing and laughing there too.

Again, he was surprised when he heard the sound of instruments tuning up, floating out of a window. There hadn’t been any music taught whilst he was at the school.

He saw some fliers in the air over at the quidditch pitch, and headed over.

It wasn’t a house team practice. The players were wearing a dark blue strip that he’d never seen before. Also, he decided, after watching for several minutes, they weren’t very good. Or particularly enthusiastic. There were eight of them, so they weren’t playing full teams, but even so…
Professor Donnelly was certainly at home on a broom, though. She had that ease that spoke of years of practice, and Harry didn’t doubt for a minute that she’d played professionally at some point in her life.

“Okay, teams, let’s talk tactics,” she shouted, and Harry watched, knowing something was off, as with a joint sense of relief the players flew down to land, and huddled around their coach.

He stepped nearer, wanting to hear what she could possibly say to improve their playing, or rally their interest. After her History of Magic lesson, he didn’t hold out much hope.

“‘Well done, everyone,’” she said, her voice low.

Harry stepped closer, drawn in by the quiet intensity of her voice. He was not prepared for what he heard next.

“Well, you all know now that Potter has been released, so we’ll have to put Plan C into action. Wear your complete kit; I want to see you in Room 154 in the dungeons, eleven sharp.”

Harry felt like he’d been hit in the chest. What was Plan C? Why was his release of any interest to this group? What had Plan A and Plan B been? His heart juddered. Was this the group they were looking for? Was Professor Donnelly involved in subversive politics? Could she possibly be involved in what had happened to Neville and Hugo? Hugo had said it had been a man, but Polyjuice could sort that out. They needed to find out her schedule for that day.

Harry looked at her afresh, then at the pupils in front of him. He needed to follow who he could, see if he could pick up any names. He looked at them all; six pairs of eager eyes.

And two avoiding eye contact with their teacher. They were the ones to follow, then.

“Greerson, Smith, you put the equipment away. The rest of you, go and get changed. Dismissed!”

Greerson, it turned out, was one of the boys who had looked at his feet throughout her talk. Had she not picked up that there was a girl looking equally disenchanted? Then Harry saw her watching the girl leaving, and realised that she had split them up deliberately.

She followed the boys to the broom-shed, and Harry kept pace behind.

She stood at the door whilst the boys went in, putting the brooms onto the racks and stowing the box with the quaffles and snitch.

“Smith,” she said. “You and Greerson are both in Ravenclaw, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Professor,” Smith said.

He was big, with broad shoulders, and seemed eager.

“I’m sure you and Greerson are…good friends, aren’t you?”

“Er…”

The boys looked at each other, and away again quickly.

“Come come, I know Cally Donovan is Greerson’s very good friend,” she stared at Greerson. “But I think he needs someone to keep an eye on him. A close friend in his house. Someone who knows where he is and what he’s up to all the time.”
Greerson had stiffened. Smith looked from the teacher to the other boy.

“We all need…a good friend…to help us stick to our goals, don’t we, Greerson? Or someone to comfort us when things go wrong.”

“Wrong?” Greerson swallowed hard.

“Oh, you know. The thing with relationships is that we get so involved in the other person, don’t we? If anything happens to them…an accident…it always affects us too, don’t you think?”

“Accident?” Greerson demanded. “Why should Cally have an accident?”

Harry could hear the quaver in the boy’s voice.

“What? Oh, I’m sure she won’t. I mean, you’ll be looking out for her, won’t you? It’s just one can’t help noticing that after all this time, she really isn’t very comfortable on a broom, is she? Not a natural. Not too keen on getting very high, I noticed.”

There was a heavy silence.

“Sure,” Smith said, breaking it. “I’ll be Greerson’s friend. Wouldn’t want to let a team-mate down, now would I?”

“You always were so quick on the uptake, Smith. Five points for excellent team qualities.”

“Thanks, Professor,” he grinned.

“Well, come on, boys, you’ll be missing class if you don’t get a move on,” she said, stepping back.

Harry was revolted by the malicious look on her face as she watched the boys head back up to school.

He apparated from the lane outside of Hogwarts to Dublin. It was raining hard, and he dashed up the steps to the EWA Headquarters, then wiped his glasses on his top as he dripped in the foyer, before casting a quick drying spell on himself. He could have cast an Impervius, but it hadn’t seemed worth the effort, and since his imprisonment – or was it since he’d raised power at the Giant’s Causeway? - he seemed to enjoy a bit of interaction with nature more than he’d ever noticed before.

“Master Potter,” Dido said. “Is you wanting to see Master Shacklebolt?”

“Hi there, Dido, you look well,” he said, making the elf’s ears flap in surprise. “Yes please, if he’s free.”

“Dido is telling him you is here, if you is waiting a moment, please,” she indicated some comfortable armchairs in a small room off the entrance.

“Thanks,” Harry said.

Within five minutes he was in Kingsley’s office.

“Harry,” Kingsley said, greeting him with a huge smile, which slid off his face as he went at once
into business mode. “I take it this isn’t a social call. What’s up?”

“I’ve just been to Hogwarts –”

“You have?”

“Prowling around a bit, invisible. I just wanted to get a bit of a feel –”

“And you didn’t think to tell me? Let me know?” Kingsley’s brows were drawn together.

“I’ve got a notebook at home. I leave details of where I am in it in case something happens to me. Then people won’t be worried.”

Kingsley sat back in his seat, his hands resting across his abdomen. “So that we can find your body if you’re dead?” he said coolly. “How about allowing us the opportunity to keep you alive and out of trouble?”

“Look,” Harry said, annoyed. “I’m a grown man. I know you’ve worked hard to keep me safe and get me free, but my wife was murdered, and I’m not going to sit around any longer having a lovely time when whoever did it is still out there, plotting Merlin knows what.”

Kingsley sat looking at him still, not speaking.

“I know you have someone in there, and I didn’t get in the way or do anything to put them at risk,” he said, voice hard. “Now, do you want to hear what I have to say or not?”

There was a moment’s pause, and then Kingsley sat forward. “Sit down, Harry,” he said, indicating the pair of chairs on the other side of the desk. “We’ve been doing a lot of research into Hogwarts and the names we got from your visit last Thursday, which I was going to bring you up-to-date on tonight, when we all get together. I gather, though, you’ve got something more here?”

Harry nodded, and told him what he’d heard and seen.

That evening, everyone had gathered back at Grimmauld Place, rather than in Spain. They’d started off with training, as agreed, and later, Draco and then Bill had floo-ed in, joining the rest of them, and they’d all caught up with each other. Gloria hadn’t come, having moved into a new flat in Chelsea at the weekend, to make it easier to get to her new job, but she’d given her information to Kingsley already.

There was a lot of new stuff, and the feeling of excitement in the room built.

“So, you’re saying,” Ron said, “that Samantha Donnelly may have been involved in the attack on Hugo, and Neville, and Gin, because she was pissed with Gin for nicking her husband? Bloody fucking hell.”

Kingsley’s team had been researching the staff at Hogwarts and had turned up that Samantha Donnelly had only married just before her appointment at Hogwarts – and that previously, she had been Mrs Phillip Stubbins. The Phillip Stubbins who had had an affair with Ginny Potter.

“I only knew that their marriage had actually broken up when I called on him at the weekend,” Harry said. “He was very bitter: wouldn’t speak to me, apart from to shout that he’d lost his wife
and son. Do we know anything about the son? I’ve no idea how old he is.”

“We’ve been looking into him,” Kingsley said.

“But…but why would he be involved in this?” Scorpius asked, leaning forward to look down the table at Kingsley.

“’He was in the same year as Daniel Poulter,” Kingsley said.

“’ My year?” Teddy frowned. “Stubbins? Oh! Peter Stubbins! Yes, yes he was!”

“Were they friends?” Kingsley asked.

“Not that I knew of,” Teddy said. “To be honest, Daniel was a lot brighter than Peter. There was no comparison. But I didn’t really know either of them well.”


When they looked at him, he said, “Some staff believe in teaming the best students with others of similar strength, whereas others believe in pairing pupils of different ability, so that the weaker one learns from the more able pupil, and the more able confirms their own knowledge by having to teach it to another. Minerva was Headmistress at that time, but I don’t doubt that she kept a strict eye on what was going on. Also, she is a source we can trust not to reveal our…interest. I’m just thinking of how there might be a link between the two. I’ll be happy to go and renew our acquaintance.”

“Thanks, Severus, that would be good,” Kingsley nodded. “We’re beginning to see things in the picture, but the more connections we make, the clearer it will become.”

“I’ve been thinking about this since we talked earlier, Kingsley,” Harry said.

His tone had everyone turning to him.

“All this – all this – I mean, if she’s implicated in it all – all this could be – nothing to do with some greater scheme, right? I mean, it’s looking more and more like…like jealousy had driven her mad. That it’s all about the affair. She got someone to kill Gin – or – or she could have been one of them, after a bit of Poyjuice, couldn’t she? And then, she got at me for …for not being enough for Gin. I mean, if Gin had been happy –”

“You’re forgetting several things there,” Draco cut across him. “For a start, deliberately and purposefully, Ginny was killed while I was there, and my memories modified – oh dear Merlin, no!”

“What? What?”

Everyone leant forward as Draco went white.

He stood up, hands shaking, clearly thinking, as he paced back and forth.

“What is it, Draco?” Snape asked sharply, trying to draw him back.

“Samantha Stubbins. Sorry, the name sounded familiar when you first said it, but I was thinking of her husband –”

“Well, they both played, didn’t they?” Ron interrupted. “He was with the Magpies, she played for the Prides, everyone knows that. She wasn’t bad, either, but her form went right off –”
“Well, that was it,” Draco said. “Just after I took over at The Harpies, she came up for transfer. I watched her play a couple of times, but I thought she was past it, to be honest. I didn’t give it another thought.”

“Well, there we have a motive against you too,” Kingsley sighed.

“But it was long before – ”

“I think she ended up with some crap semi-professional team,” Ron mused. “I’ll have it in one of my back copies – ”

“You keep all your old back copies?” Bill looked at his brother, eyes twinkling.

“Hey! They were a big investment when I was a kid, you know!”

“Merlin’s beard, all of them?” Bill was laughing outright.

Behind Ron’s head, Hermione was nodding, a look of tender-hearted exasperation on her face.

“Well, if you’d rather I didn’t – ” he said huffily.

“It might be quicker to just talk to Atkinson at The Pride,” Draco said. “He’d have a record of where she went to. Not that I’d want to take away your pleasure of going back through all those copies – ”

There were lots of sniggers around the table. Ron was beetroot red.

“Alright, alright, you won’t be laughing when I get a load for selling them! Do you know what a complete collection is worth – ”

“But you ain’t ever going to sell them, bro’,” George laughed.

Ron opened his mouth. And shut it again. “True,” he admitted, to more laughter.

“So – so let’s look at this,” Harry cut through the amusement with the seriousness of his tone. “She could have murdered Gin – we’d need to find who the third person was, if we assume she was one of them. Set up Draco to get revenge. Then, when that didn’t work – well, I was expendable anyway – ”

“That wouldn’t explain why she’d refer to a Plan C,” George said, “in the same sentence as mentioning you being released. I can see that her jealousy - and maybe she’s as mad as a hatter too – is a motive, but it doesn’t make any sense of that. And if you didn’t matter, why was it so important to get you killed? What she did with Hugo and Neville was entirely about that.”

“And from what you’ve said, she’s got some young people working for her, voluntarily or not,” Hermione added. “I can see youngsters signing up for a cause, but not for some teacher’s revenge plot.”

“Good points,” Kingsley said. “So my team are going to be doing a lot more investigation into Donnelly – ”

“We need to know if her husband is involved too,” Andy said. “What’s his role in this? I mean, if it’s not just her revenge binge. Because it seems to me like there are a lot of changes going on at Hogwarts, and he’s a man with a lot of power to make those changes happen.”

“Also an excellent point,” Kingsley said. “Let’s just go over that to clarify it in our minds. Let’s be
specific about the changes we see at Hogwarts, whether we think they’re good or bad. Someone write this up as a list, will you? I see the security being a big issue.”

Albus had called a quill over from a pot on the dresser, and then summoned paper and ink.

“There’s the staff – all the old staff are gone, except Trelawney, who no-one counts,” George said. “Might be normal wastage, but it seems worth finding out how long teachers usually stay in post before moving on. And check with anyone that’s left recently why they went. Oh, and we need to see what the Governors are up to. If anything. And if not, why not.”

“I don’t know how many points that is,” Albus complained.

“Just get it down,” Bill said, “you can fiddle with it afterwards.”

“Alright, well, obviously I’m concerned about pupil safety,” Hermione said. “Hugo should have been reported missing, and there shouldn’t have been all that stalling. Not to mention the attack itself. And I’m worried about the threats to those kids you overheard, Harry.”

Albus groaned as he scribbled and crossed out, trying to make some order.

“I’m concerned about the history lessons,” Harry said, surprising them.

“Why’s that? The most tedious class in school?” Ron asked. “Good thing there’s less of it.”

“It’s not that they’ve reduced the number of lessons and the years who study it, I understand there are new things to fit in, it’s just… I don’t mean to sound…boasting, or wanting attention, or anything, but they don’t study anything recent at all. Not Grindelwald, or Voldemort. And…and I know people here didn’t seem to know either, about things like Molly fighting Bellatrix. I want to know what in the textbooks, even if they’ve chosen not to use them.”

“Yes, that’s a good point, Harry. I mean, the fight with Bellatrix ought to be in Hogwarts: A History. I’m sure anyone browsing might have come across it, and it’s pretty amazing stuff.”


There was a slight cough. “Actually, I have a copy,” Scorpius said. As everyone looked at him, he blushed. “Dad got it for me before I went to Hogwarts: I wanted to find out about it before I went.”

“You see?” Hermione said, leaning back, crossing her arms. “Intelligent people do like something more than a magazine collection to fulfil their interest.”

“Well, I had that too,” Scorpius said, then after a moment’s hesitation, added, grinning, “Guess I liked looking at the guys on their brooms as much as Ron liked looking at the girls.”

Snape made a choked sound.

George opened his mouth.

“Not a single comment about my posters of the Cannons,” Ron hissed at him.

“I was thinking about your Victor Krum fixation,” Harry whistled. “Till he went out with Mione, that is.”

“You went out with Victor Krum?” Scorpius looked at Hermione as if he hadn’t seen her before. “He’s hot!”
“Oi! Alright, alright, let’s change the subject!” Ron demanded, to a good bit of chuckling.

“Well,” Scorpius said, “I can’t remember anything about my Aunt Bella in there, and I’m pretty sure I would have noticed.”

“Where’s your copy, Harry?” Hermione demanded, standing up.

“You don’t think Harry has a copy of that mangy old book, do you?” Ron snorted.

Hermione whacked him round the head as she passed. “Talk among yourselves – I’ll go get mine. Any chance of some more tea, Harry, by the time I’m back?”

“Mione,” Harry called, halting her progress. “You haven’t got more than one copy, have you? An old one and a more recent one? Binns said something about the editing.”

“Merlin, don’t encourage her,” Ron groaned.

“You will be regretting that,” Hermione said, pointing a finger at her husband, to much further amusement.

“We’ve got a new copy at HQ,” Kingsley said. “It’s a good source for the names and educational details of all the staff,” he explained, at the surprised looks.

“I’ll go ask Dido to pass it through,” Rose said, getting up, and following her mother out of the room.

Harry called Mitty, who was delighted to make tea, and even more delighted, at Albus’ suggestion, to fetch out Allie and Dinky and introduce her new family to everyone.

Dinky was overawed at being treated as actually visible, and bowed and scraped and wiped away his tears, and the younger generation were all fascinated with the elfling, much to Mitty’s maternal delight.

Several minutes later Hermione appeared with the book open, obviously busy skimming the pages.

“You’re the only person I know who can travel through the floo whilst reading a book,” Harry said, grinning at his friend.

She laid the book out on the table. “I got this edition for my twenty first birthday. There’s a twenty page section on Dumbledore and his battle with Grindelwald. Looks reasonably thorough as far as I can tell. There’re forty pages on The Battle of Hogwarts, starting with a brief history of Tom Riddle’s time at the school, through the first war, to his return to power, the use of Professor Quirrell, histories on all the leading characters involved, finishing with the Battle before it goes on to the rebuilding programme. All accurate. I remember at the time wondering who wrote it and thought they’d done a pretty decent job. There are some bits omitted, obviously, because they didn’t happen at Hogwarts or relate directly to it. What’s the current edition got?”

Rose had been leafing through it whilst waiting for her mother to arrive. “One paragraph on Albus Dumbledore and Grindelwald, a page and a half on the other.”

“What?” Bill said. “What on earth can they manage to say in a paragraph? A page and a half?”

“Not much,” Rose said. “Want me to read it?”

When she’d finished, they sat in silence for a moment.
Harry got up and walked out of the room.

“What - ?”

“Shall I - ?”

“I’ll go,” Snape said, getting up.

“Perhaps I should – “ Albus got to his feet.

But Snape was already out of the door.

“Leave them,” Kingsley said. “That is a betrayal of both of them,” he waved at the book. “Of everything they gave…” he slammed his fist on the table, and stood up himself. He leant on the sink with his back to them. “Have you anything stronger than coffee in the house, James?”

“Er, yes, sure,” James’ chair clattered as he got to his feet. “Er, beer?”

“There’s firewhiskey. I’ll get it,” Albus said.

James got out glasses.

Andy had pulled the book towards him, and he and Scorpius were reading it.

“I – I don’t mean to be rude,” Andy asked, when he’d finished, “but – is this wrong? Is that why Harry is upset?”

“Read the other version,” Hermione said. “Even that doesn’t tell everything, but at least it gives some idea of what it was like. What people had to do to get rid of the bastard.”

The younger ones stared at her. Hermione wasn’t one for using that tone, or that sort of language.

Albus came back with the bottle. “I think they’ve gone into the garden,” he whispered.

“He likes to be outside when things are tough,” Ron said.

The younger ones had gathered behind Andy and Scorpius, reading over their shoulders. The older ones all took a stiff shot of the firewhisky.

“All this happened?” Andy said at last.

Hermione nodded. “And more. Obviously, there were several more detailed histories written – “

“I’ve never seen any,” Teddy said.

“Well, Harry’s never bothered with having that sort of thing around, and I suppose Andromeda perhaps didn’t want reminding….“

“I’ve never seen anything that mentioned my parents,” he said, quietly. “They fought to the death.”

“Yeah,” Ron nodded. “They did. We were all gutted. Absolutely gutted.”

After a moment of silence, Scorpius asked, tentatively, “What more was there? You said there was more. Or is it secret?”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other. Everyone watched them. Ron gave a slight shake of the head.
“There are some things that are best never said,” Hermione spoke. “But what isn’t mentioned, is that Harry had to give up his life to defeat Voldemort.”

“You mean he had to be willing to? To duel with someone so much older and more powerful? Harry was what, seventeen?” Andy asked. “That was ridiculous.”

“No,” Ron shook his head. “We didn’t know, but he literally had to die. Just let Voldemort kill him.”

“What? Why?”

Ron and Hermione looked at each other again. “Because when he’d survived the killing curse as a baby, Voldemort had lodged a bit of himself in Harry. He couldn’t die whilst Harry was alive.”

“Holy shit! That – that’s disgusting,” Teddy said.

“But – he knew that he had a bit of Voldemort in him?” Scorpius asked, frowning.

“He’d known for a long time that there was a connection,” Ron said. “He had appalling nightmares – no – worse. Voldemort used to send him images; Harry had to watch people being tortured, and…well, stuff no-one wants to see.”

“God, the poor sod,” Bill said. “I didn’t really realise – I mean, I knew we found Dad that time because – but – “

“Yeah,” Ron said.

“But – Voldemort didn’t let on that Harry needed to do that, did he?” Draco asked, frowning.

Ron shook his head. “Dumbledore worked it out.”

“What? He knew he’d have to kill himself before Dumbledore died? That’s – so –“

Hermione shook her head. “It was worse than that. Dumbledore had told Severus. Severus – as much as we hated him then – had actually been protecting Harry for years. He knew Harry’s Mum. Anyway, Severus was bitten by Nagini, Voldemort’s giant snake, and – “ she gave a little shrug, “ - we spent the last thirty years thinking he was dead. We found him just before – well, we thought he died when we were there. But in those last couple of minutes, he insisted on giving Harry his memories. Harry slipped off and looked at them on his own; he didn’t tell us what he was going to do,” she looked down at her hands.

“But he had to do it to defeat Voldemort?” Rose asked.

Hermione nodded.

“I haven’t thought about this in years,” Ron said. “But buggering hell! Snape must’ve hated Dumbledore for expecting him to lay that on Harry.” He shook his head. “And then he made Snape kill him. What a bastard!”

“To save me,” Draco whispered. “He saved me, and yet there was no alternative for Harry but dying?” His voice was rising. “There must have been something else!”

“Well,” Andy said into the silence, “Harry didn’t die, did he? He’s still here.”

“Oh, he did,” Kingsley said.
Everyone looked at him.

“I was involved in taking the statements of all the Death Eaters who witnessed it. He just lowered his wand and allowed Voldemort to AK him. He died.”

Out in the garden, Harry stood, hands in his pockets, rocking on his feet. It was only a small garden, but there was a wisteria climbing up the back of the house, and the delicate scent clung to the night air.

Snape stood beside him, not saying anything. Just there.

“Everything you did, Severus! It’s not even as if they can insist that you weren’t relevant to Hogwarts! You’d taught there for twenty years! You were the fucking Headmaster!”

“Your concern is that they didn’t mention me?” Snape said, surprised.

“What was it all for? For fuck’s sake, why did we fucking bother? They’ve forgotten it already and now some new shit organisation is going to come and we’re back to fucking square one!”

“No,” Snape said, turning towards him.

Harry looked away.

Snape took hold of his biceps, and turned Harry to face him. “It isn’t the same. We’re catching it earlier in the game. They don’t appear to be organised in the same way. There’s not a charismatic leader – ”

“I don’t fucking care!” Harry shouted, stepping away.

Harry stiffened as Snape came up behind him and put his arms around his waist, hauling him back against his body.

“You do,” he whispered in his ear. “You do care, and that’s why it hurts.”

Harry gasped in a shuddering breath. He started to pull away.

Snape sighed, and released him.

And then Harry turned, standing close, and dropped his head onto Snape’s chest.

“I know,” Harry said. “I do.”

Snape’s arms came up, and he held him.
Later that evening, Harry and Snape stood side by side in the shadows of Room 154 at Hogwarts.

Harry didn’t know why he’d done it: turning into Snape’s arms had seemed the most ridiculous, and yet the easiest of things to do. He didn’t know when he’d last felt the sense of relief that had washed over him as he stood there, just hearing Snape’s heartbeat, feeling the slender strength of him.

Knowing that Snape knew him. That Snape understood. Understood his frustration, and anger, and bitterness.

And the fact that he couldn’t walk away from it.

And knowing that Snape wouldn’t either.

They hadn’t said anything else. Eventually, they’d pulled apart, and Snape had put a hand in the small of Harry’s back as he’d turned him to go inside.

He didn’t know what the others had talked about whilst they were outside, but everyone looked serious. When Harry had said that he was going to Hogwarts that night to see what was going on at the meeting, James had at once said, “I’ll get the cloak.”

“If you would be willing to allow someone else to use it, I think it would be better if I accompanied Harry,” Snape said. “As Head of Slytherin for almost two decades, not to mention being a student of that House, and Headmaster, I know the dungeons better than most.”

There hadn’t been any argument. George had whizzed off to get an extra button for Snape. They’d discussed whether they thought the Headmaster was involved. Whether the security systems, the stuff in the wash to track people, the diminishing place of History on the curriculum, had been the Head’s idea, or whether Adrian Donnelly was behind it. Kingsley had said that Gloria had had some interesting information which they were following up, and they were looking at intercontinental links.

Kingsley shoo-ed everyone away at a quarter to ten, to give Harry and Severus time to get themselves organised and off to Hogwarts.

“You too,” he said to the boys. “Go and watch the telly, or something. I need to have a word with them.” He leant in. “Make sure they don’t do anything gung-ho and silly,” he added.

Albus laughed. “Good luck with that! I don’t think Dad can help himself.”

“That’s why I’m glad Severus is with him,” Kingsley said, seriously. “Not that you two didn’t do a super job last week, but this witch sounds potentially dangerous.”

“You don’t think we could handle that?” James asked, affronted. “Dad did when he was younger than us.”

Kingsley looked at him. “If push came to shove, you might hesitate. You haven’t killed before. It’s not easy. Severus has.”
James swallowed, and after a moment, nodded. “Dad too. He’s killed,” James clarified.

“Yes. They’ll take care of each other. Now, we need to get a move on. Don’t worry, alright?”

“It’s easy for you to say –” James started.

There was something about the stillness in Kingsley that stopped him. “Oh. Sorry,” he mumbled.

“I’d rather be there, than listening and waiting, but they’re the right people for the job. They’ll be safe. Now, bugger off.”

Albus snorted, and they both went.

Kingsley walked back into the kitchen where Harry was loading dishes into the sink and Severus was just pouring three mugs of tea. He picked his up and took a sip, exchanging a look with Severus as he did so.

“I’ve just promised the boys to make you behave yourselves and not get into any unnecessary danger.”

Harry turned round. “How’re you going to do that?” he smiled, surprising Kingsley.

Kingsley grinned back. “I trust you both,” he said. “And I know you’ll cover each other’s backs if anything comes up. But if you want instant back-up, something that overrides all the secrecy and pretence, I want you to let me know. Now we’ve got George’s buttons, you can just say something. A phrase, a word…?” He looked from one to the other.

Harry looked at Snape and shrugged. “Olives,” he said.

“Olives. Okay, fair enough. Any reason?”

“You’ve got an olive grove. I always feel safe at your place. It’s something that I could throw into a conversation –”

“You could?” Snape’s laughing eyes invited him to do so.

“Hey! How about, ‘Gosh, I’m starving! I really fancy some olives’, or, ‘Is your robe olive or khaki?’”

“You think you’d be able to slip those into the conversation if we were in a situation where we feared for our lives?” Snape raised his eyebrows.

“Dunno,” Harry grinned. “It might lighten me up to try, though.”

“Right, begone with you,” Kingsley said. “I’m going to be at HQ. George is listening in in his office, just in case there’s any problems with my mouthy thing.”

“Nothing wrong with your mouthy thing that I know of,” Snape said, voice low, looking at Kingsley’s lips, before attaching George’s button to his robe, where it instantly transformed to be identical to all the others.

“Oi!” Harry said. “I’m here, you know.”

“And you have experience of Kingsley’s mouthy thing too,” Snape added.

Harry ducked his head. “I’ve had a cuddle with Severus now,” he blushed, “if we’re hanging out
“Have you now?” Kingsley smiled, looking from one to the other. “We’ll have to discuss that another time.” He stepped forward, pecked Snape on the cheek, patted Harry’s arm, and strode off to the floo.

Feeling disappointed and relieved at the same time, Harry had said, “Ready?” to Snape, and they’d apparated up to Scotland.

They’d made their way into the dungeons without mishap. Room 154 had apparently been a storage cellar at some point, and was on a floor below the level where the Potions classroom was. It was a floor that didn’t appear on the Marauders’ map - indeed, the staircase itself was hidden behind a painting, which was located in a large gallery full of old portraits, many of them snoring. Harry had never been there before.

“Is someone there?”

Harry almost jumped out of his skin.

“Ernest, can you see anyone?” the portrait called. “You know my sight isn’t what it was. I’m sure I heard a footstep.”

Harry curled his toes, as if that would muffle the sound.

“Probably a rat, Angus,” a handsome young gentleman with mutton-chop whiskers said, peering out of his frame. “Demmed creatures!”

“It could be those children again,” a lady in a purple gown with a lace cap on her hair suggested. “The ones who go downstairs now and then. It’s so nice to see the young people again, don’t you think? I wish they’d take the time to talk to us.”

“Children only think of themselves,” an old wizard in a dark velvet robe covered in silver-thread embroidery said. “And that’s how it should be: they’ve better things to do than talk to us.”

“I don’t think it’s fair that they all talk to Doris,” the purple lady said, with a sniff.

“It’s hardly scintillating conversation,” Doris answered. She looked like a 1920s flapper, Harry thought, with a robe cut above her ankles and a green sash across her hips. Her hair was cut in a severe bob.

Harry heard Severus sigh beside him, then cast a silencing spell towards the door.

“Ladies and Gentlemen,” he said aloud. “Forgive us for intruding.”

“Who are you? Where are you?” Angus demanded. “Where are they, Ernest? I could really do with some new pince-nez, you know.”

“We’re invisible,” Snape said. “And I’m afraid we need to disturb Doris too.”

“Do you have the password?” Doris asked. She was holding a cigarette in a long, thin holder, and waved it languidly.

“To the Master all must yield, for Hogwarts’ honour he must shield.”
There were gasps throughout the room, with the portraits staring out, trying to see who was there.

“Who is it?”

“It’s a Headmaster!”

“Why would he be invisible - ?”

“Headmaster Snape?” Angus demanded. “I may not have my sight, but my hearing is up to snuff, you know! I thought you had retired? Yes, yes, because we had McGonagall before the current chap.”

“You’re perfectly right,” Severus said, showing himself and bowing. “There is a threat at Hogwarts, and by the wards of Hogwarts, I invoke your assistance.”

Harry wondered what exactly was happening, but he could feel the magic swirling, and the shocked and excited noises of the portraits.

“Of course we’ll do anything to help you, young man,” the purple lady said. “You’d better tell us what is going on.”

“People will come soon – ”

“Yes,” Snape said. “I’ll be brief. The current Headmaster hasn’t already invoked your aid?”

“Demmed fellow has never even introduced himself,” Ernest said. “Dashed poor show, what?”

“And none of you have visited him in his office? Called in on one of the old Headmasters?” Snape queried.

“He never works in there. Set up in another room with his secretary and the bursar. It’s the modern way, apparently,” Doris said, blowing a perfect smoke ring.

“That’s all very well,” huffed Ernest, “but there are no pictures in there that we can get into. No portraits. Not even a landscape. Who doesn’t like a good landscape, eh? Landseer, now there was an artist!”

“He has ‘abstract paintings’, so Mrs Banton calls them,” the purple lady said. “I’m sure I don’t know what that means!”

“What it means,” Doris said coolly, “is that we can’t get into them. Who is with you, by the way, Severus?” she asked, her eyes flicking over the man in front of her.

Harry looked to Snape, who nodded.

“My apologies for my poor manners,” Harry said, removing the spell and bowing to them all.

“Good heavens,” Angus said. “I haven’t seen a wizard – or witch,” he said, hastily looking at Doris, “who was capable of personal invisibility since – well, since Albus Dumbledore, and he was the first in a century too. So, young man, who are you?”

“Please allow me to introduce Harry Potter,” Snape said smoothly.

“Harry Potter?” Ernest said. “Great heavens! An honour, Sir, an honour! I’d shake your hand if only I was capable – “
Harry smiled. “I do hope you will also keep my presence here to yourselves?”

“Of course, of course!”

“No gossiping when anyone might hear,” Snape ordered.

“Not a whisper, Headmaster!”

“It must be serious if you’ve returned,” the purple lady said anxiously.

Harry nodded. “I expect you might have heard that a pupil – my nephew – was deliberately trapped in the greenhouses and almost killed, in order to force Professor Longbottom to try and bring about my death. He gave his life and honour in order to save the boy.”

“Good lord! We’d heard whispers, of course, what the portraits upstairs had picked up. Professor Longbottom was much admired. A sad loss to the school –”

“Yes,” Snape said. “And there have been other attacks on past pupils. Mrs Potter – a Weasley by birth – has been killed -”

“My dear boy! My condolences,” Angus said, looking at Harry.

“Thank you,” Harry nodded. “We’re trying to find the people responsible, and several links are bringing us back to Hogwarts. In particular, the group using 154 and Professor Donnelly have raised suspicion. There might be nothing in it, but we’re going to investigate. Do they use the room often?”

“Erratically,” Doris said. “About half a dozen times since the school year began.”

Harry nodded.

“We ought to get down there,” Severus said. “We may have some more questions for you later. Your help is much appreciated. And your silence,” he added severely.

“Count on us,” Ernest said, holding onto the edges of his waistcoat. “An honour, dear Sirs, an honour!”

Doris made a small movement with her cigarette holder, and her portrait swung forward.

Five minutes later they were ensconced in a cellar. They waited in the dark. Harry was aware of the musty smell of the place. He shifted his feet slightly, the total blackness disorientating, and bumped against Snape. Snape didn’t move, just stayed there, a solid fixed point, for Harry to lean against, or not. Harry stayed still, enjoying the contact, until they heard footsteps, and he moved away just slightly. There was a wall behind them, and he leant back on it. He assumed they might be there for up to an hour – surely Donnelly wouldn’t be expecting the students to go to bed too much after midnight?

He blinked his eyes as the lights flared. Donnelly was there, heading towards a table, where she set out some glasses and a flask. Only a couple of minutes later, the youngsters arrived, eight of them, as earlier. The last one in closed the door quietly. There were six boys and two girls.

None of them spoke, but, to Harry’s amazement, lined up facing Donnelly. They were all wearing
basic quidditch gear, the same clothes Harry had seen earlier, although they weren’t wearing
gloves or any of the protective parts.

She turned towards them. “Right, pair up. Duncan, you go with Dalton. Greerson, Smith. Browne,
Donovan. Burton, Di Mario.”

Harry noticed the twitch of Greerson’s shoulders as he was matched with Smith.

Donnelly had her back to them at the table as the students shuffled into pairs.

She turned round and presented one of each pair with a steaming glass, then leant forward and
plucked a hair that was lying on Duncan’s robe. She popped it into the glass.

“Drink up, Dalton, we don’t have any time to waste,” she ordered.

“You want me to become Duncan, Professor? Who’s he becoming?” he asked.

“I will explain in a moment. Get to it.” And she walked to the next pair. Soon, four people were
gagging over the Polyjuice. And then there were two matched pairs. Smith, however, had not
turned into Greerson, but into Cally Donovan, which meant that there were three Donovan’s in the
room now.

“Well, well, well,” Donnelly strode up and down, hands on hips. “Been canoodling with Donovan
on the way here, Greerson?” she mocked.

Harry would have hated her for that tone alone.

“I’m a girl!” Smith stared down at his body in horror.

“And that is an excellent experience for you,” Donnelly said.

“But Professor – “

“No, Smith, this is ideal. It’s very important to know how to move and imitate the person you’re
aiming to copy. And imitating the opposite sex is particularly challenging, and useful. You’ll need
to get a good feel of that body – you’ll find the balance, and stride, is quite different. Go on,
explore.”

Smith looked at Donnelly, who glanced over at the real Donovan, and at Greerson, and then
smiled at him. The smirk that lit up Smith’s face turned Harry’s stomach. The youth stroked his
hands down his sides in a sensuous gesture.

“Hey!” Donovan said.

“Nice bod, Donovan,” Smith grinned, then rubbed his hands over his breasts.

Greerson punched him in the face.

“Ah, there is some fight in you, is there, Greerson? Well, we’ll see how you cope with a little bit
more of that. And as your partner can’t work on copying you, you can watch for a bit.” And with a
flick, she cast a Petrificus Totalis at him. “Now,” she said to the others, “those of you who’ve taken
the potion, I want you to imitate your counterpart. Donovan, you’ve got two copying you. Make it
good, everyone, your lives might depend on it.”

“Are we going to be needing this, then, Professor? Is this part of Plan C?” Burton asked.
“Are you going to tell us what Plan C is?” one of the Donovans asked. “So we can be prepared?”

“Browne, if you think I’m going to tell a bunch of kids who’re just going to spill it the first time there’s a Hogsmeade weekend and they hit The Three Broomsticks – ”

“Professor, you can trust us,” one of the Duncan’s said.

“I hope so,” she said. “But the less you know at this point, the safer we all are. For the moment, train. You’re wasting Polyjuice time.”

For the next twenty minutes, the seven students played copycat, mirroring the speech, movement, posture, and then spellwork of the original person.

Donnelly prowled.

Harry tried to glean the students’ commitment from watching them, but to be fair, it was an interesting exercise. He couldn’t blame any of them for getting into it.

Then Donnelly called a halt. “Right, let’s see how much you’ve learnt,” she said, “and stretch our wings a little, shall we? You’re going to need to recognise a member of your team in disguise. You’re going to need to learn to fight in a body you’re not familiar with.” She turned to Greerson, and released the spell.

He stumbled, and Harry felt sympathy wash over him: he’d been there, coming out of a Petrificus, and knew just how uncomfortable it felt when the blood started rushing back into your muscles.

“Greerson,” Donnelly sneered, not trying to hide her dislike. “Let’s see if you’ve taken advantage of the opportunity to observe, shall we? Shut your eyes.”

The boy looked at her mutely, chin out, but slowly did so.

Donnelly quickly moved the other students, so that the three Donovans were in the middle, facing Greerson, and the other four students surrounded them.

“You may look,” Donnelly said, and the boy opened his eyes.

“This is what we’re doing you’ve had a nice rest watching everyone else work, and now it’s your turn for a little action. I want you to attack the Donovans.”

Harry saw the boy’s eyes widen, and dart from one to another of the three identical girl figures. Harry hadn’t realised it before, but it suddenly struck him that the kit they were wearing must be charmed, as everyone’s fitted them perfectly. There was no clue there as to who was who.

“Now, Greerson, your job is to attack as hard as you can. The Donovans are allowed to block your spells only, so there’s no fear of them attacking you. You may be tempted to go lightly on one or more of them. The team on the outside of the circle are to cast at any of the Donovans who they feel is not receiving their fair share of your attacks, or if they feel that you’re going too easy. The Donovans are not allowed to block curses from the outer team, only yours. So it will be entirely your fault if they’re hurt as a result of your weakness. If you attack properly, they can rely on their own skill to defend themselves. Am I clear?”

“What spells can we use, Professor?” one of the Duncans asked.

“Anything you like, except Unforgiveables.”
Harry had to bite off a sharp intake of breath. Next to him, Snape hadn’t moved, and yet Harry was aware of the tension in the man.

It was the most cruel thing Harry had seen since the days of Voldemort.

He didn’t know how he stood there and watched it, filled with self-disgust at doing so, and yet knowing that he could not intervene. All three Donovans had been hurt by the combination of Greerson’s attacks, which grew fiercer in order to prevent the outer team from throwing curses. The two Duncans, in particular, seemed to enjoy themselves. One of the Donovans fell to her knees as a hex from behind slashed at her tendon. She screamed.

It was not the first scream they’d heard.

Greerson threw down his wand.

“Enough!” he shouted. “I don’t care which Cally that is, this is bloody enough!”

Everyone’s hands dropped to their sides, with the outer team all looking to Donnelly.

Harry felt Snape shift fractionally beside him. If his reaction was anything like Harry’s, he already had his wand in his hand.

To his surprise, Donnelly said, “Took you enough time to grow some balls, Greerson. Like inflicting pain, do you?”

Greerson, still covered in sweat and red with effort, went white almost as quickly.

“The potion will wear off any moment,” Donnelly said. “In the meantime, outer team, get to healing the damage. I don’t want anyone to see any sign of injury at all. Whoever was stupid enough to sever the Achilles tendon, twenty points from your House. That takes twenty four hours to heal, and will require a trip to the Infirmary for the correct potion. Stand forward.”

One of the Burtons stepped up.

“Di Mario?”

The boy nodded.

“And which one are you?” she turned to the Donovan huddled over on the floor.

“Sarah Browne, Professor,” she gritted.

“Very well. Di Mario, once you have healed Miss Browne’s other wounds, you will accompany her to the Infirmary. If questioned, which you should be at this time of night, you will say that you had met in the Astronomy Tower and that Miss Browne’s foot slipped on a step.” Her brows pulled together. She pointed her wand at Miss Browne’s leg and fired off a spell.

Browne grabbed her leg, and bit her tongue, tears streaming from her eyes.

“I’ve just saved your bacon,” Donnelly said, without any sympathy whatsoever. “Now the damage looks like a tear rather than a neat cut. Well, get to it, everybody.”

Soon, the repairs were done and the transformations over. Harry could not help watching as Greerson’s eyes met with the real Donovan.

“The rest of you, off to bed. Practice as usual on Sunday morning,” Donnelly said, and then they
were all leaving.

Harry and Snape allowed them to go. They waited a few seconds after the door closed, then Harry heard Snape moving to the front of the class.

Snape pulled off the cloak and bent down towards the desk, wiping his finger over a drop of spilt potion. He sniffed it, and touched it to his tongue.

“Shall I follow Greerson and Smith?” Harry said, impatient at the thought of losing them.

“You take them, I’ll take Donnelly,” Snape whispered back, as they moved to the door.

“Too dangerous,” Harry said, opening it and peering outside. They headed up the stairs.

“Don’t be foolish,” Snape hissed.

Harry didn’t know how to answer. Snape was right, there was information to be got from both, but…

They carefully approached Doris’ portrait, which was double-sided.

“Anyone in the room beyond, or is it clear for us to come through?” Harry asked.

Doris’ head swivelled back. “Clear. There’s just a cat here that’s been prowling about. Rather handsome tom. Anything to do with you?”

Harry and Snape looked at each other, and went through.

“Albus!” Harry exclaimed in a hushed voice, as the cat shot out and wound around his legs.

“Right,” Snape said. “No time to lose. Albus, follow the girl who went to Griffindor Tower. Potter, you take the Donnellys, I’ll take the boys. Meet up at the apparition point.”

They all headed to the stairs, moving fast. Albus bounded ahead. Harry could see him overtake the students. Wise. He’d go to the tower and be there before Cally Donovan arrived.

Harry was glad that he’d been working out, and that he was able to keep his breathing even. Snape too was silent beside him.

Even though he couldn’t see him, he felt Snape’s absence as they parted to follow their respective marks. Harry was surprised that Snape had conceded Donnelly to him. Was it an indication that Snape trusted him to look after himself?

After three quarters of an hour with the Donnelly’s, Harry was dying of embarrassment. They were going at it like the clappers on the sofa, and he didn’t know where to look. Their quarters were also heavily warded, and he didn’t know how to get out without triggering their awareness. It looked as if he was stuck with them till the morning, or until they were asleep, at least.

Adrian Donnelly had fallen into a post-coital doze, but his wife was having none of it. She’d barely got her breath back when her hand slithered down his body again.

Donnelly groaned.
Harry felt a large twinge of sympathy. There was always something so intense and delicious about that sleep straight after….

He was just settling his bottom to lean back against the wall when he jerked upright. The most ear-splitting noises were coming from the corridor. Both Donnelly’s leapt to their feet, going for their wands.

“If that’s Peeves –“ Adrian Donnelly said angrily.

“Sounds like a cat-fight,” Samantha Donnelly said, after a second. “I think it’s time you banned them from the school, Adrian.”

She flung her robe over her head. Her husband was wrapping his around him like a dressing gown.

Harry moved to stand as close to the door as he thought he could get without them accidentally bumping into him.

“They’re soothing for the students – usually,” Adrian added the qualifier, seeing the fierce look his wife was throwing him.

As he went to open the door, Harry slipped a weak sticking charm on it. Adrian cursed as the door refused to budge. “I’ll get Banton to oil this,” he muttered, a second before he applied extra force and the door flung back inwards. Samantha swore as he fell back and stepped on her toe.

Harry was out. Albus quit attacking the other cat and raced after him up the corridor, as if the crash of the door had scared him away.

Ten minutes later Harry was just reaching for his broom when he heard the slightest of noises.

Instantly still, he held out a hand to Albus, who, he assumed, had been about to transform himself.

His heart was beating fast, and his wand was out.

They were in the darkness underneath the quidditch stadium. He couldn’t see anything. Suddenly a crow cawed overhead. And then there was the movement again. Harry raised his wand. Albus rubbed against his leg. Harry crept forward. Albus jostled again. Harry gritted his teeth in frustration: why did Albus’ feline tendency to coil around his legs have to come out at a time like this? And then it clicked.

“You know who it is?” he whispered, bending down to stroke the cat’s back quickly.

Albus arched up into it, butted his head against Harry’s shin, then toddled off towards the movement. Harry then watched as Albus, and what looked like a white fox, raced across the grounds together.

His lips twitched.

He mounted his broom, and after carefully looking out of the enclosed space, took to the air. A crow whirled and darted around him.

He landed moments later beside the copse and walked into the darkness of the wood, wand still out.

Snape was sitting on a fallen log. A moment later, the crow landed on a branch overhead, then floated down to the ground, and transformed.
Snape said nothing, just looked at Harry with a raised brow. Harry assumed the crow had looped around Severus whilst he was flying too. Snape stood up, but Harry shook his head. He said nothing. It was still dangerous. He came and sat beside Snape. James perched on a log nearby. The next moment, they all stood up, wands ready, as the crackling of twigs breaking could be heard. The fox and Albus trotted into the clearing, and transformed.

“Where’s Andy?” Scorpius said, and the next moment, Harry jumped as something scuttled out from the brush and then there too was Andy.

“What are you, the new Marauders?” he shook his head.

“Home,” Snape said. “We’ll talk there. Yours,” he added to Harry.

Albus stepped forward, shaking out his limbs as he moved. He frowned.

“Dad,” he said, voice low. “I might have overstretched myself.”

Harry looked at him, then at the other boys. “Gather round,” he said. “Hold hands. Snape, help me power it. All cast on three, and think of my sitting room. One, two, three!”

They landed on the carpet in the middle of the room.

“Sit,” Harry said to the boys. “Mitty! Dinky!”

The elves appeared at once, Allie’s head peeking out from Mitty’s pillow-case. “Master Harry is needing us?”

“Yes, thank you both. Hot chocolate all round, please, and some cake if you have it. Or biscuits. Tea for me, actually. Snape?”

“Tea and cake sounds excellent,” he said, sitting himself down also.

“Yes, Master Harry,” the elves said together.

“We has carrot cake,” Mitty said, “and shortbread.”

“Great,” Harry said. “Just the job. Thank you.”

Harry turned and looked at the children. It was getting on for two in the morning, and despite the fact that all of them probably often socialized this late, he knew there would be work in the morning for most of them. He had never done the animagus transformation, but from the look of them, it was exhausting to maintain.

He didn’t know whether to be cross or touched that the four had come.

The floo in the other room whooshed. He strode out to investigate, and saw Kingsley brushing off floo powder.

“You’ve got to admire their guts,” Kingsley said, “even if their sense of discipline needs sorting out.”

Harry nodded. “They’re tired out. Is transforming hard?”

Kingsley nodded. “Hard to maintain, and they’re all relatively new to it, aren’t they? You okay? Got an eyeful, from the sound of it.” He came over and put a hand on Harry’s back as they headed into the corridor.
“I’ve seen more sex in the last week –” Harry began, before realising what he was saying.

“Really? Do tell.” Kingsley murmured, his lips close to Harry’s ear.

Harry felt his colour rising. “I’ve been to some gay clubs,” he said, quietly. “You know. To see.”

Kingsley laughed. “I bet you did see. Got more than an eyeful, I expect,” he bumped shoulders.

Harry nodded, opening the door.

The elves were just putting two large trays of food onto the coffee table, extending it to fit. As they snapped out, with a smile at Harry, the boys were already leaning forward, helping themselves.

The floo sounded again.

“Go in,” Harry said. “I expect it’s George.”

Moments later, they were all sitting round, eating and drinking.

“Well,” Kingsley said as the last piece of cake disappeared, “I won’t keep you long – just a quick debrief. Harry, Severus, well done. Thoughts?”

“She’s cruel,” Harry said. “She enjoys being cruel.”

“Donnelly?” James asked, and Harry nodded.

“I found it almost impossible not to…stop it,” Harry said.

“What’s the issue?” Andy asked.

“There are three students that are not – thrilled – with what is going on,” Snape said.

“Three?” Harry asked.

Snape nodded. “It was something of a surprise to discover that Greerson and Smith are the best of friends.”

“Really?” Harry said, leaning forward.

“Yes. They’re playing a part to fool Donnelly. All three of them are terrified. I believe one at least of the three has used Polyjuice for an unknown crime, and therefore feels unable to escape the situation.”

Harry looked at him. “Do you think one of them could have been involved in Ginny’s murder?”

“I can only speculate: I don’t imagine they would feel so scared, or unable to escape, if the matter were not serious.”

“You didn’t speak to them?” Harry asked, frowning. “I – I’d intended to – “

“Yes, I thought you might have,” Snape said. “It’s better to let Kingsley’s mole at Hogwarts contact them.”

“But –“

“They need someone who’s there, Harry. They can help us - ”
“You expect them to spy for us?” Harry leapt to his feet. “They’re in danger! We could have got them out!”

“They could have got out themselves – they have clothes that they know prevent their movements being detected. Which suggests that others they know are under threat if they leave, or they’re hoping to find a way out on their own, or both. Or that they feel that their situation is inescapable –”

“But I could have taken them out!”

“I mean in the sense that, if they had committed a crime, that there would be no escape from justice if the fact was revealed.”

The others were watching the interplay between the two men. Even Kingsley sat on the arm of Snape’s chair, his fingers linked loosely together in front of him, his arms resting along his thighs.

“You’re trying to give them the chance of redemption?” Harry said slowly.

“Would you deny them it?”

Harry looked at Snape. The man sat there, long and lean, his dark eyes regarding Harry, his expression unfathomable.

Harry had wanted to save the youngsters. But redemption? What if they had actually killed Ginny? What if one, or two of them, had used Polyjuice and had actually cast those awful spells at Ginny? Could he find it in his heart to forgive them? And what else was Snape asking him? If he believed in redemption? In Snape’s own redemption?

“Why did you taste the potion?” he asked, because his mind was getting convoluted on the other thoughts. Was Snape asking him if he had really forgiven him? Surely he couldn’t think…?

“It was made by the Ministry,” Snape said.

“What?” almost everyone asked at once.

“The Ministry add a component to identify it. It does not affect the potion, but it means that any Potions Master worth his salt can identify it as created by the Ministry.”

“The Ministry make Polyjuice?” Scorpius asked.

“It’s use can be authorised by the Minister only, for use by the MLE in avoiding detection. It is not permissible to use it to impersonate a suspect, or known contact of a suspect,” Kingsley said.

“So we have a link between the Ministry and the school,” George said. “The question is, at what level?”

“Exactly,” Snape agreed, crossing his legs.

“But Adrian Donnelly doesn’t appear to be in on whatever his wife is up to?” Kingsley asked Harry.

“Hard to judge, really,” Harry said. “He asked her if she’d had a good meeting, but it was all so off-hand, like it wasn’t anything worth mentioning. But then, who did he think his wife would be meeting at eleven at night, and it not be something a bit dubious? She just said ‘yeah, fine,’ or something, so she wasn’t sharing it, so you couldn’t really tell if he knew what she was up to or
“But you were there ages,” Scorpius said. “What else did they talk about, then?”

Kingsley looked at Harry and grinned, but it was Albus who answered.

“They weren’t exactly talking,” he smirked.

“How did you know?” Harry asked. “That I needed rescuing?”

“You needed rescuing?” James asked, face worried.

“The smell,” Albus said.

“What smell?” James asked.

“Sex. It’s really strong,” Albus twitched his nose, as if he could still smell it.

“You can smell people having sex through a door?” Scorpius grinned. “I thought my sense of smell was good!”

“My cat sense of smell is pretty amazing: it was how I knew Dad and Severus had gone down to that portrait place,” Albus said. “But then I couldn’t get past that woman.”

“Doris is a bit fierce,” Harry agreed, “but then, you weren’t supposed to be there. Any of you,” he said, looking around.

“We didn’t get in the way,” Albus said, meekly.

“You could have endangered the mission. Harry and Severus. The students,” Kingsley said severely.

“I was just a crow overhead. Keeping watch. Peeking in windows,” James said.

“I was just protecting the base site – didn’t do anything useful at all,” Andy shrugged.

“And I only prowled the grounds. Just in case,” Scorpius added. “But Albus was really brave to follow you, Mr Potter, Severus.”

Harry wondered what the world was coming to when people addressed Snape by his first name and used the formal title for him.

Kingsley’s silence as he looked at them had them all fidgeting in their seats. Finally, he said, “I take on board that you want to help. And,” he added, “that you are capable and have useful skills. I’ll try to include you in planning of future operations. But if you ever take action without my instruction, or without consulting me, that will be the end of it. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir,” Scorpius said.

It was an acknowledgement of the different role. Kingsley was wearing his EWA hat, and there was no doubt that the qualities that had made him Minister for Magic were still very much in evidence.

“Right,” he said, standing up. “I, for one, need my bed. Goodnight, all.”

Everyone stood too, and although Kingsley had got up first, he waited whilst Scorpius and Andy
headed to the floo. Harry followed them.

“Thank you both,” he said, quietly. “I worry for you, but I do appreciate it.”

Scorpius smiled. “Thanks for bringing us back. I don’t know if Albus was really knackered or just knew we were.”

“Get to bed,” he said, a quick hand against Andy’s arm as he too gave his thanks.

George, Severus and Kingsley walked through.

“They’re all brave, these kids,” George said.

“Like yours,” Harry agreed. “We forget that we were right in the depths of it back then.”

George nodded.

“It didn’t trouble you to leave your children at Hogwarts? After Hugo?” Snape asked him.

“I reckoned, from things Lucius has said, that France didn’t represent security either. And we talked to the kids: they’ve got great friends, and wanted to stay put. I’ve given them one or two extra security devices.”

“How is Lucius? I suppose I ought to make contact with him? Or not? What?” Harry said, seeing the look that passed between George and Kingsley. “He’s – what he’s doing is useful, yes?”

“You ought to know that he killed a man,” Kingsley said, hands in his pockets.

“What?” Harry stared at them, bewildered. “Why haven’t you pulled him? Or have you? Do I need to?”

Kingsley put a hand on his arm to stop the questions.

“He had to, Harry.”

“Had to kill someone? I never intended –”

“I can’t stand the git,” George said, “but the alternative would have been torturing the poor guy. He’d suffered appallingly already and they weren’t going to stop. It would have been easier for Lucius to take part, but he didn’t. Showing mercy put him at risk. We’re not dealing with normal people, here, Harry. Donnelly showed us that tonight. The people who killed Ginny the way they did showed us that. He went for the kindest option and had to talk his way out of it. Which, I have to say, he did remarkably well. He’s in a lot of danger and providing us some good information.”

Harry rubbed a hand over his face, suddenly weary. The nastiness of what was going on left him feeling dirty. He nodded.

“We’re getting there,” Kingsley said, soothingly.

“Yeah,” Harry agreed. “Thanks, everyone,” he added, looking at them all.

“This isn’t just your war,” George said. “I’m off to bed. See you,” and he patted Harry on the arm, smiled at the other two men, and was gone.

Harry had wondered during the debrief if Kingsley would try and talk to him about his earlier comment about going to clubs, but it was late, and they were all tired.
“Don’t be a stranger,” was all Kingsley said, and then he leaned forward, and kissed Harry on the cheek before disappearing into the flames.

Harry blushed as Snape looked at him. “You did well tonight,” Snape said. “I know it must have been hard to restrain yourself.”

“I thought you’d given me the Donnellys because you respected my ability to look after myself, rather than that you didn’t trust me not to speak to the boys,” Harry said.

Snape had his hand on the mantelpiece, but turned to look at Harry. “It would be a lie,” he said after a moment, “if I didn’t admit that I seem to have some – inbuilt urge - to protect you. That’s just history, I think. As soon as I apply logic, I realise that you’re the strongest wizard I know, and not only that, that you do have the skills and wit and reaction time to use it. But you’d be lying if you didn’t acknowledge that your heart is a lot softer than mine.”

Harry was about to agree when he thought about it. “You think your approach is tougher, but your outcome for them should be better than my jump-in head-first one. And you want to give them hope of redemption. You’re not as hard-hearted as you like to think.”

“You realise that I’m suggesting using them?”

“I think our boys tonight have shown that young people want to do what they can. Hell, those kids at Hogwarts want to be involved in shaping the world, even if they’re getting in above their necks. Maybe what we need is a political change. It’s crazy that a wizard is of legal age at seventeen but can’t actually vote till he’s twenty five, or sit on the Wizengamot until he’s forty. What a damn waste!”

“Much as I agree with you, Dad,” James said, coming into the room with Albus, “you’re not talking politics at getting on for three in the morning, are you? Because I’d like to join in this discussion, but I have work in six hours.”

“Responsible youngsters,” Harry smiled at his sons and Snape. “Whatever is the world coming to?”

James reached past Snape and took a pinch of floo powder.

“After you, or shall I go first?” he asked.

“I’m gone,” Snape said. “Thank you for the tea and cake, Harry,” he nodded at his host, then threw his powder into the flames and stepped into the fire.

Ten minutes later, Harry was asleep.

He was eating a late breakfast the next morning when the doorbell rang.

“Shall Mitty answer it?” asked the elf, who had been pootling about in the kitchen, babe knotted into her tea-towel.

Thinking that the sight might be something of a shock if it was a Muggle at the door, Harry shook his head. “I’ll go, thanks, Mitty.”
Rather more careful than he had been previously, Harry cast a view-through spell on the door.

A man in jeans and with a hoodie pulled up around his head looked him directly in the eye.

He drew his wand, and yanked it open. “Yes?” he demanded, fiercely.

“Mr Potter,” Felton said, looking somewhat agitated. “I wonder if I might have a moment of your time.”
“I think you’ve had far too many moments of my time already,” Harry snapped, starting to shut the door.

Felton stuck his foot in it.

Harry had his wand under his chin instantly. Felton clutched the handrail outside to stop himself falling back down the steps.

“I have information,” he said, through barely moving lips.

Harry released his wand a fraction. “You expect me to trust anything you’d say?”

“No. But I know you want to find your wife’s killers.”

Harry’s wand didn’t move.

“I’m not inviting you in.” He thought quickly. “I’ll meet you at The Leaky in an hour.”

“We can’t talk at –”

Harry stood back, went in and slammed the door.

He watched through the spell, as Felton hunched his shoulders, pulling the hood further over his head, then turned and headed off down the road. It was hardly the ideal disguise for a man of his age, but the fact that Felton was wearing it meant that he knew, or suspected, that the house was still being watched.

He went straight to the floo and put a call through to Ron, and then one to Kingsley.

At 11.15, he strolled into The Leaky. Ron was behind the bar, and nodded a greeting as he stepped through the door. There weren’t many people in the pub: a few shoppers sitting at tables having coffee. Lunch wasn’t served until midday.

Ron glanced at his watch as Harry reached the counter. “Wotcha, Mate. First time I’ve seen you here since I started,” he said cheerfully and slightly loudly to Harry. “Got time to catch up? My break’s in a couple of minutes. Got a nice staff sitting room upstairs.”

“Great,” Harry agreed.

At 11.20, Patty, one of the other workers, appeared down the back stairs. “Go on, Ron,” she smiled. “Your turn. Oh, hi, Harry. You going up with Ron?”

“Got coffee up there?” Harry asked. “Been waiting at the bar for five minutes and still not been served.”

“Oi!” Ron exclaimed.

Patty and Harry grinned at each other. Ron lifted the counter flap so Harry could get through to the back, cuffing him as he walked through.

“Bloody hell, you’re strong,” Harry said.
“Yeah, yeah. Wimp,” Ron slung back, as they headed up the stairs.

They negotiated the twisted passages of the first floor, then Ron flung open one of the doors.

Inside, Kingsley was standing in what looked to be a private parlour, studying a faded picture over the fire. He swung round, and smiled at Harry.

“Thanks for dropping everything and coming.” Harry walked over to him, stopping a little short and suddenly feeling awkward.

“No offence, Harry, but this is my work. We don’t know what information he has, and it might be nothing; there might be no connection between Ginny’s murder and the bigger picture, but it sure as hell looks like it, so my thanks: I need to be here.”

“I’m going back down to grab the bastard,” Ron said.

“Discreetly?” Harry asked, turning back.

“What? You doubt me?” Ron grinned.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“Alright, alright,” Ron held up his hands. “I’ve asked Patty to tell him meals are being served in the back room today, and to check out the chalkboard. I’ll whisk him away from there. Satisfied?”

“Thanks for being here, Ron. And sorting the room, and everything.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Ron smiled.

Kingsley looked down at Harry once the door had closed. “Alone at last,” he smiled.

As Harry’s heart began to thump, Kingsley continued, “Are you free to come over to lunch on Sunday? Mum’s coming, but also Minerva.”

“Minerva? Really?”

“She and Severus have always kept up. And believe it or not, she and my Mum get on like a house on fire,” Kingsley twinkled.

“You have to be kidding me!” Harry grinned. “They’re…”

“Chalk and cheese?” Kingsley laughed. “They can drink each other under the table, and they both have – rigorous – opinions.”

“Rigorous!” Harry chuckled at the word. “It sounds brilliant, but I usually have the boys round for Sunday lunch. Thanks, though –”

“They’d be welcome too – if they’d like to come,” Kingsley said easily.

The door opened.

“Can I get back to you on that?”

“Sure.”

They both turned, standing side by side as Ron stood back and let Felton precede him into the
Felton’s step faltered for just a second.

“Take a seat,” Kingsley said, taking charge.

Ron slung himself into an armchair, tapping his wand loosely between his fingers. It was a simple gesture, but surprisingly threatening.

Felton sat down.

“You said you had information,” Kingsley got straight to the point.

Felton took a visible breath. “Firstly,” he began, looking directly at Harry, “let me apologise.”

Harry sat back, eyes narrowed, and waited.

“Your treatment – I accept that it was – inappropriate.”

“Big of you,” Ron said.

There was silence.

“I’d hardly call that an apology,” Kingsley commented. “You allowed a physical assault to occur in your presence. You encouraged your staff to take actions that you knew would endanger the health and welfare of a suspect. The first rule of law is that a man is innocent until proven guilty: I’m sure you can’t have forgotten the first thing you learnt in your training?”

Felton flushed. “I had no idea –”

“I don’t want to hear excuses,” Harry said, cutting across him. “Let’s get to the point: if you have any information, let’s have it.”

“I appreciate your anger,” Felton began.

“Fuck my anger,” Harry snapped. “Stop wasting our time. Have you, or have you not, got some information?”

“Look,” Felton said. “I had every reason to think that you were guilty – “

“Even if he had been, and proven so, your treatment was off the rulebook,” Ron sat forward, face getting red with anger.

“Ron,” Harry interjected, “let him speak.” He sighed. “Alright: why did you think I was guilty?”

“I still don’t know that you’re not,” Felton said.

At that, Harry laughed. “Fair enough. That’s the first honest thing you’ve said, I imagine.”

“Look at it from my point of view: when a wife is murdered, it’s usually the husband. Add in the infidelity, the spell used, your history with the lover – “

“If you still think that, why’re you here?” Harry asked.

“Because the Longbottom thing didn’t make sense.”

“Merlin’s knobbly staff,” Ron exclaimed, “it took Neville’s death to make you realise there was
“It wasn’t his death – that just confirmed it,” Felton said. “The whole thing – him suddenly appearing like that, just at the end of the trial, when Mrs Weasley was doing her good stuff – and the way he was just pushing and desperate to be in the court…and the fact that they were willing to let him. I mean, that’s not proper practice at all. It was definitely hokey.”

“Well, aren’t you the sharp one,” Ron muttered.

“I’ve always been thorough at my job, whatever you might think,” Felton snapped. He paused, before saying in a much calmer tone, “Then, he was shot in court, and the reasoning came out…”

“And you took the can for the failure of the prosecution,” Kingsley finished. “How much of this is sour grapes, Felton?”

“Oh, some of it,” Felton agreed.

Harry laughed again.

Felton sat forward. “The – it wasn’t just the failure of the prosecution. A weapon had been brought into court. A member of the Wizengamot had fired it – he pleaded Imperius at once. That meant a bigger picture, other people involved. So I tried to look at it from your point of view. I mean, if this was some sort of plot, rather than just a murder…”

Harry stiffened.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” Felton said quickly. “The thing is, I went back to the beginning. If you didn’t kill your wife, who did?”

“A pity you didn’t start there before,” Ron snarled.

Felton nodded slightly, before continuing, “I looked at what was happening: an important sporting icon was dead. Firstly, it looked like one of our leading media and sporting moguls was responsible. You discovered that that was a set up, but I wondered what could have been achieved if Malfoy had been convicted, as I believe the real murderers had planned. If we take it that you didn’t know about the affair, we have to think that the murder would hit the sports world, Malfoy’s conviction would hit sports and media, and one can assume you were supposed to be devastated by your wife’s murder and betrayal –”

“I was devastated,” Harry bit out.

Felton shrugged. “Fair enough, but – “

“ Fucking hell, you’re a bastard,” Ron said.

“I accept that,” Felton said. “Still.” He looked at Ron. “Ginevra’s connections - the fact that she was a member of one of the most influential wizarding families – might also be important.”

“Influential?” Ron said.

“Maybe respected would be a better word,” Felton said. “You hold a responsible rank in the Auror Division, your father had obviously had a long career in the Ministry, and your brothers are all successful in various fields. Weasleys’ Wizard Wheezes is world famous. Your mother is an honoured hero of the War. Your sister was the only female child. It’s obvious that her loss would be a big hit against the whole family. Then I thought about me.”
“What about you?” Kingsley said.

Kingsley looked relaxed, Harry thought, sitting back in his seat, and yet he was sure that Felton wasn’t fool enough to underestimate him.

“You’re looking for a plot,” Felton said. “I know about your role with EWA, and I’ve been wondering at your involvement. Say this is part of a larger scheme: well, destroying my reputation, me losing my job, it all fits in.”

“I think you managed to destroy your reputation all on your own,” Harry said.

Felton looked at him. “If you weren’t who you were, do you think anyone would care if you got a little roughed up? Or Malfoy? 99% of the people we arrest are shits. People don’t want prisoners to have an easy ride.”

Harry felt his breath almost taken away at the statement, but Felton was continuing:

“But if Longbottom was sent in to ensure the trial failed – well. It was inevitable I’d lose my job. That leaves Atkins clear to appoint her own man.”

“Hold on,” Ron said. “Surely Neville was sent in to make certain that Harry was convicted?”

“Then why was there someone – a member of the Wizengamot – waiting with a gun?” Felton asked.

They sat and digested this. “Are you saying the trial was meant to fail? That Neville’s murder was inevitable whatever he’d said or done? And you think Atkins is behind all this?” Ron asked. “Why her?”

“It can’t be Benningdean: he already has the top job, all the power he could want. So it has to be someone who’s after his position, who, logically, stands a chance of getting it. In the normal way, Benningdean would have been in post for decades.”

“It would have been easier to simply kill Benningdean,” Kingsley said mildly.

“Yes, I thought of that,” Felton said.

Harry stared at both with raised eyebrows. How could they talk so easily of death and murder?

“So it’s a seismic shift she’s after,” Felton said. “I know you’re looking into a - a revolt by purebloods, so I started looking for evidence of that. I only had forty eight hours after the trial before I was fired, but I had access to all the records for that period. Benningdean, like myself, is not a pureblood. Atkins is.”

“That doesn’t really say anything,” Ron said. “So were Ginny and Neville. Malfoy. Harry’s parents were both wizards even if his mother’s line wasn’t.”

“Every single person that has been employed in MLE since she took charge has been a pureblood. That’s forty eight staff. Every single one.”

There was silence.

“That is interesting,” Kingsleys said slowly.

“Going back to what you were saying, though, about why not kill Benningdean straight out, why kill purebloods? I think something big must be brewing. I don’t know what yet. It’s why I came to
you. I know you don’t have any grounds to trust me, or to believe me, but I love the wizarding world and I’ve spent my whole career trying to protect it. I may or may not have got it right every time,” he looked at Harry, “and I’d like to believe I’m wrong here. I suspect you have more pieces of the puzzle. My guess at the moment is that she’s got to do something that makes it seem like the Muggleborns are to blame for everything that’s been happening. Can you imagine if she can lay the blame for the murder of Ginny Potter and Neville Longbottom on a Muggleborn? For damaging Malfoy and Potter here? Hurting your son?” he said to Ron.

“Why have you fixated on Atkins?” Harry asked. “Has she got any links with Hogwarts? There must be other contenders, surely, for what you’re suggesting?”

“Even if there isn’t a direct attack on Benningdean, his position has been seriously weakened by what has to be seen as seriously poor handling of a high profile case – “

“That’s your seriously poor handling,” Ron said. “Your department.”

“And I’ve taken the fall for it,” Felton agreed.

“I haven’t heard who’s been appointed in your place,” Ron said. “Going to tell me it’s a pureblood?”

“On the contrary, she hasn’t appointed anyone: the word is that she wants to keep an eye on things herself. Looks to me that she’s keeping out any potential threats.”

“What about Hogwarts?” Harry prompted again.

Felton shrugged. “I don’t know of any connection. But the investigation at Hogwarts is ongoing. Your report,” he nodded at Ron, “of the situation in which you found your son, and his statement of what happened, obviously make clear that Longbottom was entirely innocent. That lends credibility to your innocence,” he turned to Harry, “given that he was forced to implicate you.”

“Who else did you consider?” Kingsley asked. “Besides Atkins?”

“Someone who was in a position to exert influence over people and wanted power? And change?”

“If you think that’s what this is about,” Kingsley said.

“Well, I wondered about Mafalda Hopkirk, but I think she just likes the sound of her own voice. Also Brown, the Headmaster at Hogwarts. There are one or two old-school wizards, Lucius Malfoy, springs to mind, but of course his son was implicated, so I ruled him out. Rowle has support, but more on the continent and in the old families. If the aim is to take charge of the Ministry, and to run it in a new direction, it has to be someone familiar with the politics and well known enough for people to approve of.”

“Does Brown have a political background?” Harry asked. He’d made sure not to look at anyone when Lucius Malfoy and Rowle were mentioned.

“I haven’t investigated him yet,” Felton said. “But it’s well known that he’s made more changes at Hogwarts than any Headmaster for decades, if not centuries. Moreover, if you look at history, Hogwarts’ Headmasters or Mistresses have often gone on to become either Chief Warlock or Minister for Magic. One or two, like Albus Dumbledore, became Supreme Mugwamp.” Felton looked at Ron. “You’re on gardening leave whilst your sister’s case is ongoing,” he said. “You could assist me in looking into it.”

There was a sudden silence in the room.
“I think, for the moment,” Kingsley said, “that my team will look into your suggestions. Do you have anything else?”

“You’re cutting me right out of this?” Felton asked, brows furrowed.

“What else were you expecting?” Kingsley asked.

“I can be useful to you –”

“Perhaps,” he said, “but if you thought I was just going to offer you a job at EWA, think again.” Felton flushed, and got up. “I only want what’s best for the wizarding world –“ he began.

“The ends don’t justify the means,” Ron had got to his feet too. “Perhaps that’s something you’ll think about a bit more.”

Kingsley stood up. “Thank you for your help, Felton. If you have anything else,” he withdrew a card from his pocket, “you can contact me directly.”

Felton shoved the card into his robe and stalked towards the door. “You’d be foolish not to use my skills,” he said, and then he was gone.

They all sat down again.

“Phew,” Ron said.

“That was quite interesting,” Harry commented, slowly. He looked at Kingsley. “What happens now?”

“Now we investigate.”

“ Atkins?”

“Definitely. Obviously we can rule out Lucius Malfoy and Rowle, and we already have Brown and the Donnellys under investigation. We’ll look into Mafalda Hopkirk, but unless she’s changed since I worked at the Ministry, I suspect she’s not a runner in this.”

“I know I’m going to sound like a complete idiot,” Harry said, “but I don’t even know who the Supreme Mugwamp is anymore. Not that I wanted him to know that.”

Kingsley grinned. “The post went into abeyance when Dumbledore died. I don’t think anyone else wanted to take it on, and to be honest, the international interaction had become a nonsense. England has become increasingly insular. It’s a very good point. I wonder if that’s where this is headed?” his brow furrowed.

“What are you thinking?” Ron asked.

“Not sure. But I’m just thinking of all these European strands.” He looked at Ron. “I know that you’re taking a break, but would you be interested in some background work?”

“What do you mean?” Ron asked. “I’m interested in anything that will help get Ginny’s murderers caught, and the bastards who hurt Hugo and killed Neville. The larger picture is interesting too,” he added, after a moment.

Kingsley nodded. “You had a reputation as a strategist, back in the day. I want you to work at this from the other end – what Felton was doing, basically, but with different scenarios. For each
suspect, I want you to work on different objectives, how they could be achieved, and how the crimes we already know about fit into that picture.”

Harry could see Ron’s face lighting up. It was like working out the chess moves for different pieces: exactly the sort of thing he excelled at.

“So you won’t just be doing this for Atkins?” Harry asked.


Harry shrugged. “It would be a bit like what they did to me.”

Both men looked at him.

Harry explained: “Decided I was guilty and then fitted the facts around that assumption. I wouldn’t feel it was the right way if you were just going to do the same thing with a different target.”

“It’s how we work,” Ron said, “but I can see that it’s backfired on us. I’ll bear it in mind, I promise. I want the right person caught too.”

Harry nodded.

“I must get back,” Kingsley said. “Thanks for calling me in, Harry. This was useful,” and with a nod to Ron, he apparated away.

“I need to head back to work. Patty will cut off my balls,” Ron said. “Come down and have a pint.”

“Yeah, maybe I’ll see if this barman stuff really suits you,” Harry bumped shoulders with his friend.

They exited the room.

“I like the idea of what I’ve just been asked to do,” Ron said, careful with his words, “but I think I might like this bar-keeping too. It’s definitely better than hanging out on stakeouts in the freezing rain for days on end, that’s for sure.”

Harry laughed, but as he followed Ron down the stairs, he thought how one change – Ginny’s death – had been like a stone in a pond, casting ripples in the lives of all of them.
When Harry had mentioned Sunday lunch in Spain to Albus that evening, Albus had wrinkled his nose.

“No offence, Dad, I know you’re probably delighted to see Professor McGonagall, but I’d sit there feeling like I was going to have points taken at any moment.”

“Fair enough,” Harry laughed. “Thought I’d just run it by you. I don’t think James will want to go anyway. I’ll tell Kingsley no.”

“Why don’t you go?”

“Because I like a meal with both my sons once a week?” Harry said. “It’s no problem.”

“Well, I was just wondering if Lils was allowed an evening out. We could all go over to France and have supper over there with her on Saturday instead. It can’t be easy settling into a new school, a new country. And she hasn’t got anyone to talk to about Mum or what’s going on or anything. She might be lonely.”

It was a brilliant idea. James’ work experience meant that he knew of an ideal restaurant.

It was funny, when he’d been in Paris laughing about the bistro with Kingsley, it hadn’t even occurred to him that James might have some ideas. He’d thought of James’ job as being about the travel, and hadn’t realised that that included the places wizards might want to go once they were at their destination.

They’d had a lovely time, and it had been marvellous to see Lils, and to hear all about school.

The next day had found him enjoying the sparks flying between Minerva and Gloria. To Harry’s surprise, and pleasure, Ron and Hermione had been invited too. After the preliminary hug and awkward condolences from Minerva, and her congratulations to Hermione for the way she had conducted the case, the meal had launched into a boozy and delicious affair, with conversation and sarcasm zinging about the table.

“Oh, I need to go and put my feet up,” Gloria said, when they were all fit to bursting and merry to boot.

“I’ll keep you company,” Minerva said, getting up a little unsteadily.

The two women headed off to the sitting room.

“They’ll be asleep in two minutes flat,” Kingsley said.

“I might be getting on a bit, but there’s nothing wrong with my hearing, you know,” Minerva’s voice sailed out.
“And a nice big pot of tea, Kingsley,” Gloria called.

“I’ll bring it through in a moment,” Severus responded.

“We’ll give it two and a half hours,” Kingsley said, lowering his voice. “They do this every time. Minerva won’t get up from the table till Mum suggests putting her feet up, but Mum won’t sleep until she sees Minerva’s given in first.”

“So will they still be awake, then?” Hermione asked.

“Nah,” Kingsley shook his head. “They did hold out years ago, but now they just give in and enjoy, but still play the game.”

“I have to say, a nap sounds very tempting,” Hermione said, stretching. “Can we help clear up, and then we’ll get out of your hair? That was absolutely wonderful, by the way.”

“Thank you,” Snape said. “And no assistance is required, but I wonder if I could impose on you to stay? There are things to discuss, and Minerva might be very helpful. Gloria too, of course,” he smiled at Kingsley.

“Well,” Hermione said, “if you really don’t need help, I’ll go and join the ladies.”

“What?” Ron said, looking up at her.

“For some scintillating female discussion.”

“But Kingsley just said – “

“Exactly,” Hermione nodded. “I can hardly keep my eyes open. I’m off.”

“Well!” Ron expostulated, as Hermione headed out of the kitchen. He looked at the men. “What do we do?” His eyes went wide. “I mean – “

“Don’t worry, Ron,” Harry patted his arm. “You needn’t worry that we gay men’ve got designs on you.”

“Of course not! Why not?” Ron swung from relief to bristling. “Is it because of this?” he poked his belly.

Harry laughed. “If that’s bothering you so much, you shouldn’t have had thirds of pudding,” he teased. “Anyway, I can’t speak for Severus and Kingsley, but you’re not my type.”

“But I look like Ginny,” Ron said. “Oh.”

Harry had gone stiff.

“Do you ever think before speaking?” Snape asked Ron, voice hard.

“I’ll make some coffee,” Kingsley said, tactfully. “Everyone want some?”

“Please,” Harry said.

“Yeah, thanks. Sorry,” Ron said to Harry.

“No denying Gin was beautiful,” Harry shrugged. A twinkle came into his eye. “You don’t look a bit like her, Ron.”
“Oi!” Ron protested, glad that his crassness had been forgiven. He got up. “Loo?” he asked.

“Upstairs, at the end of the corridor,” Severus said.

Ron lumbered out of the room.

“We’ve all drunk too much,” Harry said. “It was a wonderful meal, though,” he added, in a wistful tone.

“You know you’re welcome here for any meals you wish to take,” Snape said, leaning back and draining the last of his glass of wine.

“I’m interested to hear what sort of men you do fancy,” Kingsley said, bringing cups over to the table. “Now you’ve had a bit of a chance to look.”

“I’ve just been to a few bars,” Harry felt himself going red.

“Did you enjoy it?” Kingsley asked.

“I – well – I – it was interesting, I suppose,” Harry said.

“What was?” Ron came back in, and poured himself a large glass of water.

Harry felt himself getting redder.


It was a kind out for him, but – “I went to some gay bars,” Harry explained, looking at Ron.

“Oh. Right.” Ron brushed back his hair, then shoved his hands into his pockets. “Muggle?”

“Yeah. Are there any wizard ones, then? Anyway, I’d best not – “

“Very true,” Ron nodded. “So. Good beer? Muggle stuff is way better, isn’t it? I’m thinking of buying some in for The Leaky, if Hannah’ll agree – what?”

Everyone was laughing.

They picked up the coffee pot, and headed out into the garden. Ron nabbed the hammock before Harry had a chance.

“Wake me when the ladies are up,” he said, making himself comfortable.

“Have you spelled your skin?” Snape prompted.

“Thanks,” Ron waved his wand lazily over himself.

“No coffee?” Kingsley asked.

Ron struggled into a sitting position, and Harry took him over a cup.

Ron smiled his thanks, drank it down in one go and handed the cup back. Harry rolled his eyes. Ron stretched out again, an arm over his face.

Harry sat back at the outdoor table, and picked up his own cup.

“So. Definitely gay then?” Ron asked from behind his arm.
Harry put the cup down, aware of the other two looking at him.

“Definitely bisexual, I think,” he answered, heart thumping a bit.

Ron nodded.

Harry waited.

Thirty seconds later Ron was snoring.

“How anticlimax?” Kingsley laughed.

Harry grinned sheepishly, though he must be drunk too. The word ‘climax’ in Kingsley’s voice was doing something to his insides.

There was a pair of sun loungers a little further along the terrace. Harry waved towards them.

“Mind if I lie down too?”

“How about you two?” he asked. “Do you want me to make another?” He indicated the loungers.

“Good idea,” Kingsley said.

A couple of minutes later, Harry looked up from his spell-work to see Kingsley strolling over, shrugging out of his robe as he walked.

He couldn’t help it. His mouth watered. Kingsley was wearing nothing except a pair of body-hugging white shorts. Muscles bulged and rippled everywhere. He seemed absolutely hairless, and Harry couldn’t help wondering if he had hair anywhere. If his – he gulped, and looked away.

“You’ll bake if you wear that,” Kingsley said, pointing at Harry’s formal robe, which he’d worn in honour of Minerva’s presence.

Harry stood up and started undoing the buttons. Kingsley had taken the middle lounger, and spread himself out, watching Harry with interest.

Harry felt intensely glad that he’d been doing all those exercises. He might be small, but he was in reasonable shape. Not like Kingsley of course…he averted his eyes as Kingsley flexed his hips, settling himself into a more comfortable position.

“You joining us?” Kingsley called to Snape.

Snape cast a spell, and moments later, a book flew out of the house and slapped into his hand. He walked over, and dropped it onto the lounger.

Harry sat down, summoning the water glass from the table. He was just taking a sip when Snape dropped his robe, and he choked.

Kingsley’s fist thumped him on the back. “You alright?” he asked.

Harry finally stopped spluttering, cast a quick glance across Kingsley to where Snape had settled himself back, book open, one leg slightly raised, looking completely at ease.

“I’m sure all of them have seen a naked man before,” Snape said, flicking over a page.

“I couldn’t even face Minerva in traditional dress,” Harry said, blushing. “I couldn’t shake her hand without having a pair of pants on.”

Kingsley laughed. “Severus doesn’t believe in wearing anything to swim or sunbathe,” he said.

“What if your – you know – gets sunburnt?” Harry could still feel the heat in his cheeks, and was scrunched up, arms wrapped around his knees, looking away.

“My ‘you know’?” Snape’s voice was scathing. “Do you mean this?” he grasped himself. “Commonly known as a cock, properly called a penis – ”

“Oh my god,” Harry was burying his face in his arms.

Kingsley was laughing.

Harry watched as Kingsley leant over and swatted Snape’s hand away, then patted Snape’s cock himself, as if it were an affectionate pet.

“I’d better go,” Harry said, swinging his legs over the side.

“I’m not going to ravish him right now,” Kingsley said, a warm hand on Harry’s back.

He was so conscious of his skin, his nakedness. Their nakedness.

Harry cast a glance backward. He took in Kingsley, and then Snape.

He swallowed. “You’re not like I expected,” he mumbled.

“Scrawny and bony? Did you think I was hiding muscles under my robes?” Snape asked.

For the first time, Harry suddenly realised that Snape was perhaps not as relaxed as he had thought. He turned round slowly.

“Not physically – I mean, so – open,” he said.

“I’ve had enough of hiding away,” Snape said, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

Harry nodded. He looked at Snape over Kingsley’s body. “I saw a bit of you before, anyway. When I magicked your robe open.”

“So you did,” Snape nodded. “I think my erection might have taken up most of your attention at the time, though.”

Harry snorted in embarrassment.

His eyes looked at Snape, and darted away again.

“You can look at us,” Kingsley said gently. “We haven’t anything to hide. This is us,” he spread his arms wide.

Harry looked down at him, eyes stroking up over his stomach, past the dark nipples, to the warmth of his eyes. “Can I do a disillusionment spell, or something? I can’t cope with the thought of the ladies just strolling up.”
“We’re just sunbathing,” Snape said, an instruction in his tone.

“You go ahead,” Kingsley said.

Harry cast the spell, and felt the relief of it.

“You don’t mind if I look at you?” he asked, embarrassed.

“Do you mind if I look at you?” Kingsley said.

“There’s nothing special about me,” Harry shrugged.

“Same here,” Snape said, “look your fill.”

Harry looked at Kingsley first. Everything was so – powerful. His skin was so smooth. Harry’s fingers itched to touch it. “Why don’t you have any hair?” Harry asked. He glanced at Kingsley’s underarms: none there either.

“I just don’t,” Kingsley said. “Not anywhere,” he answered Harry’s unasked question.

Harry swallowed. His eyes darted to Kingsley’s groin, and then away again quickly as he saw the twitch shifting the fabric. He really wanted to see.

“Another time,” Kingsley’s voice rumbled, as if he knew what was in Harry’s mind.

Harry nodded, a brief sharp movement. He looked over at Snape, who was still reading his book.

Snape wasn’t pasty as he had been at school, put pale golden. All over. His forearms had a coating of smooth hair. For some reason, Harry found that very sexy. Hair crossed his chest, circling his nipples, and then led in a trail down across his ribs and the narrow planes of his stomach. The inner surface of his raised thigh was almost hairless, the muscle slim and firm.

“Is that a birthmark?” Harry asked.

Snape leant his thigh out to look, as if Harry’s gaze had painted exactly where he had been looking onto his skin. “No,” he said.

“Bite,” Kingsley chuckled. “Sorry, Love, didn’t realise I’d left such a mark.”

“I like it,” Snape said, flicking over another page.

Harry felt himself firing up again. The casual allusion to Kingsley’s mouth being – there – made him hot all over. He shut his eyes, but at once he had a picture of Kingsley and Severus lying out here, both of them naked, Kingsley’s head between Snape’s legs…rather like the position he’d found Scorpius and Andy in. He felt his cock swelling, and opened his eyes quickly.

And found he was looking straight at Snape’s cock. And scrotum. “You – it’s all trimmed,” he said, looking at the neatly shaved dark frame. Snape’s balls hung loosely in their sac, sitting on his thigh. His cock was slender. It looked – enticing. Harry watched it respond to his gaze.

“Mmmm,” Kingsley said, and Harry realised that Kingsley was watching too, and watching him.

“Enough of that,” Kingsley said, with regret.

Harry groaned. He was aching.
“Yeah, me too,” Kingsley said.

“Do you know everything I’m feeling?” Harry asked.

“I know Severus is beautiful, and incredibly hot,” Kingsley said, his eyes on his lover.

Snape dropped the book, enough to give a slight smile.

“So are you,” Harry whispered. He turned away, and muttered a detumescence spell.

“Good idea,” Kingsley’s voice was smiling as he copied Harry. “Ah. For want of something more fulfilling, I can feel a nice sleep coming on.”

Harry turned, watching Kingsley settle back. “You can sleep?”

“Yup,” Kingsley said, “and so can you. Come here.”

Harry looked at him. Kingsley reached for his wand, and flicked it. Suddenly, instead of three loungers, there was one large one. Kingsley’s arm was extended.

Surprised, uncertain, Harry edged forward. Kingsley’s arm slipped under his neck and he hauled Harry in.

“Night,” Kingsley said, and shut his eyes.

Harry looked at Snape across Kingsley’s chest. Snape twitched the book to the side. His dark eyes looked back at Harry.

“You don’t mind?” Harry whispered.

Snape shifted. Kingsley’s other arm reached out. Snape, complete with book, moved into its circle.

“Kingsley’s big enough for both of us,” he said, and resumed reading, holding the book up to block the light.

“Compliments, compliments,” Kingsley’s voice vibrated under Harry’s ear.

He smiled, settling in. He allowed his hand to creep onto Kingsley’s stomach, feeling the texture of his skin, the muscle underneath. He could smell the slight tang of Kingsley’s armpit, and was shocked to find it erotic. A hand brushed over his briefly. He was falling asleep, but realised that both Kingsley’s were occupied.

It was Severus’.

He slept.

Across the yard, Ron slowly turned his head. A flick of his wand allowed him to see through the spell.

Snape was looking straight back at him.

He tensed, lying there, then looked at them all.
He’d startled awake when Harry had started spluttering, and was then unable to stop himself from listening in. From what he’d heard, he was expecting to be shocked.

Instead….

Harry was snuggled up against Kingsley’s side. Snape was just stretched out alongside on the other, parallel with Kingsley. His legs were raised, and Ron was glad that he was at the wrong angle to see anything, after their conversation. His eyes went back to Harry.

He was completely relaxed.

He didn’t think he’d ever seen Harry like that.

The whole tableau reminded him, weirdly, of going in and seeing Hermione reading to the kids, them both snuggled up on either side of her.

It spoke of trust, and care.

He knew he ought to be horrified at the thought of the three of them together.

Three men.

But…they looked right.

He looked back to Snape, who was still watching him, and nodded.

Snape inclined his head, and returned to his book.

Later, copious amounts of tea were being drunk. Minerva had been brought up to date with the aspects she hadn’t read in the papers.

“I must say, I was appalled when I heard what had happened to poor Hugo and Neville,” she said. “On Hogwarts’ grounds!”

“What can you tell us about the Headmaster, Minerva?” Snape asked. “You must have been involved in appointing him, I assume?”

“Aye, I was,” she said. “He was young, of course. Not a unanimous choice. The old fogies on the Board thought he wouldn’t have enough experience, especially as he hadn’t been through Hogwarts himself. Me, I thought it a good thing that he came with a fresh eye, and new ideas. Of course,” she sniffed, “I knew I wouldn’t like all of them.”

“I can see that,” Gloria said, nodding. “It’s not easy to see someone changing everything you’ve done. Best to keep your nose right out of it afterwards.”

“Exactly,” Minerva said, giving her tight smile. “I made a point of not reading anything about Hogwarts at all. And I always refused when the papers asked me to comment on the school.”

“So you don’t know anything about the Donnellys?” Ron asked, with some disappointment.

“Well, of course, I do still hear things,” Minerva said. “Seems a good idea to me to have a School Secretary: I wish I’d thought of that, myself.”
“But you don’t know anything about them?”

“Not really, no,” she said. “He’s another outsider, I know that. I don’t know about his wife, though – he wasn’t married when he came, was he?”

“No,” Harry said. “She was married to Phillip Stubbins.”

“Samantha Stubbins? Oh aye, well I knew her, then. She was a Hufflepuff hersel’. Now, what was her name before she married?” she mused. “I can see her now on her broom – she gave our team – that is, the Gryffindor team – “ she twinkled at Ron and Harry, “a right auld work out every game.”

“Dawson,” Kingsley said.

“Oh yes. Samantha Dawson, she was. Quite a bright girl too, but a bit – well,” she sniffed.

“Well, what?” Harry asked.

“Obsessive, I suppose,” Minerva said. “I remember Pomona having to take her to task. She got very … enthralled with one young man and her behaviour became quite unacceptable. But maybe that’s why she went on to get onto a professional team,” she added, then looked quickly at Harry. “Not that I think you need to be obsessive to play professional quidditch, of course.”

“Well, Ginny was determined too,” Harry said fairly. “I see what you’re getting at.”

“Miss Dawson was a lot more than determined,” Minerva said.

“Thank you, Minerva, that’s all helpful,” Kingsley said.

“I thought for sure that there might be a link with the Donnellys and The Giant’s Causeway,” Harry sat back. “What with the Irish name.”

“Well, there might be, for all I know,” Minerva said. “What’s this about The Giant’s Causeway? Now if you’d asked me about Thorfinn Rowle I’d be understanding it. What?” she said, as they’d all almost jumped in their seats.

“Thorfinn Rowle is linked with The Giant’s Causeway?” Snape asked.

“Well, of course he is,” Minerva said.

“He’s Scottish, not Irish,” Ron said. He’d had Rowle’s file on his desk often enough to be sure about that.

“Yes, I know that,” Minerva said, her own accent growing very broad. “But the Scots lay claim to Finn McCool as well, you know.”

“You’ve lost me,” Harry said.

“Well,” Minerva said, “I remember it being one of the first things he ever said to me, right early in his first year. He was named for Thor and Finn McCool, you see. Terribly proud of it, he was. It still tickles me to think of it,” she chuckled. “His parents weren’t very bright: Thor was a red-headed God, to be sure, and the wee laddie had more of a shock of it than any of you Weasleys, Ronald, but I don’t think they realised that the mother of Thor in mythology was a giant, rather than a god. And although we Scots think Finn McCool is ours, sometimes called Fingal, or the original Fionn mac Cumhaill, in other legends he wasn’t so much a clan leader as a giant, an Irish one, and in that legend he whipped our Scotsman Fingal, so he did.” She laughed out loud.
“They were Purebloods, the Rowles, weren’t they? I remember his father,” Gloria said. “Horrible man.”

“Aye, he was. And it tickled me to think they’d named their son after giants when they’d turn their nose up at any wizard for having a drip of Muggle blood, let alone as much as give a giant the time of day.” She was dabbing at her eyes with a lace-edged hanky, tears of laughter in their corners.

“So – this Finn guy was from near The Giant’s Causeway, then?” Harry asked, trying to see the connection. “In the Irish legend?”

“Och! Don’t tell me you don’t know the story of Fionn mac Cumhaill?” Minerva said, her mouth pinched up in shock. “He built it, didn’t he?”

“He did? The Giant’s Causeway?” Harry asked. “I thought it was a natural formation.”

“Well, of course it is,” Minerva said briskly, “but before anyone knew anything, they explained things with legends and myths, didn’t they? Any Irishman will tell you that Finn McCool was a giant who built The Causeway. A Scotsman will tell you he built it so he didn’t have to get his feet wet crossing between Scotland and Ireland. An Irishman’ll tell you he built it in a mud fight with the Scots giant Fingal, and sent him packing, after tricking him to boot.” She chuckled again. “To be fair to the Rowles, there are so many legends that it wasn’t so bad to name their child after a god and a famous warrior, but I could never help think of the other legends, every time I saw that red head of his.” Her face darkened. “Of course, one of the children once threw the giant story in his face after a row. Thorfinn said if he was like a giant he’d be one, and stomped all over the boy. Broke his back, his arm, his fingers. Dreadful, it was,” she shook her head. “He was expelled, of course.”

“Wow,” Harry said, sitting back. “Talk about learning something new every day.”

“Well, I suppose not everyone is interested in Gaelic mythology,” Minerva sniffed.

“I don’t suppose Nott happens to be Scottish as well?” Harry asked.

“Aye, the Notts are from the Highlands,” Minerva said, at the same time as Ron said much the same.

“What have those two been up to?” Minerva demanded.

“Trying to raise power at The Giant’s Causeway,” Harry explained.

“Whissht! Iona wouldn’t have liked that!”

“You know the leader of the mervillage?” Harry exclaimed.

“Aye, I do. And how do you come to know her, Harry?” Minerva looked at him with a beady eye.

“Ummm,” Harry said.

“He went for a little swim,” Kingsley put in. “I was scared to death when I found the pile of clothes and no sight of him.”

“I had gillyweed!” Harry defended himself.

Gloria turned and looked Harry over. “So, you had no clothes when you came out?”

Ron and Hermione turned to look at Harry.
“There was an old bid – er, an elderly couple - looking at me too,” he admitted, realising calling a woman half the age of Minerva ‘an old biddy’ was hardly tactful.

“Got a look too, did you, son?” his mother smirked at Kingsley.

“Gloria!” Harry went bright red.

Hermione’s head was darting from one side of the room to the other, as if watching a tennis match. She glanced at Ron, who just gave her the slightest of nods.

“He saved my modesty with a towel!” Harry defended them both. “And at least I wasn’t wearing the pink knickers!”

“Whoa! I really don’t want to go there!” Ron said, holding his hands out in front of him as if to ward the very idea away. “You’ll be telling me you wear dresses next.”

“Er, Ron?” Harry said, his hand indicating the full length robes they were all wearing. “You were into that long before me.”

“Hey! Robes aren’t dresses!”

Harry snorted.

“We had blue uniform knickers at school,” Gloria mused. “Navy in winter and pale blue in summer.”

“Did they check?” Snape asked.

Hermione choked, and burst into giggles.

“At least Hogwarts never went that far,” Minerva said. “I bet they were scratchy as well, weren’t they? Wool?”

“Dreadful,” Gloria agreed. “And as for –“

“Mother,” Kingsley said sternly, “no.”

“Are you telling me to be quiet?” Gloria put her hands on her hips and glared at her son.

“Yes,” Kingsley said.

She opened her mouth.

“Ach, Gloria, we’ve got carried away with the memories,” Minerva intervened. “We were talking about Thorfinn Rowle and the Notts. You’re talking about Martin Nott, not Theodore or his children, of course?”

“Theo’s alright,” Ron said. “He’s not a bad chap at all.”

“Aye, he did well to keep himself out of his family politics,” Minerva said. “You did well, Severus, helping him concentrate on his studies rather than get drawn in by the other elements in the school.”

“Not enough,” Snape said, his voice bitter in a way Harry hadn’t heard it since he’d seen the man again.
“You’ve got a bigger saving people thing than Harry,” Ron said. “You both beat yourself up when you’ve done more than anyone could possibly have expected of you.”

Into the surprised silence, Minerva said, “Well said indeed, Ron.”

“Yes,” Hermione agreed.

“Thorfinn wasn’t at school at the same time as Martin Nott?” Harry asked, changing the subject, diffusing their embarrassment.

“No indeed,” Minerva said, “but their families knew each other. Thorfinn was there when you were, wasn’t he, Severus?”

“Yes, but he was older. Although we saw him around a bit because he had a rather creepy “friendship” with Wilkes, who was in my year.” He shuddered.

“What? Wilkes?” Harry said, a cold feeling running through him.

Snape looked at Harry. “Yes. Francis Wilkes became a Death Eater at the same time I did. I don’t suppose you’ll have heard of him: he wasn’t on your parents’ friend list, and anyway, he was killed just after we left Hogwarts.”

“Oh my god,” Harry said.

“Harry?” Kingsley asked.

“I suppose his father is Thomas Wilkes?”

“I don’t know,” Snape said. “Who’s Thomas Wilkes?” he asked, his voice concerned.


Snape put a hand on his arm. “Didn’t you say Albus was going out today?”

“What?” Harry looked at him, unseeing.

“Think,” Snape ordered.

Harry did. “Yeah, he was going out with some mates,” he said, unsteadily.

“Then you have time to think about this,” Snape said.

Harry nodded, and sat down. He leant his elbows on the table and ran his hands through his hair.

“Mitty was going over there regularly. When Draco was over,” he said, trying to put some order to his thoughts. “So Wilkes would have been able to find out about that, potentially, couldn’t he? Even if Mitty hasn’t done anything intentional – I mean, I don’t think she would,” he looked across at Hermione.

“I don’t think she would either, she seems devoted to your family, Harry,” Hermione said. “And she was terribly upset that she had let the killers in. That suggests it wasn’t Wilkes, by the way – she would have recognised him, wouldn’t she?”

“If she’d seen him,” Ron commented. “No reason she would have, necessarily. But you’re right,
Harry, Wilkes would probably know about the visits. That means he’d know that Ginny would be in the house at those times, and he may or may not have known the Draco would be there. Possibly, if he had contact with someone else who knew of the affair. Kingsley, do you have anything on Wilkes? Thomas? I’m pretty sure we don’t. That is, back in the department,” he added.

“I’ll go check it out. Excuse me.” Kingsley got up, and left the room.

“I know a Wilkes,” Gloria said. “Is he a big, bluff sort of chap? Thinning hair, paunch, forty-six inch chest?”

“I don’t know the chest exactly, but that sounds like him,” Harry said. “I met him when I went to get Dinky.” His brow furrowed. “He took Dinky away before he let me have him. I assumed it was to check that Dinky wanted it, but what if he was setting him up to spy on us? Or worse.”

“House elves have to be totally faithful to their masters,” Hermione said.

“Dobby,” was all Harry replied to that.

“Good point,” Ron nodded, looking over at Hermione, who pulled a face and nodded too.

“He’s friendly with some of the other gentlemen,” Gloria went on. “I mentioned him in my notes to Kingsley.”

“Then maybe they’ve started looking into him already,” Snape said, looking towards the door.

“While we’re waiting, Harry,” Minerva said, “what did you mean about Rowle and Nott trying to raise power? Foolish boys. Has Kingsley got them under arrest too?”

“I saw them on the sea bed,” Harry said.

“Dead, were they?” McGonagall raised her eyebrows.

Harry nodded. “The merpeople said it was Nott and Rowle, though I can’t be sure. They weren’t very pleased with them. Said it was the sea, though, that dealt with them.”

“Oh aye,” Minerva nodded. “Well, it was bound to fail.”

“Trying to raise power?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” Minerva said. “I expect they’d got a copy of Graeme Grunyard’s text on it. Useless book. Full of complex rituals that no one ever could follow, but of course his claims brought him a lot of readers, and he was very well known in his day. Killed himsel’, of course, trying to prove that it was possible when Albus challenged him. Eighty years ago, that was, I expect.” She shook her head.

“What exactly is raising power?” Hermione asked. “I don’t think I’ve read anything about it.”

“Well, don’t buy Grunyard’s book,” Minerva said acerbically. “Really, I didn’t believe it was possible until I saw Albus do it. I don’t think it’s for your common or garden wizard. Essentially, you’re gathering extra power through the earth,” she said.

“Or water,” Harry added, quietly. “Or the air.”

Minerva looked at him sharply. “Yes, Harry has the right of it, of course. It’s from the world around, the elements. I saw Albus do it standing out on the grounds, to gather force to strengthen the wards. But it sounds as if you know more about it than I do, Harry,” she said, eyeing him.

“He merely raised enough power to boil a river, dig a bore hole,” Severus began.

“What were you thinking?” Hermione screeched. “It sounds like you could have done yourself a damage, Harry!”

“Well, it was a bit of an accident,” he felt himself going red again. “I thought I was just enjoying the scenery.”

Hermione’s mouth opened and shut.

“At The Giant’s Causeway?” Minerva made the connection.

Harry nodded.

“What did Iona think to that?”

“Well, maybe that was why her mermen waved at me, and I went down to meet her?” Harry said.


“Er, well, pretty much,” Harry said, thinking of the protective guards Iona had had.


“I see them all day,” Gloria shrugged. “As for mermen, you’d have to be a dormouse not to wonder about whether their tackle is in the fish bit or the human bit, though, wouldn’t you?”

Kingsley had just walked in the door and clapped his hands over his ears.

Gloria sallied on, “I mean, the women have bosoms, which means they can feed their young, so surely they’re mammals? But did you see any pregnant ones, Harry? Do they carry their babies or lay eggs in the water?”

“Well! I’ve never even thought of that!” Minerva exclaimed.

“Sex is such an interesting subject,” Gloria said smugly.

“I didn’t see any pregnant ones, I don’t think,” Harry answered. It was a fascinating discussion, to be fair.

“Wilkes has a house in Paris,” Kingsley said, sitting down.

They all turned to look at him. “Francis went to Beauxbatons after he was expelled from Hogwarts. His father bought the house then, and kept it after he died. He’s been a regular visitor recently, apparently. He isn’t listed as a Death Eater himself, so we can’t assume he influenced his son, or indeed, has any supremacist leanings. We’ll need to find out more.”

“I can do that,” Gloria said, heaving herself up and picking up the tea-pot. “I’m going to make some more.”

“Mother – “ Kingsley began.

“I’ve seen him a couple of times,” Gloria said. “He likes me.”
“How can you know that?” Kingsley’s brows drew together.

“Because I measured him for robes last week.” She went out of the door.

“How can you know from that? He was friendly?” Kingsley asked.

“You don’t want to know,” Gloria called from the kitchen.

They heard the kettle being filled, and the rattle as it was put on the stove. Gloria appeared back in the doorway.

“Tell me what you mean,” Kingsley said.

“Son, when you measure a man for traditional robes, you can tell when he’s interested,” she said, and turned back towards the kitchen.

A stunned silence was left behind her.

“Are you telling me,” Minerva’s shrill voice called, “that you measure them – without their robes on, Gloria?”

“Business has gone up 400% since I’ve been there,” she said. “They like impressing me,” she winked, and then shrieked with laughter.

“Mother!” Kingsley looked horrified.

“Don’t you give me that look!” she wagged a finger at her son. “I ain’t doin’ nothing dirty,” she said. “Only how they’ve always been measured.”

“It’s true,” Snape nodded. He rubbed his arm, where the Dark Mark lay, faded but ever present. “I’ve always been more worried about them seeing this than anything else.”

“You see?” Gloria said. “Anyway, that Wilkes chap likes me. I’ll ask him out. Or maybe get him to take me to Paris for the weekend.”

“I don’t want you in danger,” Kingsley said. “And you sure as hell aren’t sleeping with some guy just for information.”

Nobody dared say a word as the conversation bounced back and forth between the two.

“Kingsley,” Gloria said, “I’m going to give you a clip around the ear in a minute. I may have been married more than once, but I have never,” she looked at him, “never been to bed with a man that I didn’t want to sleep with.”

Hermione sucked in a breath.

“Maybe Kingsley is just worried that you’ll be forced – “

“Girl,” Gloria looked across at her. “I’ve been around a bit. And although my son might not notice it, I’m quite a powerful witch, if I do say so myself. The day I can’t cast a surreptitious spell or two on a man with more on his mind than I’m willing to entertain, is the day I’m going to get myself a pipe and turn into a hag.”

“We’re just worried for you,” Harry said. “I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“I can manage any of those boys,” Gloria said. “They’re all puff and no winkle.”
Ron snorted. “My Mum uses that expression,” he explained, as they all looked at him.

“We’ll talk about this,” Kingsley said.

“Well, I don’t mind having some of your gadgets,” Gloria said. “Just so you know your mother is behaving herself.”

Harry stood up. “I really ought to go and talk to Mitty and Dinky.” He looked at Hermione. “Will you come with me?”

“Of course. What’re you thinking?”

“I’m thinking I can’t have a spy in my house,” Harry said. “I’m thinking Mitty will be devastated if she discovers that Dinky is doing anything against us; if he had any role in Ginny’s death.” He sighed. “I really don’t want to go home,” he rubbed his hands over his face.

“You can stay with us,” Hermione offered.

“He knows he can stay with any of us,” Snape cut in, “but that won’t solve the problem. Go home and work out what’s happening. You can’t leave the children using the house until you do, and if you have to send the elves away, then you must.”

“With a baby?” Hermione looked scandalised.

“You put the elfling’s safety before Harry’s or his children’s?”

“Good point,” Ron said.

“You can send them to me if you need to,” Minerva said. “Elves are usually extremely loyal: if they’ve caused your family harm, Harry’s right: they’ll be devastated. The male – Dinky, was it? – will be torn. The mother is going to be distraught.”

“I wouldn’t want to put you through that,” Harry said. “But it’s very kind of you, Minerva.”

“There’s little enough I can do,” she said, “at my age. Much as I’d like to help. This is a little thing I can help with.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Thank you: I appreciate it.”

“Thanks,” he said, looking from Kingsley to Snape. There were no words that were adequate to say how much he’d enjoyed the day. Well, apart from the last part.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Kingsley said.

Harry kissed Minerva and Gloria goodbye. Ron and Hermione made their farewells too. Snape walked them to the floo.

To Harry’s surprise, Hermione reached up and gave Snape a peck on the cheek. “Thank you, Severus. The meal was wonderful, and it was great to catch up with Minerva.

“Yeah, thanks for having us. Brilliant beef,” Ron smiled. “I could do with the recipe for that.”

Harry felt his heart beginning to pound as he was waiting his turn. Hermione stepped into the floo, Ron moments later.

Harry hesitated.
“Do you wish me to come too?” Snape asked, looking down at him.

Harry shook his head. Then, darting forward, he grasped Snape’s forearms, and chest pounding, he leant up and placed a kiss on his cheek.

Snape was utterly still for a moment.

Harry pulled back. “I’ll let Kingsley know what – “

“No,” Snape cut across him.

“No?” Harry said, his heart plummeting.

“I think we might be ready for this,” Snape said. He stepped right into Harry’s space, and took Harry’s face in his hands. “Are you ready, Harry?”

Harry was terrified. He licked his lips.

Snape’s eyes followed the movement.

“You don’t need to be afraid of me,” Snape said, his voice low. “You aren’t, are you?”

“Not of you,” Harry whispered. And then he took his courage into his hands, and reached up.

Snape’s lips were firm and warm. Harry was conscious of the scent of him, the hint of lemon that must be in his shampoo. The flavour of his breath. Then Snape’s tongue flicked along the edge of his mouth, and he gasped, and Snape’s tongue touched his.

Harry thought he might pass out. Everything was so – so – his tongue reached forward, tangling.

It was wonderful.

Incredible.

He couldn’t help pressing into Snape, even as the man’s tongue explored his mouth, stroking against his.

He pulled back enough to suck in a breath, his head spinning, his body thrilling, aching.

“You taste delicious,” Snape said, lips still against his. His head turned a little. “Kingsley’s watching us; wishing he was tasting you too, I expect.”

Harry turned his head; Snape hadn’t let him go, and his nose brushed against the hint of stubble on Snape’s jaw.

Through the doorway, he could see Kingsley; Minerva and Gloria were sitting on the sofa, which had its back to the door. Kingsley was sitting on the arm of one of the chairs, looking directly at them.

He was smiling.

Harry smiled back.

Snape’s hand stroked up his back.

“Come back soon,” he said.
Harry nodded as he stepped away.

His head was still buzzing as he stepped through.

“Took your time,” Ron said, looking him over.

Harry couldn’t help licking his lips, and Ron’s eyes widened.

“Well,” Ron said, his eyes darting away.

“Well what?” Hermione demanded, looking from one to the other.

“Well, let’s do this,” Harry said. “Before I go and become a hermit somewhere.”

Hermione laughed, then sobered. “This is really upsetting you?”

Harry nodded.

Three hours later, Harry was in the gym when Albus opened the door. He watched his father for a minute.

“Working off your lunch?”


“Oh?” Albus came and sat on the end of the bench press. “What’s going on?”

“We’ll have to do our own housework for a while.”

“What?”

“I’ve sent Mitty and Allie and Dinky to stay with Minerva for a bit.”

“What? Why?”

“Mione, Ron and I have just spent the best part of a couple of hours talking to them. They didn’t know what was going on, and they’re upset.”

Harry did another ten press ups. He felt awful. But…

“Dad? Come on. What happened? I can’t believe they did anything bad….”

“Dinky’s owner knew exactly when Mitty was over there: Dinky had to report ‘having visitors’ every time.”

Albus’ brows drew together. “I suppose that isn’t something unusual. I mean, you’d want to know who was in our house, wouldn’t you?”

“Thomas Wilkes son was a Death Eater.”
“Oh. Oh shit.” Albus stared at his father. “You said ‘was’?”

“He died years ago. After he was expelled from Hogwarts and went to school at Beauxbatons. Thomas Wilkes has had a house in Paris ever since.”

“Hold on. So Dinky’s owner wasn’t a Death Eater himself?”

“Not that we know of. Kingsley’s looking into him.”

“But then… I mean…”

“They knew – he knew – exactly when Gin would be alone in the house, Albus. Or rather, with Draco. And that she wouldn’t have a house elf there to protect her.”

“But – I – we can’t be sure, Dad, can we? That he actually did anything with that information?”

“When I went to get Dinky, he took him to another room. I thought he was asking him if he was happy to go. I asked Dinky tonight what that was about. Dinky said that Wilkes had told him he had to visit him once a week, or he’d make Toaster pay.”

“Oh, Merlin’s knickers. Has he been going back, there, then?”

Harry nodded. “Dinky says that he only promised to visit, and that he hasn’t told Wilkes anything, but that’s as much, I think, because he hasn’t asked Dinky anything, as yet.” Harry looked at his son. “I can’t have him in the house, Albus. It’s a no-win situation. If Dinky isn’t loyal – “

“I thought house-elves had to be, though.”

“Dobby was a Malfoy house-elf. He almost killed me trying to save my life, years ago, and definitely acted against his master. We’re idiots if we think house-elves don’t have minds of their own and consciences. And even if he’s loyal, look at the cost. Toaster will be hurt. That’s the first step. We don’t know if Wilkes would hike it up and threaten the baby – he could. I can’t have them around, for their safety or ours.”

“Blimey,” Albus said. “I can see that. I suppose Mitty was pretty upset?”

“Yes, but I’ve told them it’s temporary, that Minerva needs some help and that they’re to do everything she says, and that the fresh Scottish air will be good for the baby, and that they’re to be good and make the most of it until I call them back.”

“Did they accept that?”

“There was a lot of wailing,” Harry said, grimacing.

Albus gave his father a sympathetic look. “I bet. What about Dinky?”

“I think he’s scared,” Harry said. “He was put in a very difficult position. I think he’s scared I won’t have them back, and that they’ve been bad house-elves.” He sighed.

“I could go and visit them, if you like,” Albus said. “When they’ve had a chance to settle in. So they know we haven’t abandoned them.”

Harry loved his son. Sometimes, like now, it just welled up in him. “That would be great. Thanks.”

“No problem. Looks like I’ll be seeing Professor McGonagall after all, then,” he grinned. “How was your lunch?”
Harry was glad to be able to talk about happier things, and not to have to admit that he just couldn’t face seeing the elves around the house.

He didn’t mention falling asleep in Kingsley’s arms, though, or being swept off his feet in a kiss by Severus.

In the cold light of sobriety, he didn’t know how he had come to allow it. He didn’t have time for it. It was too complicated. People got hurt. He wasn’t – ready – able – no. What they had was wonderful, and he’d given into temptation, to their warmth. He couldn’t deny that he’d enjoyed – that it had felt – but…he didn’t need to lean on anyone. He had to be strong. He had things to do, and he only had to look at what had happened to Ginny and Malfoy, to Mitty and Dinky, to know that love made you vulnerable, and the people you loved got hurt.
“Monsieur, Master Harry Potter is asking if you is having a moment to see him,” the elf bowed low to Lucius.

Lucius looked up from the morning’s papers. “Bring us coffee, Mattieu,” he ordered.

He stood up, waiting, wondering why Potter had come. No doubt to punish him for the murder, he thought, lip curling. Perhaps he would end his life. Who could tell, with Potter?

The man strode into the room.

Lucius bowed his head. “An unexpected pleasure,” he said smoothly. “Mattieu is bringing us coffee. Unless you would prefer tea?”

“Coffee would be fine,” Potter said. He stood, looking at Lucius.

Lucius raised his eyebrow.

A slight smile, and Potter sat.

“You’re looking well,” he commented.

“Does that please or displease you?”

Potter frowned. “I didn’t come to play games.”

Mattieu appeared with a tray, and several moments were taken up with the mechanics of pouring and passing.

“Might I enquire, then, as to the purpose of your visit?” Lucius asked, taking a sip of the delicious liquid.

“You killed a man,” Potter said.

Lucius was surprised to find that he could make nothing from Potter’s tone.

“Yes,” he answered.

Potter made a sound rather horribly like a snort. “No excuses?” he asked.

“Is there ever an excuse for taking another’s life?”

Potter drained his cup, and laid it back down on the side table. “Of course there is, and we both know it. You showed mercy.”

Lucius felt something uncoil in his chest. “Brouillard would have tortured him to death. Dinner was barely over.”

You don’t need to find excuses for your – kindness - with me, Lucius,” Potter said gently. “You did the right thing.”

“It could have put my position as spy at risk.”

“You’re allowed to have principles.”
The man constantly flummoxed him. Lucius wanted to despise and dislike him, but with every meeting, he found such ideas less possible. That Potter should treat him with respect surely demanded that he should return the favour. Nevertheless, he could not hold back from asking, “Even ones you don’t like?”

“Do you have principles I don’t like?”

Lucius wanted to shout at him that he’d stood for Pureblood supremacy for his whole life, that surely that alone was evidence that he did. And yet, even as the words formed, he held them back. He didn’t like what he was seeing was happening with Brouchard and the rest of that horrible clutch of cronies, and he hadn’t frankly, liked the way things had gone with the Dark Lord. He’d always assumed that there were people like him who could enact their beliefs with taste and sense, but instead, the people he met seemed to be idiots and sadists.

Even homosexuals – and he had been estranged from his son and his grandson for a decade because of his views on that score – well. He needed to think about that. He was facing one, after all, if Potter had been telling the truth in court.

“I’m sure I must,” he said at last.

Potter laughed. “No doubt. Where would we be if we all thought the same? But treating others’ views with respect is not, I hope, beyond us.”

“Are you thinking of becoming a politician?”

Potter grinned. “I’m sure you know that there isn’t a hope in hell of me getting anywhere, seeing as gay men are viewed at the devil’s spawn.” His face straightened. “I’ve no desire for all that tactical crap anyway. Tell me how your work is going.”

“You have reports, I take it, from our contacts.”

“Yes, but they aren’t responsible for you.”

Lucius again struggled to keep his face immobile. The fact that Potter saw him as a responsibility, rather than a commodity, was unfathomable.

“Are you finding it bearable? We’re grateful for your information, but I realise that it must be… difficult. It’s in your hands when you decide that the danger is too great. At that point, get out, and get back to England. Use the portkey if you need to.”

“And then?”

“And then what?”

“If I am no longer useful to you…”

Suddenly, Mattieu appeared again. “Mattieu is being most humbly sorry, Messieurs,” he bowed low to the floor, alternating between them several times, “but there is being another visitor, Monsieur Malfoy. Mattieu is asking her to wait in the small salon. Shall Mattieu tell her that you is being engaged?”

“Who is it?” Lucius’ brows drew together.

“Mademoiselle Odont, Monsieur.”
Lucius was supremely conscious that he had not included Nanette in any of his reports, but that undoubtedly the name ‘Odont’ would be familiar to Potter if he had been reading them.

“She is the daughter of Henri, and the fiancée of Artur Brouchard,” he said, briskly. “She is a child. I do not know why she has come.”

Harry stood up. “If you need me, you know how to find me. Don’t take unnecessary risks,” he added. “You’re not the only spoke in this wheel, and you’re not alone.”

“It was good of you to call,” Lucius said, somewhat formally. How did one end an interview of this nature?

And what did Nanette want?

He bowed, and Potter left.

A few moments later, Mattieu showed Nanette into the room.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, Mademoiselle,” Lucius said, moving forward to take her hand. “You will surely stay for a moment or two? Mattieu has a delightful Earl Grey tea: have you ever tried it? Let me take your cloak.”

Lucius helped slip it from her shoulders, and handed it to the elf. He could see that Nanette was very nervous. That was understandable.

“Please, sit down,” he said, leading her over to take the seat that Potter had just vacated.

“I can only stay a moment—“

“But you will be kind to an old man, won’t you? I cannot sit if you do not, Mademoiselle,” he said gently.

“Oh! Oh of course,” she said, flustered. “Forgive me.” She sat down quickly, crossing her legs modestly at the ankles. She looked up at Lucius, and said, “I am sorry, Monsieur. I never think of you as old.”

Lucius was charmed. Nanette had that affect on him. “You’re very kind,” he said, sitting down.

The tea appeared. Lucius was glad that his bladder had not suffered during his incarceration. And that the cups were small. He poured the brew. “Lemon or milk?” he asked.

Nanette’s brow furrowed in uncertainty.

“Try it with lemon,” he suggested. “It allows the flavour to blossom.”

She nodded, and accepted the cup from him.

“This is beautiful,” she said, a finger indicating the delicate china.

“They were my grandmère’s,” Lucius smiled. “They are very pretty, are they not?”

“They’re Sèvres?” Nanette asked, studying the design.

“Indeed.” Lucius found himself pleased that she knew. It spoke of an interest in culture, despite her
“What do you think?” he raised his cup to indicate the tea.

“Different – and refreshing. I like it,” she smiled.

She was more at ease. Lucius hated to destroy her comfort, but asked, “Your father doesn’t know you’re visiting me?”

The cup rattled against the saucer. “No,” she whispered. She glanced up at him. “You are not shocked? Or – or offended?”

“Nanette – may I call you that?”

She nodded shyly.

“Thank you. You are always welcome here,” he said, “for whatever reason. Whether to share a joy – a fine scarf you’ve just purchased, perhaps – or a concern. I am at your service.”

Well, he had given her her opening.

“I fear I may be rather - impolite,” she hesitated.

“I doubt that you could be,” Lucius said, “but you know, friends need to be honest with each other. I do hope that you regard me as a friend.”

“Oh! Oh yes, thank you,” she blushed and put her cup down. “Monsieur Malfoy -“

“You have given me the honour of calling you Nanette: you really must call me Lucius, my dear.”

“Lucius,” she said, as if tasting it on her tongue. “Thank you.” She seemed to pull herself up, her body tensing. “You – you really did kill that man?”

Ah. “Yes.”

She nodded. “I – can I ask why?”

“I don’t believe that torturing a man to death in any way demonstrates one’s superiority of being or purpose. What do you think?”

“Me?” she squeaked.

“It is your birthday, next week, is it not?”

“You remembered?”

“Oh course. You will be able to apparate, and will no longer need my assistance. It will be a sad loss to me. But you will also be an adult. You must decide what you believe to be right.”

“Father says – “

“No,” Lucius said gently. “It is, of course, admirable, as a child, that you should accept your father’s guidance, but as an adult, Nanette, you must make decisions based on what you yourself believe in, don’t you think?”

She looked down, and then up again. “What if I don’t agree with Father? Or…or with Artur? I can’t…I’m trapped…that is...” she stood up, wringing her hands.
Lucius came and took them in his. “Nanette, I have made many mistakes in my life, and there is much I am not proud of. But they were my mistakes,” he said. “My fault, and only myself to blame.”

“But…you’re strong,” she whispered.

Lucius felt his chest swelling, and didn’t know if it was pride or pity. “You can be strong too. Forgive me, now, if my question is intrusive: do you wish to marry Artur?”

Her hands pulled away from his, and she sank back down. “My father – “ she looked up at him and smiled shyly. “My father thinks it would be best for my future.”

“And you? What do you think?”

“Monsieur – Lucius,” she bowed her head. “I know there are witches who don’t marry, and who do wonderful things. Teachers, and spell-makers. But,” she looked up at him and shrugged, “I’m not clever. I’m not those women.”

Lucius sat himself down on the chair beside her, rather than the one further away where he had been sitting before.

“Would you like not to marry? I have seen that you have many talents, and you are underestimating yourself. Or perhaps you have dreams of a handsome young man of your own choosing, rather than an arranged marriage…?”

“It is difficult,” she said, wringing her hands again.

Lucius put one hand on them to still them. “No,” he said. “Let us take it one step at a time, and it will not be so difficult to find your way. Let us go back to the first question: do you wish to marry Artur?”

She sat very still for several moments, and then shook her head without looking up.

“There, you see, you have settled the first question,” he said.

“But –”

“Ah, there are always ‘buts’ in life, Nanette, but sometimes the simple answers can help us find our path. Let me ask another: you need only answer it to yourself, if you do not wish to say it aloud. Is there another young man who perhaps has caught your eye?”

“Another – no! Of course not!”

She sounded genuinely shocked.

“There is no ‘of course not’ about attraction. About love,” he said, smiling. “Are you sure there is no one?”

“I only see the people - that is, Artur’s friends. I – excuse me, I will say no more.”

“Of course you must not speak if you do not wish to. I would not be surprised, though, if a woman of your sense and sensibilities, found them, perhaps, a trifle…boorish?”

She looked relieved, and nodded slightly. “I – perhaps it is that I am not used to the company of young people,” she said. “As I haven’t been at school for some time.”
“Yes, there is that,” Lucius agreed, “but you know, there are many young people who are vastly more cultured than Artur’s friends. You must not judge all young men by their behaviour.”

She sat quietly a moment.

Lucius wondered what she was thinking.

“Forgive me, Mons - Lucius, but I thought you enjoyed their company?”

He looked at her. “I am afraid you will dislike me for it, but the truth is, I cultivated them only because of the people that I wanted to meet because of them.”

It was dangerous ground, and he had to play it carefully.

“Is that why you have been nice to me? You wanted to meet the people that Father introduced you to?”

She was brave, there was no doubt about it.

“I did want to meet those people, but I hadn’t expected to meet you. Your company has been a highlight of my evenings, I do assure you.”

She stood up. “There is no need to pretend with me,” she said. “I expected better of you than insincere flattery. At least you were honest about your motives. I will take up no more of your time. My cloak, if you please.”

Lucius rose too. “I have offended you, when I was trying to do quite the opposite.” He leant on his cane. “My days are filled with politics and my evenings are spent with crass young things who cannot yet hold their wine, or older men, who, I am afraid, are rather too fond of their own voices. Can you really believe that I don’t find your modesty and gentility refreshing?”

It was obvious that she was torn. She must have endured enough suppers with her father’s friends for the latter to ring true, and with Artur and his sycophants for the former.

“You are interested in politics”? she asked.

It was neutral, and gave Lucius a chance.

“Indeed. As are your friends and your father. Are you not?”

“Not really, no,” she answered, with some bravado.

“Why not?”

She looked startled. “Is that politics, what they talk about? All they do is moan about what isn’t, and day-dream about what could be. And…and some of them like….they talk about…well, I do not think violence is the way to achieve anything! Or killing people!” She stared at him, as if petrified by what she had said.

“I am pleased to hear it.”

“You – you are?”

“Sometimes it is possible to agree with the objectives, but not with the method of achieving them.”

“Oh! Yes, that is very true,” she agreed, with some excitement. “That is exactly what I said to Monsieur Duvain – he is my tutor – yesterday!”
“Yes? You were in dispute?”

“He said I would best improve my English by reading, and said my – lack of success was because I did not wish to learn. But I do wish to learn. I think I would learn a lot more by talking to someone, and going to England, than I will ever learn from a dusty old book!”

“That is easily put to the test,” he smiled.

“I don’t see how,” she frowned. “He refuses to converse with me.”

“Perhaps his English is very poor?”

She giggled. “I hadn’t thought of that!”

It would be so easy to offer to teach her. Lucius found the idea ridiculously tempting. But…”I believe Mr Weasley has a bilingual assistant in the shop, who might be willing to help you. Would you like me to enquire?”

“Oh! Oh, would you? You’re so kind to me –”

“She might say no. But I will ask.”

“Merci, Lucius. I had better go now. I have taken up so much of your time…”

“Your father will be missing you, no doubt. Did you have anything else urgent you needed to ask me?” he prompted.

“N…no. I – they had been talking about…about the Muggleborn man, and you killing him, and… and some of them thought you had no stomach, and others that you had guts. I… I could not put it out of my mind.”

Well. He had learnt a lot, just from that sentence. “I am glad you came to me. In short, then, I do not believe life is something to take lightly. I have inflicted enough suffering…and seen much more…that I do not take that lightly either. I do not think that makes me less of a person, or less intent on following my principles, but you must judge for yourself.”

“I – I am glad that you killed him,” she whispered. “Though I don’t understand – I mean, had he broken in? Why was he there? But I am glad you stopped his suffering. I think…I think Artur sounded as if he enjoyed hurting him.”

It was a question.

“I think you already know the answer to that,” Lucius said, gently, as Mattieu appeared with her cloak.

Lucius swept it around her shoulders, and stepped away. “À bientôt, Nanette.”

“Th –thank you, Lucius,” she smiled at him, and then followed the elf from the room.

Lucius walked to the window, and stood hands behind his back, watching.

Eventually he sighed, and strode out of the room.
The elf reappeared. “Can Mattieu get anything for Master?”

Harry dropped the invisibility. “Thank you, nothing, Mattieu. I’ll be off.”

The elf nodded, and with a clap, Harry apparated away.

Harry spent the afternoon in the workshop at the back of his shop. Working with his hands usually helped him to clarify his thoughts, but instead, he found his brain shying away from anything in particular, and in the end, he just let himself be absorbed in the wood, its smoothness, the grain, and teasing out its properties to enhance the piece.

Later that night, he was back in the cellar of one of the gay bars. The euphoria from his release was buzzing in his head.

The heavy base of the piped music thumped out of time with the slowing beats of his heart.

The man rose from his knees, and leant in. “Time to return the favour, Mate.”

Harry’s high disappeared in an instant. Most of the men he had watched who dropped to their knees in front of others just seemed to like to suck cock, sometimes wanking at the same time, sometimes not.

He hadn’t expected to have to return the favour.

That was selfish, of him, of course.

The man had already shifted so that his back was to the wall, pushing Harry down with a hand on his shoulder whilst he popped open his jeans with the other hand.

Harry felt the urge to reject that pressure, that domination.

But…didn’t he owe it to the other guy to get him off?

He was on his knees and the man’s cock bumped him on the nose. He recoiled.

The man slid a condom on himself expertly, then put one hand on his head, the other feeding his cock towards Harry’s mouth.

He ought to try it.

He stuck out his tongue.

It felt strange. He gave another tentative lick, grimacing at the fake strawberry flavour. He wasn’t fond of strawberries at the best of times.

“For fuck’s sake, I haven’t got all night,” the man leant down, growling in his ear, as he shoved it into Harry’s mouth.

It hit the back of Harry’s throat, and he gagged, pulling back fast.
“Yeah, suck it,” the man said, withdrawing and then thrusting back in.

Harry forced himself to stay there. The man thrust in and out. He tightened his lips a bit, trying to recreate the sensations he’d enjoyed.

“Oh yeah.” The man pulled almost out, then rammed back hard, his hand on Harry’s head, holding him in place.

Harry choked, then pulled right off, and stood up.

“What the fuck?”

“I’m a man, not a fucking hole,” Harry snapped, and turned away.

“Fucking cunt,” the man yelled after him, peeling off the condom.

Harry cast a small spell. The man was zipping himself back up, and suddenly let out a gasp that had several heads that had been engaged in kissing turning towards him. Harry turned back, as laughter broke out.

The man was doubled over, holding his crotch.


Harry glanced round, noting the heaving bodies, the heavy atmosphere, the scent of sex.

Into his mind popped Lucius Malfoy and that girl.

Malfoy had shocked him completely. He had shown such…tenderness. He hadn’t known that the man was capable of it.

Suddenly, he hated absolutely everything about the shit-hole he was in. It was full of people getting their needs met, and yes, there was an argument for the honesty of just fucking.

But it was cold. He shivered, despite the humid heat of the place.

He was crap at this sex business. It had been alright with Ginny – more than alright, on occasion, back in the beginning, before she’d started wanting….and it had been a disaster with Hannah. That had been the most stupid thing he’d ever done. Coming here…he couldn’t deny that he’d been aroused, but…he’d had enough coldness. And the domination – he’d hated having his head held, no control.

If he couldn’t have a cock in his mouth there was no way he was ever going to enjoy having one in his arse, some man forcing him against the wall and pounding away. Even if there was pleasure in it, which there obviously was.

Maybe he was better going back to celibacy.

He fought his way through the bar upstairs, and out into the fresh air.

It was raining.

He paused, holding his face up to the sky, letting the drops splash on him. His glasses were spattered, but he put out his tongue, glad to taste cool water rather than chemical flavouring. He opened his mouth, trying to catch some raindrops.
“Easier to buy a bottle at the bar,” a voice said beside him.

Another man had come out behind him, hunching over to light a cigarette. He took a drag, then looked across at Harry, eyes slipping up and down his body without restraint. “I’ll buy you one in a moment, when I’ve finished this,” he waved the cigarette. “If you fancy it.”

_If you fancy me_, was what he meant, Harry thought. He looked the chap over. He looked nice enough, actually. And then the room downstairs that he’d just left popped back into his mind.

“Thanks, but I’m heading home,” he gave a small smile, and walked off into the rain.

It felt a relief to have made a decision, not to have the butterflies flitting around his stomach that had accompanied his evenings to Soho, but alongside that relief there seemed to be an empty space in his chest, as if he’d given up on a hope and there would only ever be a void.
Dorothy Atkins sat in her office, her chin resting on one hand, the fingers of the other tapping on the desk.

She had a decision to make.

She had just received word that Lucius Malfoy was showing a distinct interest in a takeover bid of the French group.

It was unexpected, but no less interesting for that.

He had, after all, been the Dark Lord’s right hand man for many years. One didn’t rise to that level – and keep it – without good reason. He’d lost the Dark Lord’s confidence in the end, of course, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad sign. Voldemort had become completely unstable; insane was not an inappropriate word. The only ones still standing fast by him at that point, or still having his approval, were those who were too stupid to see what was happening, or barking mad themselves. Or they were traitors, like Severus Snape.

No, she didn’t hold that against Malfoy. The fact that he had taken his punishment and survived it, apparently with his intelligence intact, also spoke well of him.

His decision to make his move in France was inspired. Voldemort’s arm really had not reached onto the continent to any great extent, and the term Death Eater held a certain sort of ‘freedom fighter’ cachet, rather than the fear and loathing that it induced in England.

The Malfoys had long interwoven with the aristocracy of French Wizardkind, and he was accepted there. His family had owned property in France for generations. He would not be seen as an outsider – indeed, his British side, and his suffering for the cause in England, would only bring him honour.

It was a pity that his son had been involved in the business. Her fingers stilled, and she leant back in her chair. Was it possible that Lucius was trying to find out who had set him up? Why would he have gone to France, if that was the case? Although he had gone into business with the Weasley multimillionaire. An excellent move, but suspicious. And Potter was involved too.

Malfoy had actually taken the stand for him – although, in fairness, his evidence had put Potter into his pocket, and caused Potter a great deal of humiliation, no doubt.

If Potter was enamoured of him, that could be quite useful.

Until his appearance at his son’s trial, all the evidence was that the Malfoy men were estranged. That Draco Malfoy did not see his father, or allow his father any involvement with his son. She had investigated Draco Malfoy’s links quite thoroughly beforehand.

It was interesting how things had turned out. Who would have thought that Harry Potter would come to Draco Malfoy’s defence? At the time she had thought that was a huge setback, but look how well that had worked out. Even the fact that Potter hadn’t been found guilty had worked in their favour. Now, he was regarded as a homosexual who’d denied his wife sex and power, despite having, apparently, an abundance of it himself. The gossip was that he had either been able to lie under Veritaserum about whether he was having sex, or had a level of power that most people found distinctly scary. She hadn’t done anything to discourage that worry, of course. Moreover, now that he’d been released, people were even more scared of him; although unfortunately she
couldn’t rely on *The Prophet* to spread any scandal, leaked information to other papers and magazines had lead to several useful articles questioning what should be done when the accused hadn’t actually been cleared. There was definitely a very nice element of uncertainty hanging over his head.

And Longbottom was out of the way into the bargain. That had been risky. Frankly, quite a lot of things had not gone to plan, but wasn’t it interesting how things seemed to work out well in the end? She hadn’t envisaged Longbottom as a threat, but it was handy to have him out of the way, and Felton too, to boot.

And people concerned about security everywhere, even at Hogwarts.

And at the Ministry, of course. Albert Thruxton’s case was due to come before the court shortly. She had encountered Thruxton whilst buying appropriate robes when she had first become Head of MLE. She’d soon become aware of his views, and discovered the little clique of Gentlemen Plotters, as she thought of them, to which he belonged. It has been no trouble to ensure that he was called as a member of the Wizengamot for Potter’s trial.

It had been more difficult to decide what to do about Potter. It was not her business to personally attend the sessions of the Wizengamot, of course, but at the end of the first day, her department had been buzzing with curiosity about the defence that Hermione Granger was going to mount, and the ease with which she’d knocked Harcourt back a peg or two. The Prosecutor himself was distinctly rattled, she could see. Usually, he was off for a drink with his coterie of sycophantic juniors, but instead, he had knuckled down in his office, going over everything again.

As a powerful and determined woman herself, she knew one when she saw one.

She’d needed a back-up plan. She’d gone to Hogsmeade, as promised, Polyjuiced of course, where she’d met up with Sam Donnelly. She’d promised her that she’d keep her informed of the progress of the trial. Between them, they’d hatched the Longbottom angle: it required risk on both their parts, but she could see Donnelly’s excitement. Donnelly liked flying by the seat of her pants, and not just when she was on her broom.

It was an aspect that worried her, but needs must. The Professor had played her part so far, and had done well at the school, finding and training young people who shared their views. Donnelly’s position, influence and daring were all useful qualities, and as long as she kept her in check, all would be well.

For her own part, she had found the task of casting *Imperio* on Thruxton quite challenging enough. It was a good thing that she knew he had a weak bladder, and that she’d previously told him where a staff toilet was only one floor from the court; he’d been embarrassingly grateful for the information. She had Polyjuiced herself, then waited in the lavatories when it was time for the lunch break. The smell was enough to put her off men for life. As it was, Thruxton had dashed in, as she knew he would. A simple locking spell to the door, and within a minute she’d cast the Imperius Curse with one of her collection of spare wands, added a simple and brief Confundus Charm, and had left him, slightly muddled, in the middle of urinating in the towel basket.

The whole business had left her with her heart racing and a firm realisation that she was better at being a General than a foot soldier.

She’d appointed Dowling as Felton’s replacement, and if push came to shove, she’d exert a little pressure on him to tie the matter up quickly. Thruxton had cited *Imperio* as his defence, and even if they used *Veritaserox*, which was unlikely, the claim would hold up and no one would be any the wiser as to the identity of the caster: she had picked up the hair from the back of a seat in a café at King’s Cross. Dowling was due to retire in two years. Nobody wanted to rock the boat just before
they were due to retire. And after he left, when things were quieter, she would be able to recommend a more appropriate choice.

Thruxtion would inevitably be freed, and as payment for his unknowing service, she had employed one of his grandsons as a clerk in the MLE. Not that he knew that was why the lad had got the job, but he had been so concerned about his grandchildren that she felt quite sure that the news would mollify his frustrations. And the boy might be quite useful to her. Someone on the ground, without much in the way of brains.

Hmmm. Her thoughts returned to Lucius Malfoy. She did need a good right hand man who didn’t mind getting their fingers dirty.

Perhaps a similar situation to Dowling’s could work there. She could allow him to take over from LeFevre, then, in a couple of years, when she was certain of him, he could replace Peter Brown. Brown would inevitably make a mess of being Minister, but there was a lot of precedent, and the fact that he wasn’t a Pureblood would be excellent cover for a year or two. And she would suggest that he bring Adrian Donnelly with him. Sam would be pleased, and besides, he was a man with a lot of sense.

As for Samantha herself: she was a liability, no doubt about it, but she could deal with her once they’d been split up.

She’d have to think about who would be best in charge of Hogwarts.

She sighed, and snapped her fingers for a house-elf, who brought tea and a plate of chopped fruit at her request. She skewered a cube of melon and popped it into her mouth.

It was a long game. She’d already eliminated Arthur Weasley. She’d never been able to understand why he’d been held in such high regard. He’d had such an interest in Muggles and their silly inventions! She had had to acknowledge, though, that when the catastrophe happened, he would have been thought a safe option for Minister, with his kindness and his family ties. Even her supporters would have found him acceptable, as a Pureblood. She was really quite pleased with her solution there: inducing a stroke by raising his blood pressure over several months had been extremely effective, and no-one had realised a thing. The Ministry house-elf she’d charged with putting what she’d told it was a health supplement in his tea had been easy to dispose of. No-one was any the wiser.

She’d had setbacks, of course. What the hell had happened to Nott and Rowle, for a start? Not that it had mattered, as Potter had been rescued. Snatched from within the Ministry itself! And she still hadn’t found out how that had been done. If he’d been able to apparate out: whether the wards had not been set in place properly in the confusion. She scowled. It would have been excellent, and once she’d had the idea, she’d worked her socks off to set it all up. The timing of the trial and everything. Potter should have been on the bloody boat to Azkaban when Nott and Rowle had raised power from the sea. Instead, those idiots had, apparently, gone to The Giant’s Causeway too early. Been spotted. Auror Weasley had obviously had a good network of contacts, and been given the information.

She ate the last half-stawberry, and then poured her tea. It had brewed to perfection, and she took a sip, enjoying the depth of flavour.

Hmmm. Weasley’d taken leave after that. His report had said there’d been sightings, but he’d not seen or found Nott and Rowle. She didn’t think Nott and Rowle would have defected, or run to ground. What if Weasley had taken them out himself? They weren’t linked in any obvious way to his sister’s case…but maybe they’d talked. That bore thinking about.
She’d insisted that he go on extended leave until his sister’s murder was cleared up, but perhaps it was time to recall him…or…she mused over various options.

And she needed to set up another scenario for the Ministry. She still thought the plan prompted by Potter’s impending arrest had been an excellent one: it was frustrating, when she had put so much work into it, that it had failed. The idea of using the raised power, timed with Potter’s death at sea, to flood the entire Ministry, would have been catastrophic and brilliant, and it would have been easy, in the angry aftermath, to pin the blame squarely on Potter. Almost the entire Ministry was built underground, and its original builders had created numerous channels to the Thames. Not only was water provided from it with the incoming tide, but all the waste was taken away with the outgoing one. The early spellworkers had been incredibly talented. Of course, in the years since, additional spells to purify the water and treat the sewage had been added. Potter had been held on the floor from which the huge sewage channels left the building, and it would be no stretch of the public’s imagination to believe that he had weakened the water locks on the tunnels during his time in the cells, and had deliberately thrown himself into the North Sea in order to take his revenge on them all. Grunyard’s *Treatise on Natural Power and Its Uses*, would be quoted, and no doubt wizards everywhere would be horrified that Potter had possessed the knowledge to choose to use his death to raise so much power that he had created a bore that had ridden up the Thames and burst through into the Ministry.

She’d had it aligned perfectly with the phases of the moon and the tides, just to help things along. Still, no point in crying over spilt milk.

Fire was a possibility, of course.

Her thoughts returned to Malfoy. His Death Eater past meant that he would always be… controllable. The Ministry had the right to re-institute supervision on any ex-Death Eaters that were considered to be causing concern. He could be ideal.

A small smile flirted at the edges of her lips, as she dabbed at them with the napkin from her tray. She steepled her hands, and allowed the smile to bloom.

So…a test was in order.

The next night was the weekly meeting. Harry had made a big tureen of chilli and shoved some potatoes in the oven to bake. Happy as he was to cook, it was strange not having Mitty in the house.

They’d had spell practice with the youngsters, and then the meeting had been brief, with Kingsley passing on salient points from the weekend’s discussions to those who had not been there.

Throughout the evening, Harry had been conscious of Snape and Kingsley. The last time he’d seen them, he had nestled in Kingsley’s arms, touched his bare stomach.

Seen Snape naked.

Been thoroughly kissed.

He’d allowed himself the pleasure, lulled by wine and sun and the ease their home seemed to
bring.

And he needed to be honest: he’d initiated that kiss by reaching up himself to Severus’ cheek.

He’d led them on. But it wasn’t right to even think of anything with them. They had each other and didn’t need him. He’d brought them enough hassle already.

He just couldn’t…he…they were so comfortable with sex.

And he wasn’t. It would be awkward, and spoil their friendship.

He didn’t want to see pity in their eyes, or disappointment. He didn’t want to feel afraid, or resentful.

He didn’t know if he needed to say anything.

But somehow, they left before he needed to speak.

Relief mingled with the feeling that he’d just put it off to a later date.

Kingsley was on his knees.

“Oh Merlin fucking…gods yes!…just…nnnghh,” he moaned. “You…I…. unggh.” He could barely think, his brain swamped by the pleasure, as Severus slowly thrust in and out of him, over and over, relentless, changing pace or moving just slightly every time he thought he was just about to come, taking him up to another plateau, higher and higher.

Sweat coated his skin. The windows were open, and a strong breeze blew in, sensitizing it even further.

Severus shifted again, and it felt like lights were exploding behind his eyes. He lifted his head up, turning his face, and Severus was there, draping over his back, reaching forward to kiss him, sloppy and awkward with the angle, and then Severus’ hand had slipped around him, slick with lube, gripping him tight.

He moaned into Severus’ mouth, words beyond him now, and then suddenly Severus stroked hard, thumb slicking over the head just as he loved….aah… it… and then…fuck…Severus had a firm grip and the gentle thrusts gave way to an absolutely fierce pounding and…

“Oh Severus! Fucking…bloody….” and he wailed, literally wailed, unable to control the sound coming out of his mouth as his orgasm ripped out of him, thundering through him, and he felt tears in the corners of his eyes, inexplicable, just tears of sheer…reaction, to the incredibleness of it.

He heard and felt Severus, the pulsing throb of him coming, and as Severus’ thrusts slowed to a lazy rocking he collapsed onto his front, his arms giving out.

His body overloading and oversensitized, he edged away from the gentle thrusts. Sometimes Severus could stay there, just rocking, and harden again, and he could feel that Severus was thinking about it, but he pulled forward, and Severus’ cock slipped out. He turned over and pulled Severus into his side, into the curve of his arm.

“Had enough?” Severus asked, breathless himself. His face turned sharp. “Did I hurt you?”
“Blew my brains out,” Kingsley said, a lethargic hand coming up and sweeping away the damp strands of Severus’ hair that were sticking to his forehead. “You’re bloody fucking amazing,” he said, face-to-face now with his lover.

A gleam shone in Severus’ eyes; a gentle finger wiped the tear sliding across the bridge of Kingsley’s nose. “That good, eh?”

“You’re a miracle in the sack,” Kingsley said. “That was – beyond words.”

Severus’ lips curved, then he looked down, shifting a little.

“You’re disappointed,” Kingsley said softly, his hand now gentling down Snape’s side.

Severus’ gaze snapped up. “After that?”

“Not the sex,” Kingsley smiled, and leant forward, kissing Severus slowly and thoroughly. He felt the hesitation, and then Snape giving himself over to the kiss.

“I’m cross with myself,” he agreed, as Kingsley eventually came up for air.

“I don’t think you scared him away,” Kingsley said. “He looked like he was loving every minute.”

“Something’s happened to change his mind, then,” Severus said. “His body language said it all tonight.”

Severus shifted in his arms, turning so his back was running along Kingsley’s side, his head on his arm. Kingsley knew the turning away was not rejection – it was Severus’ favourite position for talking, or thinking, or reading.

“Maybe he’s found some hot young thing at those clubs he’s been going to.”

He felt the way Severus held himself still, then forced himself to relax. He knew him too well to mention it. Severus didn’t like that idea, then.

The hand under Severus’ neck smoothed over his arm. Kingsley didn’t say anything.

“I’m a stupid old man,” Severus said at last.

Kingsley couldn’t help the snort that blasted from him. “After that? Fucking hell, Severus, I practically died and went to heaven.”

He felt the tension drop out of his lover a little.

“I hate that I care,” Severus admitted at last. “I don’t like feeling…feeling…”

“Severus, if we didn’t care, it really wouldn’t be worth it,” Kingsley said. He shrugged. “I like feeling a bit off-balance.”

Severus turned to look at him. “How can you like that? You never look like you feel off-balance,” he added.

“When we were first – you know – pussy-footing around each other, I felt I didn’t know my arse from my elbow.”

“You were always glowing in confidence,” Severus argued. “While I felt…”
“While you felt?” Kingsley’s hand stroked over Severus’ hip, slipping forward and inward along the front of his thigh.

Severus nudged back into him. “Randy all the time, certainly,” he rolled his eyes.

“Nothing’s changed there, then,” Kingsley stole another kiss, tongue lingering as it tangled with Severus’.

“On tenterhooks the whole time,” Severus said, eventually.

“And you don’t like that?” Kingsley said, mouth still close.

Severus had shifted back round in his arms. Kingsley had thought he was too tired to move, too drained, but found himself reaching up to bite at Snape’s ear. The soft moan went straight to his balls.

“You do?”

“Mmmm. Keeps me on my toes.”

“I suppose I associate it with fear,” Severus admitted. He’d had too many years of spying, of having to act with calm despite the adrenalin coursing through his body.

“Well, with Harry, there’s no fail situation, is there?” Kingsley suggested. “If he doesn’t want us, we still have us. And he obviously wants to maintain the friendship. That’s good.”

Severus was quiet a moment. Kingsley relaxed back a bit himself, allowing the stirring desire to return to a simmer. He raised his head to look at Severus, taking in the still sweaty face, the tension in his shoulders, the hook of his nose.

“What?” Severus asked.

“Just lying here with my heart swelling. I love you, Severus Snape.”

It wasn’t something that they said often: the love was there all around them, all the time. But Severus’ eyes darkened in pleasure all the same. His hand came up and stroked over said heart. Kingsley’s arm tightened around him.

It was several minutes later, when Kingsley was at the edge of sleep, that Severus said, “I hate not understanding.”

Kingsley shifted, dragging his brain back out of its doze. “Why he’s blowing hot and cold? He’s frightened.”

“Of us? Of sex?”

“This,” he said, holding Severus close. “Intimacy. What it really means to give yourself to someone. You were always so self-contained. I think he is too. Used to depending on himself. I suspect he has no idea of what something like this feels like.”

Severus’ hand stroked down his belly, then he shifted, reaching for the covers that were rumpled at the foot of the bed, pulling them up over them both.

“I suppose you’re right. I didn’t realise how much…strength… there is in giving. How much strength there is in being together.”
“Hmm,” Kingsley said, wiggling to get comfortable and feeling sleep pulling at him. “Exactly.” He shut his eyes.

Severus lay next to him, their bodies parallel, curved towards each other but not touching, the positions comfortable and familiar.

“Perhaps we should show him,” Severus said.

Ron slid out from under the covers, his ears hurting from the pressure of Hermione’s thighs, and slid into her, taking her mouth at the same time.

He loved it when she was sated and relaxed and he knew he had made his normally restrained wife into a brazen and demanding woman. He took it slow, building her up again, holding himself back until she gasped,

“Ron!”

And then he put everything he was holding back into it, loving how she arched and made funny little sounds and grabbed at him. He loved looking at the marks she made on his skin, the signs that he’d driven her wild with pleasure.

Later, she was curled against his chest, threading her fingers through the hair there.

He was nearly asleep.

“Ron?”

“Hmmm?”

“I – I’m thinking of giving up my job.”

He was awake at once. “What? But you love your job!”

“Not so much,” she said, looking up at him.

“What? Why? When did you start thinking about this?”

“Harry.”

“What?” He turned her to face him. “But you did a brilliant job on Harry’s defence –“

She shook her head. “He would have been found guilty, Ron.”

“No!”

“Yes. And if I can’t get off a man who I know to be innocent, then I shouldn’t be doing it.”

Ron lay back again. “You can’t give up just because there was a conspiracy against Harry and Harcourt is a bastard.”

Her head rubbed against his chest. “Harcourt is a brilliant lawyer.”

“He made everything sound – “
“Yes. That’s his job. And I realised I’m not that ruthless. I don’t want to be that ruthless.”

Ron lay there, stroking her back. “No,” he said at last, “I don’t think we’d be together if you were like that.”

Her chin nudged a rib as she looked up at him. He bent down, eyes smiling, and kissed her.

“So,” he said, as they settled back. “We’re both leaving the law and law enforcement. Any ideas what you want to do?”

She laughed. “Just like that?”

“Don’t see why not,” he said. “We’re not one-trick-ponies.”

“True,” she agreed. “I – I’ve been enjoying the evening sessions. Teaching the kids. Thinking what they need to know.”

“I always thought you’d be a teacher. You know, when we were at Hogwarts,” Ron said. “So, what do you want to teach? You’re good at everything.”

“I don’t know whether to think of Law at the uni, or a Hogwarts-level subject.”

“Yeah, could be either.”

“I’ll earn less either way.”

“Rose has already left home, and it won’t be long before Hugo goes. House is paid for. We’ll be fine.”

“Well…”

“Hmmm?”

“There might be some more expenses coming.”

“Yeah? You thinking of setting up your own school? Buying out a law firm?”

She laughed. “Not quite.”

“Can’t be too bad then,” Ron said. They’d both earned reasonable money. He’d never felt the crushing sense of poverty that he’d been so aware of as a teenager.

“I might need to take time off work too.”

“What?” There was something in the tone of her voice that made Ron shift onto his side to look at her. “Are you alright? You’re not ill, are you?” His heart was already beating a tattoo. Hermione couldn’t be ill. He couldn’t stand –

“Not ill, no.” Her hand brushed his face, soothing his fears. “Though I did come over all dizzy at work – “

“What? When? Are you alright? You need to see a mediwitch – “

“I did.”

She was red. Even in the low light of the candles, he could see it. His brain searched through the
reasons.

“IT – can’t be the menopause, can it? I mean, I know your parents are Muggles, and they have it earlier – “

“You’re on the right track there, it is my hormones.” She reached across and took his hand. “I hope you’re going to be alright with this, Ron,” she said, voice slightly wobbling.

“With what?”

She slid his hand over her smooth, flat stomach.

He looked at her, puzzled.

And then…she’d done the same thing, when she was -

“You’re pregnant?” he gasped.

She nodded.

“Your tummy’s flat.”

“Only a few weeks. Remember when we’d had that rather good night after I’d been holding out on you?”


She blushed. Hermione had always been very organised about contraception. She nodded.

His hand stroked over her belly, then up, over her nipples. She hissed.

“I thought they were more sensitive,” he said, gentling his touch, just stroking the tip of his finger around the edge of the areola.

“They are,” she said. “That’s nice.”

He bent his head, placing the gentlest of kisses on each. “Harry better not see them this time,” he looked up at her with a cheeky grin.

She swatted his head. “You don’t mind, then? I mean, the children are almost grown up. They’re going to die of embarrassment.”

“We’re wizards,” he said. “Witches,” he kissed her nose. “Bill was ten when Ginny was born. We’re considered quite close in age for a wizarding family. Mum’s going to be so excited!”

“Are you?”

He turned a dazzling smile on her. “It’s brilliant!” He quietened. “You? You’re happy?”

She looked at him, and nodded, shyly. “I mean,” she said, “it’s embarrassing having gotten pregnant by accident, but – yes. I feel – I’d forgotten how wonderful it felt,” she said, her hand again moving over her belly. “Knowing that there’s a life growing in there. Ours to love.”

“Wait till the sickness starts: you were in a right state last time,” Ron reminded her, tactful as ever, then took away the anxiety with a thorough and delicious kiss.
“Best news in years,” he whispered. “Apart from Hugo being safe. And you know, that’s—“

Hermione laughed, and kissed him, stopping the convoluted comments. “Yes,” she agreed, and snuggled in.

The young man stood up, firm thighs pushing off from the side of the bed, and stretched. Moonlight painted him golden, and the cat watched, blinking.

He turned round. “I don’t want to go.”

She smiled. “No, but I think it might cause rather a scandal if you appeared for breakfast with me tomorrow. As well as raising other suspicions.”

Albus nodded, and dressed quickly.
He bent over the bed, and kissed the woman, long and slow, until she pushed him away.

“Go on, you’ll make me change my mind, and I mustn’t.”

He laughed, and the next moment, a cat stood there. It jumped up onto the bed, and Laura gave it a long stroke down its spine.

“Take care,” she whispered, then gave him a shove off the bed.

Albus landed neatly.

“Go see that he gets off the grounds safely, Splat,” Laura said.

The tortoiseshell washed an invisible speck from her paw, then languidly got to her feet, coming to nose Albus briefly, before trotting ahead of him out of the cat-flap.

Albus gave one last look back at Professor Hart, who blew a kiss at him, and then he was gone

Ron got out of bed, easing out from under Hermione, took a trip to the loo, then headed down to the fridge. He looked down at his belly, and put the kettle on instead of taking out the milk bottle and chugging down half its contents.

His brain was in overdrive.

Hermione was pregnant. A smile split his face. He liked children. They were having another child!

He thought of the new and different future that had arisen tonight.

Suddenly, he was aware of how lethargic he’d been. Like he’d been in shock ever since Ginny had been killed, and now he’d suddenly snapped out of it.

He went into the study, collected some parchment and ink, took it back into the kitchen, made tea, and settled down to work.
Lucius mulled over what to do for twenty four hours, and then sent Mattieu down to Weasley to tell him he'd like a word, when he had a moment.

Three quarters of an hour later, Weasley loped up the back stairs and was ushered in by the bowing elf.

“What is it?”

There was no beating about the bush with George Weasley.

“I’m sorry to inconvenience you – “

“I’m sure you are,” Weasley said. “The point, Malfoy?”

“Would you be good enough to let Potter know that I need to see him?”

“Is it urgent?”

“N- no, but I would appreciate it if he could see me when it is convenient.”

Weasley nodded.

Lucius was glad that he made no comment about being treated as a house-elf.

“Will do. Anything I can help with?”

Lucius was about to say no, and then reconsidered.

“A young woman visited me yesterday. I would be – grateful – if you ever find her – in distress – and I am not here to help – if you could offer her assistance.”

Weasley looked at him sharply. “Of course,” he said, hands in his pockets, rocking on his heels. “Does she have a name?”

“Odont. Mademoiselle Nanette Odont.”

“I’ll watch out for her. Anything else?”

“Thank you, no.”

Weasley nodded, and was gone.

Potter arrived half an hour later.

“I said it wasn’t urgent,” Lucius said, getting up from the armchair where he was reading the finance section of the paper.

“No problem. What’s up?”
“Do sit down. May I get you coffee?”

“Thanks.” Potter sat.

Mattieu appeared at once, and the coffee a moment later. Potter sipped his, but Lucius prowled the room.

“Spit it out,” Potter said.

Lucius looked round. “I haven’t been entirely honest with you. With Mr Shacklebolt. In my reports.” He forced himself not to swallow.

“Alright,” Potter said. “What have you missed out? I take it it’s become important.”

Voldemort would have Crucio’d him first and asked after, Lucius thought, fleetingly.

“It probably isn’t,” Lucius said, sitting on the edge of the chair opposite. “But I’m concerned for someone’s safety.”

“Go on.”

“Artur Brouchard is engaged to a young girl –very young, not quite eighteen. She’s forced to go out with him and his cronies. If you’ve read all the reports, you know Artur tortured the man I killed – “

“Pierre Balcon.”

“Pierre - ?”

“The man you killed: his name was Pierre Balcon.”

Lucius bowed his head. “Yes. I had not forgotten.” He should have known that Potter would have checked it out.

“Artur sounds unpleasant,” Potter said, causing Lucius to bark a laugh.

“Yes. I didn’t mention Nanette in the reports: I didn’t think she was important. Her father is Henri Odont; he’s a minor player too.”

Potter said nothing, just watched him. “And now?”

Lucius stood up again, walking across the room. “I fear for her safety,” he said. He stood looking out of the window. He turned back to face his owner. “I know I have no right to ask anything of you, but… I needed to make you aware of her situation.”

“I see.”

Lucius bit his tongue, but he had known the moment that he had decided to take this course of action that he had to lay himself open. “I am asking your help on her behalf. If she should need it.”

“Did you doubt that I would give it?” Potter asked, his voice easy, calm.

“She’s mixed up with a bad lot,” Lucius shrugged.

“Do you know why she doesn’t leave? Do you think she’s tempted to be one of them?”
“I wondered that initially, yes. But – I’ve spoken to her. She isn’t interested in what they’re doing and she isn’t interested in violence.”

“Then why doesn’t she leave?” Potter repeated.

“She’s loyal to her father. Maybe that’s the wrong word,” he said, sighing. “In old families, women were traditionally guided by their parents. Her mother has long been dead. She’s always accepted his influence, I think.”

“I was gearing up to kill Voldemort at her age, Malfoy,” Potter said, still in that calm tone.

“Yes, and you had power bursting out of your fingertips! You never had any fear! You fought the Dark Lord in that cemetery, you fought all of us in the Department of Mysteries. Not all people are like you.”

Potter’s eyes had narrowed. “Why would you think I wasn’t frightened? I was a child. More to the point,” he added, “I was human.”

Lucius looked at him. Potter had always been that: Potter. Voldemort’s nemesis. He’d never really thought of him as a boy.

Even though he’d been at school with Draco.

Even when he’d seen him, and he clearly was.

“You never showed your fear,” he said.

“Maybe I never expected much of people,” he said. “Saves you from a lot of disappointment.”

Yes, Lucius thought. He’d certainly felt plenty of disappointment. And now he was to add embarrassment to that. And yet, still...

“She isn’t you,” Lucius said. “And she doesn’t know where to turn.”

Potter looked at him. “She does. She’s turned to you.”

Lucius’ mouth opened, and then he slammed it shut. His brain was whirring.

“You have a listening device in here?” he asked.

“No. I need to apologise, actually. I’d planned to visit today anyway.” He shifted. “I saw your young lady as I was leaving, and I was concerned. I followed her back in.”

Lucius’ brows drew together.

“It was an invasion of your privacy, but I hope, as you’re very concerned for the girl yourself, you’ll understand that I was too.”

“How?”

Potter seemed to fade into the background in front of his eyes.

“If you don’t see me do it, it’s practically impossible to know I’m here,” his voice said, before he reappeared.

Once again, Lucius found himself reassessing. He had never known a man capable of doing what
Potter had just done, although he’d read of the ability, of course. He’d always assumed that it was a myth.

“You saw Mademoiselle Odont yesterday?”

“Yes.”

Lucius tried to pull his thoughts together.

“Then you know that she needs help.”

“I’ve already asked Kingsley to look into her background,” Harry said.

Lucius looked at him. “Then you will undoubtedly discover all the intimate details of her life,” he said, trying to hold back his disgust and fury.

“I’m sorry, in these circumstances we all lose our privacy.”

Lucius stood, and walked over to the window again. “Her father told me she’s barren,” he said, his back to the room. “A quidditch accident, and untreated injuries. Artur Brouchard is a homosexual, and she’s his ‘cover’. Her father thinks her marriage will give her status, until Artur decides that he needs an heir after all and casts her off.”

“Does she know?”

“That she’ll be cast off?”

“That she’s barren.”

“She knows.”

“That’s very hard, at her age,” Potter said.

Lucius came back. “There were two things I wanted to ask of you, Mr Potter. Her protection, but also…” he paused.

“What is it?” Potter sat forward.

“If I had my own money, I would not need to discuss this with you.”

“You wouldn’t have your life or be here,” Potter said bluntly. “Go ahead: what do you want?”

“I would ask Snape if there was any potion he knew of, he could create, to return her fertility. Then she would be in a better position to make her own decisions.”

Potter leant back in his chair. Lucius felt as if he was being scrutinized from head to toe, and fought the anger that rose in him. He hated –

“It isn’t a weakness to care for another human being,” Potter said, as if reading his mind. “It’s a strength.”

“You think so?” Lucius hated himself for having had to ask. He knew it echoed in his tone.

“I know so. I would never have defeated Voldemort if I hadn’t cared about people. Why would I have bothered facing him?”
“Maybe you were doing what was expected of you. Like Miss Odont.”

To Lucius’ surprise, Potter laughed.

“You have a point there.” He stood up. “Is there anything else?”

“No. Thank you for coming so – “

“I’ll do what I can for Miss Odont if she needs help. And I’ll ask Snape. But I think the young lady needs to make decisions without relying on what might be.”

“Thank you.”

Potter nodded, and was gone.

Lucius walked over to the window. Potter did not reappear. He wondered if he had apparated all the way to England, or had just gone down to talk to his brother-in-law.

The man’s power astonished him.

But…that was good.

He could trust him to look after Nanette.

Harry went and had a chat to George, then wondered what to do. He should go and see Snape – he’d promised, after all.

It wasn’t easy, though, to go and see a man that you’d shared a kiss like that with, and just pretend it hadn’t happened.

Still.

“Where’re you off to now?” George asked.

“Going to see if Snape’s home.”

“Help yourself to – “

Harry was gone in a clap of apparition.

“- the floo,” George finished.

Harry had landed outside the house. The heat hit him instantly. Summer had well and truly come. He hurried inside, smiling to their house elf, and headed towards Snape’s laboratory. He knocked on the door.
Seconds later, Snape pulled it open.

He was wearing an apron over his robes, and had a vicious-looking knife in his hand.

“Eww,” Harry covered his nose and mouth. The smell was excruciating.

“Rotted gizzards. Go sit in the hammock. I’ll join you in forty five minutes.”

Harry nodded, and backed out of the room.

Instead of going to the hammock, he apparated over to the bothy. The chest he’d been working on was still there, as he’d left it, under a cloth.

He took out one of the drawers, and some sandpaper. With a glance at his watch, he started working.

Forty two minutes later, he put it away again, and apparated back. Snape walked out of the house as he arrived.

He looked at Harry, and his hands, which were covered in fine sawdust.

“Bothy?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll just wash them,” he flapped his hands, and went inside, using the loo while he was at it.

When he’d finished, Snape was in the kitchen.

“Do you have time for a salad? I’ve only got forty minutes, then I’m afraid I need to return to the potion."

“Should I come back later?”

“Only if you can’t tell me why you’re after me in forty minutes,” Snape said, cutting up a huge beef tomato.

“What are gizzards?” Harry asked.

“You didn’t come here to ask that,” Snape said, “and you really don’t want to hear the answer when you’re about to eat.”

Harry laughed. “What can I do?”

Snape thrust a pepper at him, and Harry got a knife and started chopping. Soon, they were sitting down eating.

“So,” Snape said, “delighted as I am to see you, I suspect you have something to ask.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, glad of the mouthful of parma-ham-wrapped fig. He’d never eaten figs before, but the two they were eating were the first of the early crop. “This is weird,” he said, pointing at the fig.


“Too late,” Harry said, popping the last piece into his mouth. “I came to ask about fertility potions.”
Snape’s eyes narrowed. “It’s rather odd timing to want to get somebody pregnant, and you managed perfectly well before. No one could doubt Albus, at least, is yours.”

“Hey! Lils’ red hair could be from my side, you know.”

“No,” Snape shook his head. “Your mother’s was a much darker shade.”

Harry shut up. It was odd to think of Snape knowing his mother so much better than he did. He munched his way through some crisp greenery. “It’s not for me. For a woman. A girl, really. She can’t have children. Well, that’s what she’s been told. Why I’ve come to you.”

“Do you know why she can’t have children?”

“A quidditch accident, apparently.”

“Hmm. That is more difficult. A hormonal imbalance is straightforward to fix, but ‘an accident’ could mean anything. She may have had her womb or ovaries removed, for all I know.”

“You couldn’t grow them back?”

“Did you really just say that?”

“Hey! We’re talking about magic, aren’t we? Gilderoy bloody Lockhart removed all the bones in my arm, and Madam Pomfrey grew them back. Skele-gro. For all I know there’s wombe-gro and gutsy-gro and –”

“Yes, I see your logic,” Snape said, casting a look at Harry.

Harry grinned back.

“It’s never been achieved, however. Either,” he said.

“Oh.” Harry couldn’t keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“I would need to see the woman, her medical notes, and so on, before I would have any idea.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.” Harry swallowed.

“I could see her tomorrow.”

Harry rubbed his chin. “I – well, I should have realised you’d need to know more,” he said. “Lucius Malfoy asked me to ask you.”

Snape’s brows shot up.

“I know, I know. He thinks this girl is stuck because she’s engaged to this creep and that if she weren’t infertile she’d be able to get out of it.”

“We’re talking about Lucius Malfoy?”

“I – I saw them together, Snape. He – I think he really cares about her.”

“Explain.”

Harry did.

Snape sat there a few moments, then got up and put the kettle on.
“It seems unlikely,” he turned and looked at Harry. “But his own marriage was arranged. Maybe he’s feeling some fellow sympathy.”

“I thought his marriage was happy!”

“I believe it was, but Narcissa was not his first choice. In fact, not his choice at all. In his last year at school – I’d just started at Hogwarts then, but everyone knew him - he and Adriana Nott were more or less joined at the hip.”

“What? And then he just married Narcissa?”

“The summer after Hogwarts.”

“I can’t believe Malfoy just let himself be pushed about.”

“Pureblood families were like that. Still are, many of them. You did what was thought to be best for the family; for the family line. It was bred in you to obey.”

“Is that why you had sympathy for Draco? Back then?”

Snape shrugged. “Perhaps. He was one of my Slytherins. But of course, I knew the pressure he was under.” He stood up. “I’m sorry, I must return to my potion.”

Harry got up too. “I’m sorry to have just come – “

“You’re always welcome, as you know. Take us as you find us.” He put the crockery in the sink, and looked up at Harry. “It’s very unlikely I’ll be able to help her,” he said. “Fertility caused by injury or spell damage is almost impossible to reverse. I can create potions for libido and sexual interest, but the actual underlying infertility is another matter.”

Harry nodded, thinking suddenly of Malfoy. His brows drew together.

“Yes?” Snape prompted, seeing it.

“Did – when Voldemort cursed people infertile, it – it affected their – libido?”

Snape looked at him. “The spell destroyed fertility, and yes, the ability to get it up. The threat of it was extremely powerful, striking as it did at the twin issues of continuing the family line and, as we discovered at your trial, the misguided but widespread notion that having sex is essential to maintain magic.”

Harry looked at him. Opened his mouth, and shut it again.

“Ask,” Snape said wearily.

“Is that why you’re gay? Did he do it to you?”

Snape laughed. “You do know you’re an idiot, Potter? My line had already gone – my father was a Muggle.”

“Oh yes. Sorry.”

Snape’s hand was on the door. “Are you asking if I am a ‘receiving end only’ for Kingsley?”

Harry went bright red. “Of course not!” The thought hadn’t even occurred to him. And he’d seen Severus’ erection in the bothy…His eyes darted automatically downwards, and then jerked away.
“I was cursed by Voldemort. Sex was hardly an issue for me at the time. However, Kingsley encouraged me to develop a potion to counteract the impotence part of the spell. I take it every day. And we like to take turns at topping and bottoming,” he added, provocatively.

“You – “ Harry didn’t know where to look. His brain was filling with images. He blurted out the first vaguely non-rude thing that came into his head. “You have sex every day? Oh god, forget I said that.”

Snape laughed, looked at his watch, said, “Sometimes several times, Harry,” and was gone.

Harry stood there with his mouth open.

Harry returned to Lucius, and told him the news.

“I see. Yes, of course Severus would need to see her. I understand.”

“And he says it’s unlikely that there’s anything he can do,” Harry reminded him.

“Can do or won’t do?” Lucius asked.

“I hold Master Snape in the highest regard,” Harry said tightly, “and I would be obliged if you would refrain from that tone when talking about him.”

Lucius held himself still, and then inclined his head. “My apologies. I was – disappointed on her behalf.”

“Snape said that infertility caused by injury or spell is almost impossible to cure,” he added.

Lucius walked to the window.

It seemed to be his place, Harry thought. Despite his opulent surroundings, he wondered if Lucius still found being enclosed a reminder of Azkaban. He sometimes felt that way himself, and his incarceration had been very brief in comparison. But then there had been the cupboard under the stairs,

He felt a lot better outside.

“Yes, he’s right, of course.”

Lucius’ voice sounded hollow. It hadn’t occurred to Harry – thinking about Lucius having sex not being something he wanted to consider – that when he’d told him of the spell, he had meant that not only was he infertile, he was also impotent.

Although, for all he knew, Malfoy had found a potions-maker able to develop a potion for him, as Snape had done for himself.

But now he had no money of his own.

Had he had access to such a thing, and stopped buying it now that Harry held the purse strings?

He didn’t know how he could ask that, without revealing that there was an antidote, if Snape was the only one who’d discovered it, or without causing profound offence.
If Malfoy already had a supplier, maybe he was buying it anyway. Harry’d never looked through Malfoy’s weekly spending since he’d taken on responsibility for him, and frankly, he had better things to do and to worry about.

Draco was in the office. It was getting late, but they’d finished all the standard items for the next day’s edition. The night team would deal with any last minute news to be added.

He was tired.

He seemed to be tired all the time at the moment, but that was probably because he was working fifteen hours a day every day, going between The Prophet, the Harpies, and his other business interests.

He was glad to be working. He didn’t know how else to go on, when there was no-one to go home to, nothing to look forward to.

He looked at David Smith, and Paul Edwards, whose desk area he was sitting at. They looked tired too. He tried to fish up some normal conversation.

“So, doing anything interesting this weekend?”

“Going away with the wife,” David said. “Mother-in-law’s having the kids. Can’t wait!”

Draco smiled. “Sounds good. Where’re you off to?”

“Just to a small inn down in Dorset. Few walks—”

“If you ever get out of bed,” Paul leered at him.

David grinned. “Not all of us have tickets to the big game.”

“The international?” Draco asked. “I thought Romie Jones was reporting on that?”

“She is. I’m going as a free human being. No report to write,” he tucked his hands behind his head. “Just a flask of firewhisky in my pocket and I’m going to shout and cheer and get raging drunk whether we win or lose.”

“I must be paying you too much,” Draco raised an eyebrow.

“Nah, I’ve got a friend who gets me tickets now and then. His Dad’s on the team.”

“Friends in high places. Lucky.”

“Well, I don’t know his Dad. Pete’s got a really boring job at the Ministry. Assistant to the assistant to the man who cleans the cauldrons in the labs, I think,” he laughed.

“Ouch.”

“Yeah. So, I swop him a bit of gossip every now and then, and put up with his company, and we go to a few matches together.”

“He needs your gossip when his Dad is a quidditch international?” David pulled a disbelieving face.
“Well, I don’t think he actually sees his Dad that much. But Daddy sends him tickets, so who’m I to care?”

“I hope you’re not revealing confidential client material?” Draco raised an eyebrow. They really didn’t print everything that they found out.

“Nah, it’s usually stuff that we’ve printed anyway, but he likes to hear about it from the horse’s mouth, is all.”

Draco nodded. Reporting was all about finding and the judicious sharing of information, and it was natural for people to talk to their mates about their job. “Just so long as you don’t start dishing out important private information – stuff that we keep to ourselves, for now, or that could lead to a scoop for someone else,” he said, making sure his tone showed how serious he was.

“He’s got no-one he could share it with,” Paul said easily. “He’s a bit of a weirdo, but I’m not going to turn down free tickets, am I?”

“Who’s his Dad then?”

“Phillip Stubbins. You know, beater? Plays for the Magpies. Getting a bit old now. I suppose he’ll be retiring soon. Pity, I’ll have to find someone else to give me freebies.”

Draco felt like his stomach had been sucked into a black hole, and that the rest of him was going to slide in at any moment. He held on to his voice.

“Go home, David,” he said.

“Hmm?”

Draco looked at the other reporter. “Have a good weekend.”

“What?”

“Will you just fuck off out of here!” Draco snapped.

The two men looked at each other. David got to his feet, and collected his stuff. Paul got up.

“Not you,” Draco said.

“What? What have I done?”

“We’re just about to find out,” Draco said.

Paul looked across at him, eyes wide.

Draco’s wand was in his hand, tapping between his fingers.

He gulped.

Harry and Albus were just cleaning up after their meal when they heard the floo.
“You expecting anyone?” Harry asked, and at Albus’ negative response, they both headed to the parlour.

It wasn’t as if anyone they hadn’t given permission to could get in, but still…

Kingsley smiled at them as he stood by the fireplace, holding out a hand for Snape as he stepped through. Snape took it for just a moment, before casting a spell to remove the soot.

“You look smart,” Albus said, looking them over. “Going somewhere?”

Harry’s eyes looked them over too. They were both in Muggle dress: Kingsley was wearing trousers though, and Harry realised that he didn’t think he’d ever seen him in any Muggle clothes apart from jeans. He’d teamed the pale chinos with a pastel pink shirt and a black leather jacket. A heavy silver chain gleamed against the skin of his throat; a silver watch was on his wrist, and a silver ear-ring winked against his ear.

Harry’s mouth watered.

Snape was wearing black. Black trousers, black shirt, and a black velvet jacket. Harry hadn’t seen anyone in a velvet jacket before, though formal wizarding attire used the fabric often. The jacket Snape was wearing looked incredibly supple, the pile shifting as he moved.

Harry wanted to run his hands up Snape’s chest, touch it.

“Looks good, doesn’t he?” Kingsley smiled, looking from Harry to Snape.

Albus glanced at his father, who was trying desperately to pull himself together, and rolled his eyes.

“Actually, Kingsley, have you got a minute?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Sure,” Kingsley said easily. “Want to go somewhere private?”

“Er,” Albus took in the look on his father’s face, and swallowed. “No, that’s alright.”

“You don’t have to talk in front of me if you don’t want,” Harry said. “I’ll go put the kettle on.” He strode to the door, then turned back. “You’re not going to say anything embarrassing, are you? Because I’m not going to those clubs any more – “

“This is about me, not you, Dad. And you can stay.”

“Why don’t we all go into the sitting room, then,” Snape suggested, “if I may be so bold?”

“Oh. Yes, come in,” Harry said, flustered. “No tea? Coffee?”

“Let’s sit first,” Kingsley said. “Let Albus say whatever it is.”

They all sat down in the sitting room. Then Albus stood up again. He rubbed a hand over his hair.

“I really can go –” Harry offered, shifting. “You don’t have to tell me everything, I understand that – “

“I’ve been to Hogwarts!” Albus went bright red.
“Right,” Kingsley said. “I take it you had a reason, as we discussed this?” His tone was moderate, non-judgemental.

Harry felt himself quaking.

“It was nothing to do with – with what we’d been discussing,” Albus said, sitting down again. “I – I’ve been seeing someone.” He glanced at his father and looked away again.

“I see,” Kingsley said.

“She’s trustworthy,” Albus said quickly.

“She knows about this? What we’ve been doing?” Snape said.

“It – it’s Laura Hart,” Albus said. “Dad’d talked to her, and she’s helping Fred’s club. So I didn’t think there was any risk – ”

“I’m glad you told me,” Kingsley interrupted, “but let’s keep up the honesty, hmm? You knew there was a risk, but you thought it was worth it.”

“I – yes.”

Harry didn’t know what to think. Was he so horrid that his son felt he couldn’t tell him? Should he have any expectation of his son telling him such things? Just because he lived at home…he had no idea what James was up to, romantically, most of the time. “You go in your cat form?” he asked.

Albus nodded. “And Splat – her cat, you saw her, remember? - sees me off the grounds before it gets light, and we just look like any two cats – well, we are any two cats, and – ”

He was sleeping with her. “It’s serious, then?” Harry asked.

“Yes,” Albus said, without hesitation. “I mean, I’m serious. And I hope she is. That she will be, when she gets to know me. When she gets to know me better.”

“It would be safer for you to see her away from the school,” Snape suggested.

There was a moment’s silence.

Eyes flickered to Harry.

“You can’t think I’d object to you bringing someone home!” he burst out. “Teddy’s had a stream of girlfriends through the door in his time, and James – “

“I thought you might not approve – because of the age gap.”

“Well, I hope that isn’t an issue,” Kingsley raised an eyebrow, looking at Harry.

Harry felt the heat rising in his face.

Albus snorted. “Well, it was – I mean – I know I trust her – but – I can’t bring someone into the house. Not until we know you’re safe, Dad. But I do trust her, I –“

“That was very sensible of you,” Kingsley said. He stood up. “Thank you for telling me, Albus. You’re not one of my employees and I can’t give you a dressing down for disobeying an order, and I appreciate that it wasn’t easy to bring it up.”
Albus swallowed, and nodded, and then jutted out his chin, waiting.

“I don’t believe it would do any good to ask you to stop seeing her. Can I, however, suggest you do as your father does, and leave a record of where you are? Either tell your father or write it down somewhere. Whether you’ve met up at Hogwarts or elsewhere. Our investigations suggest that Professor Hart is squeaky clean, but there’s always room for error, or for blackmail, or whatever. So if I may, I’d like to suggest you keep your relationship private for the meantime, be on alert for other people, and be aware that you are putting yourself at risk.”

“So – it’s alright then?”

“You’re old enough to know what risks are worth taking,” Kingsley said.

“Yes. Yes, thanks!” Albus was grinning. “I – I’ve only stayed over a couple of times, but, you know, there’ll be more.”

“I hope so, if she makes you happy,” Kingsley said.

Albus nodded. “Yes, she does. Brilliant!” He looked at his father. “Alright, Dad?” he asked, voice wary.

“Oh, great!” Albus looked at his watch. “Well, taking Kingsley’s orders, I’d better inform you that I’m going to head over there after my shift.”

“Do you floo to the Three Broomsticks?” Snape asked, frowning.

“Of course not. That might give a clue – “

“So how do you get there?” Snape asked.

Albus’ brows drew together. “I apparate, of course.”

Both of the older men looked at him.

“What?”

“You apparate there and back?”

“Yes, but I’ve usually – ah – well, had a bit of a kip before I come back. Not that I think I need it, because I’m used to my cat form, and I’m not in it for long, and – but – “

“You fall asleep after sex anyway,” Kingsley suggested.

Albus blushed, and nodded.

“Okay. Well, have a good evening,” he waggled his brows.

“You too,” Albus grinned. “Where are you off to, anyway?”

“We thought we’d see if your Dad wanted to show us these clubs he says he’s been to, but if he’s given them up…” he shrugged.

“We’ll just have to think of something else,” Snape finished, voice smoky, and eyes on Harry.
“Well, you probably know some better places than Dad. Have fun then! You too, Dad,” he said, looking at his father. “How can you not, with these two to show you the ropes? Though you need to smarten up…”

“You push off and leave me to sort out my own – “ Harry was about to say ‘love life’, but amended it to, “evening, you cheeky bugger. You’re being careful?” he added.

“Dad!” Albus rolled his eyes, and was out the door.

They heard him rush upstairs.

“Getting changed,” Harry said.

“Young love,” Kingsley said.

“Getting changed for work, actually. He’s helping out at The Leaky.”

“Ah. Still, that was hard for him to say, about the Professor. You alright with it?”

Harry shrugged. “She seemed a nice woman. It would be great if it wasn’t for all this business.”

“You can’t expect youngsters to put their lives on hold,” Snape said. “Everything feels too important at that age.”

Harry remembered putting his relationship with Ginny on hold, and going off to hunt Horcruxes. Once he’d gone, it hadn’t seemed that hard.

Maybe even then, he hadn’t loved her enough.

As if sensing the shift in Harry’s thoughts, Snape said, “His magic is very strong.”

“Why d’you say that?”

“Because for a young man of his age to be able to apparate to Hogwarts and back from London is pretty out of the ordinary,” Kingsley said.

“Yeah?” Harry questioned.

“It didn’t strike you as unusual?” Snape asked.

“Nobody ever seems to measure magical ability,” Harry said. “Not at school, or anywhere else. I could always apparate where I wanted, so I suppose I never expected them not to be able to do it.”

“Didn’t their mother say anything?”

“Gin was pretty able too,” Harry said. “I mean, she seemed to be able to do anything she wanted with her magic.”

“But not wandless,” Snape said.

Harry thought of Ginny handcuffed to the bed and unable to escape, and swallowed. “No. I think, growing up in a wizarding family, she was always just used to having her wand at her side. I suppose – I suppose even now, I think of it as something extra. Something I need, like my glasses – well, actually, I need my glasses more,” he said, thoughtfully.

Snape snorted.
“Never thought of contact lenses?” Kingsley asked.

“Yeah, I did try them, but I do a lot of sanding so they really weren’t a good idea. Hurts like shit when you get sawdust under them.”

Albus stuck his head around the door. “You all still here? I’m off. See you tomorrow, Dad?”

Harry nodded. His son was off to work. And then to get laid.

They heard the flare of the floo.

“Well,” Kingsley said, sitting back, the fabric of the chinos straining over his thighs, “if you’ve given up gay clubs, what shall we do?”

Harry’s eyes darted away from the swell at the juncture of Kingsley’s legs.

“Would you like to go to a pub, or something? An ordinary one?”

“Can I ask why you’ve given up the gay ones?” Snape asked.

“I – it isn’t for me,” Harry said, looking down at his hands.

“Being gay, or gay bars?” Snape asked. “Forgive me if it seems crass to mention it, but the kiss we shared seemed to indicate that you are interested in men.”

Harry looked up at him, red in the face. But Snape was just looking curious, rather than anything else, and Kingsley was just sitting back, letting Snape handle it.

Handle him.

“I – yes, alright. Obviously I’m bisexual.” He swallowed. “But – I don’t think I need sex, really. And…and…I don’t want it.” He held his head up high, chin forward, then pulled it in, trying not to look childishly mulish.

Snape leant forward. “I can understand the not needing it. I went without for a very long time. But,” he looked at Kingsley, “it can be marvellous, Harry. What has happened that you’d want to rule it out of your life?”

Harry stood up, and went over to the sideboard, where the firewhisky was kept. He held up the bottle in question.

“I’ll certainly join you if you need Dutch courage to be able to tell us,” Snape said.

Harry swung round. “I don’t have to talk about this. It’s my life – ”

Kingsley stood up and came and took the bottle from him, and put it down. Then he took hold of Harry’s arms. “Of course it’s your life,” he said. “But we see a man who is so…passionate…that we can’t help but wonder why you’d want to deny that side of yourself.”

Harry stood stiffly.

Kingsley’s hands stroked down his arms, and he moved away with a sigh.

Harry felt relieved to see that he was squatting down to reach out the glasses, rather than leaving.

He did not notice that the fabric was practically bursting at the seams over Kingsley’s thighs. He
didn’t.

He leant back against the sideboard. Kingsley handed him a glass.

Harry coddled it in his hand. He could just smell the rich scent of it.

“Look, we talked about this before,” he said, glancing at Kingsley. “I – I’m not good at …at being…restrained, or – “

“Someone tried to force you?” Snape was on his feet.

“I… I - no…but…I…”

“What happened?” Kingsley asked gently, his hand on Harry’s arm.

“It was stupid. Nothing. But that’s why I can’t do this – ”

“Tell us what happened. We won’t be shocked.”

They were all standing, close together.

Harry felt a shiver run through him. “I’m such an idiot – ”

“Sometimes, yes,” Snape said, which pulled an unexpected laugh from Harry.

“Look, it was nothing. I misjudged – and I shouldn’t have minded, but – ”

Kingsley lifted his chin and looked at him. “Unlikely as it is that I want to sound like Severus in school-teacher mode, but can you try for a whole sentence?”

Harry gave an embarrassed, choked laugh again. Nodded.

Kingsley’s hand stayed on his shoulder.

“I went to this bar. I’d been before. There’s a backroom – or rather, it’s downstairs. But you know, people – people have sex there.” His shock at people having sex in public found its way into his tone. “I mean, really going at it. And sometimes there’s a group of them, all – all doing things. It – it was a bit scary,” he looked up, awkwardly.

“I can understand that,” said Kingsley. “Did you feel forced to join in?”

“I – no. Not in that! And..not – not the first couple of times I went. But then…there seem to be guys…and they just like giving blow-jobs.”

“Ah. And you let one give you one?”

Harry nodded, looking down.

“Did you like it?” Snape asked, voice deep.

“Who doesn’t like a blow-job?” Harry asked.

“True,” Kingsley laughed. “So what happened then?”

“Nothing that night. But – well, I went back,” he said, looking from one to the other. “And?”
“This guy gave me a blow-job, and then he wanted me to return the favour.”

“Understandable,” Kingsley said.

Harry nodded. “Yes. I know I shouldn’t have been surprised, but the other guys I’d seen – anyway, I knew I ought to –”

“If you didn’t want to, there was no ‘ought to’ about it, unless you’d agreed that beforehand,” Severus said. He was leaning with his hip against the wall.

Harry nodded. “I know that in principle, but it seemed…fair. But – I – I don’t like – I didn’t like – he held my head and shoved and didn’t give a shit when I gagged and –”

“And it sounds bloody awful,” Kingsley said. “Of course you didn’t like it.” He stroked down Harry’s arms, as if he could soothe away the memory.

“I – someone’s always got to be…giving in,” Harry said. “And I can’t.” He shrugged. “I can’t.”

“Well, that’s decided it,” Snape said. He slung back the rest of the firewhisky from his glass.

“What? Decided what?” Harry said, looking from one to the other.

“I want you to watch us in bed,” Snape said.

“What?” Harry’s voice squawked in a very unmanly way.

“Come back with us and watch us making love. See what it can really be about.”

“I can’t do that! You can’t do that! Have – have sex in front of me?”

“You can be invisible if it makes it easier for you,” Kingsley said. “But don’t you think it might help if you knew what sex between men looked like? Men who actually gave a shit about the other partner? As opposed to just strangers fucking?”

“You need have no worries that we’ll take advantage of you,” Snape said. “It will be purely to watch. This time.”

“This time?” Harry felt as if he was a parrot, repeating everything, but his brain felt shocked out of all semblance of sense, whilst his body – well, maybe it was the blood heading elsewhere that was making his brain so slow.

And then, the unmistakeable sound of the floo warning that someone was trying to get in touch.

“I – the floo,” Harry said, and stumbled out of the room.

Draco Malfoy’s head appeared the minute Harry released the wards.


At Malfoy’s pale face and flustered expression Harry turned and yelled, “Kingsley!” and released the wards for Malfoy to step through.
Lucius was walking alongside the Seine when Benôit trotted up beside him.

Lucius had his wand at the ready, hidden in the fold of his robe.

But then, he always had it at the ready.

“Benôit,” he said. “It is a nice day for a walk, is it not?”

“A walk? Oh yes, yes indeed. Very fine.” Benôit stumbled along, walking almost sideways as he answered.

Lucius kept going. “To what do I owe the honour of your company?” he enquired, after a minute or two.

“Oh, I was just walking along and saw you. And of course, it was natural to bid you a good day.”

“Of course. And yet you’re still here,” Lucius murmured.

“I beg your pardon,” Benôit said, sounding affronted. “I thought you might like some company. I always enjoy company on my afternoon stroll…”

“Benôit,” Lucius said, turning towards him. “It is the morning. And whatever makes you think that I would enjoy the same things that please you?”

Benôit’s mouth opened and shut. “Really! You can be most obnoxious, you know, Malfoy.”

“So I can. I take it you have something to say to me: get on with it.”

“Upon my word!”

“Yes, yes, I understand your desire to show your outrage, but tell me what you came for. You’re ruining my solitude.”

Benôit looked mulish. “I came to invite you to a card game this evening.”

“An owl would have sufficed, surely? I am afraid I am otherwise engaged.”

Benôit leaned in. “We do not send owls. Laval asked me to tell you. There are,” he looked intently at Lucius, “important matters to discuss.”

Lucius refrained from rolling his eyes. “At what hour?”

“Nine o’clock.”

“I will cancel my other engagement,” Lucius said, in a put-upon voice.

“Very good. Well then…”

“It is quite obvious you do not enjoy walking, Benôit. What on earth do you do on your afternoon stroll? Go once around the park eyeing up the young ladies who are forever unavailable to you? Toddle off, then.”

“You are the most rude fellow – ”
“À bientôt,” Lucius said, lengthened his stride, and left the little roly-poly of a man behind.

They were three-quarters of an hour into the game when Laval laid a card on the table and said, “So, Malfoy, if you were to take out three British Muggle-born or half-breed wizards or witches, who would you go for?”

Lucius didn’t move a muscle, apart from his eyes scanning his own cards. To his left, Benôit shifted. To his right, Alfred Duncan, a wizard he’d never met before, sat easy in his chair, choosing his next card.

“That would depend on your objective, of course,” Lucius said. “If one wanted to get rid of the most annoying of fellows, my first and foremost would be Keiron Doherty, who must be the most irritating quidditch commentator I’ve ever heard.”

Benôit laughed, and Laval raised an amused face. Lucius noted the glance he made to Duncan.

Duncan’s chuckle turned into a cough; he apologised, took a flask from his left-hand pocket, and sipped.

Lucius sniffed quietly, casting a casual look out of the corner of his eye as he played his card.

Definitely a wince.

So.

“Let us say,” Laval said, “that the British Ministry had fallen, and you wanted to ensure that no cocky Muggle-borns or half-bloods stepped into the gap.”

Lucius sipped his wine. “You’re asking me for a hit list?” he asked.

Benôit wriggled.

“Hypothetically,” Laval smiled.

“Forgive me,” Lucius said, “but I’m a little too…cautious…in my old age to discuss such matters in front of strangers.”

“Ah, you have not met Alfred before,” Laval nodded. “I can assure you, he and I are old friends.”

“Really?” Lucius said. “And I can assure you, Laval, that Alfred does not belong to any noble English family.”

Duncan turned to look at him. “You seem very certain of yourself.”

“Yes,” Lucius said. “Are you playing, Benôit?” he turned to his host, who was too busy staring from one to another to play his hand.

“Oh! My apologies!” He played a card at random, causing Laval to sigh.

“My ancestry is Scottish,” Duncan said.

“Clever,” Lucius said after a moment. “It’s a common Scottish name, but - no.”
“How can you be so certain?” Laval asked, looking from one to the other.

“Two reasons,” Lucius shuffled his cards, then laid them face down on the table.

“Do enlighten me,” Duncan smiled.

“Laval, you are from an old family. I’m sure, like me, you know every noble family in France. I was taught it at my grandmother’s feet, day after day: whose line came from where, their family seats, the intermarriages…”

Laval nodded, eyes narrowing on Duncan.

“And of course, I have studied the same in Britain,” Lucius shrugged, and then threw a *Petrificus* spell at Duncan.

Benôit and Laval leapt to their feet.

Lucius pointed his wand at them. “Watch,” he snapped, then pulled the flask from Duncan’s pocket. “And there’s this,” he said, and downed a gulp of the mixture.

He writhed as he felt the transformation come over him, forcing his attention into keeping his wand pointed at Laval and Benôit.

“Mon Dieu!” Benôit exclaimed, his hands gripping the edge of the table as he stared at the two identical men now in front of him.

“Polyjuice Potion,” Lucius said, as much for the listeners at the other end of his communications system, as he realised they would not be able to know what was happening. “Exactly how long have you known Duncan, Laval?” his lips twisted.

Laval looked furious. He stepped around the table and removed Duncan’s wand.

“Three or four years,” he spat. “Well, my thanks, Malfoy. We will sit and watch this out.”

“But…but who could it be?” Benôit exclaimed. “It is – it is perhaps – the Law? An Auror?”

“Very possibly,” Lucius said, sitting down in this strange body. “But we have not done anything but joke,” he smiled at the stiff form of Duncan. “Although I do not know what you have discussed on other occasions?” He raised his eyebrow at Laval.

He could see Laval thinking over every conversation that he must have had with Duncan.

“What are we going to do?” Benôit said, his voice panicked.

“We will have to play another game,” Lucius said, collecting up the cards and shuffling them. “Three is an awkward number. We could play ‘Traitors’.”

It was the name of a children’s card game, but both Benôit and Laval again turned to look at Duncan.

“Did it never occur to you,” Lucius asked softly, “that you might have a spy in your midst?”

“Alfred has been part of the group from the beginning, even if he doesn’t visit often,” Laval growled. “He has made many…suggestions…for courses of action.”

“Well,” Lucius said, dealing the cards, “several options could be at play here.”
“What are you thinking?” Laval asked. He glanced at the cards in front of him. “What are we playing?”

“Cut-throat,” Lucius said, giving the common name of another game.

“You are a one,” Laval said, an amused smirk playing around his mouth. “Does nothing trouble you?”

“Oh, I’m used to traitors and bad decisions,” Lucius said. “Your play, Benôit.”

“What…what options did you mean?” he asked, voice squeaking as he studied his hand and laid one down without giving it much attention.

“Our Alfred here could have been an impostor all the time. Do you think his behaviour has been supportive of that idea? If that is the case, he could still be on our side – but maybe he does not entirely trust you. Or, I should say – she.”

“She?” Benôit gasped.

“Witches are by far the most vicious amongst us,” Lucius said. “Take my wife’s sister, Bellatrix LeStrange, for instance.”

“How do you know Alfred – she – is a woman?” Laval asked, playing his card.

“Well, I thought there was something off about her before, but now I am in an identical body, it is quite obvious to me that she doesn’t know how to carry it, to fully control the strength and muscles. Which suggests that whoever our guest is, it is either a witch or a very small wizard indeed.” He looked across at Duncan, and cast a small spell with his wand.

“Agonising not to be able to blink, is it not? Note my merciful nature,” he added.

The eyes swivelled in their sockets and glared at him.

To the astonishment of the other men, Lucius kept playing cards until the hour was nearly up.

“Well,” he said, clearly in charge, “wands at the ready, mes amis?”

Transformation under _Petrificus_, Lucius assumed, would be a painful business, but he had no intention of releasing the person. Whoever’s side they were on, it would be good for them to know that he wasn’t a walkover.

The pain of it was evidenced only in the heat and sweat that poured from the person as the change took place, and then….

“Mon Dieu!”

“A witch! You were right, Malfoy!”

“Well, well, well. Mrs Atkins. What an…unexpected…pleasure,” Lucius purred.

“You know this woman?” Laval demanded.

“Oh yes,” Lucius said. “May I present Mrs Dorothy Atkins, Head of the British Department of Magical Law Enforcement.” He made a slight bow.

“A spy?” Benôit was grey.
Lucius sat down again, his wand pointing at the woman. He took out his handkerchief, shook it out with a flourish, and then leant forward and mopped her brow to stop the sweat trickling into her eyes. The look she gave him suggested she would have bitten off his hand if she could move.

“Well,” Lucius said, “that is the question, isn’t it?” He crossed his legs languidly and studied her. His brain was a whirl of possibilities. “I think not,” he said.

Her eyes flashed at him.

“Should we not release the spell and…interrogate her?” Laval asked.

The eyes swivelled to him, widening.

“I think we need to establish some boundaries, first. A little rapport, perhaps,” Lucius said, tapping his wand on his knee. “It’s quite possible she’s capable of wandless magic, and will either kill us, obliterate us, or apparate out.” He watched her eyes carefully. “I wonder which you would do?” He paused, considering. “The last, of course. You would only have a moment, and you wouldn’t be able to deal with all of us in the split second you might hope was open to you.”

“Why do you think she is not a spy?” Benôit asked.

“She’s far too senior: if she’d wanted a spy in here, she’d have sent someone from down the ranks, wouldn’t you?” he looked at her.

He guessed she would have tossed her head if she could.

“Benôit! Laval! Watch her!” he said sharply, feeling his own reversal coming over him.

It was a horrible feeling. No wonder she’d sweated, unable to shudder through it.

He stood up, and strode across the room, glad to have the feel of his own body again.

Now he felt in more control. He turned back towards them, to the two men pointing their wands at her. He leant against the wall, drawing her eyes.

“So, Madam,” he said. “You’re not a spy, you’re the driving force behind this little group of friends. The question now, now that we know who you are, is whether you’re going to cash in your chips, or lead as you obviously wish to do.”

The others looked from the witch to Malfoy. “You want to trust her?”

“She already knew who all of you were. Did ‘Duncan’ ask you to organise this meeting?”

Laval nodded.

“Have you kept her informed of everything that has gone on? Recently?”

“What? You mean at my dinner party?”

“As you say.”

“Yes.”

“So she knew of my involvement too. And that I have killed a man. And I haven’t been thrown back in Azkaban.” Lucius watched her carefully as he spoke. “She came to check me out, I think. And no doubt to keep you all in line.” Lucius continued looking at her. “I can cast Avada before
you can blink,” he said, “and you know I can. And I will.” He released the spell on her.

She gasped in a huge breath, shaking herself. “May I stretch my legs?” she demanded.

“Of course,” Lucius motioned her to do so.

They all had their wands out.

She stood up, walked backwards and forwards a little, ignoring them, and stretched. Then she came and sat back down at the table, hands folded neatly in her lap. “Some coffee would be most welcome,” she said to Benôit, her tone implying that he had been most remiss not to offer it.

It was obvious Benôit hardly knew how to react. He nodded a little bow, then straightened, then clicked his fingers, and gave the order to his house-elf.

She sat there, just watching them, until it was served.

Lucius’ lips twitched in amusement.

She drank her cup and poured another. Lucius and the others also had some. It seemed bizarre. Finally, she sat back.

“I could have you arrested,” she said.

“But as we’ve already acknowledged, you haven’t,” Lucius said. “And I could have killed you, and I haven’t. Shall we move forward?”

“You’re cool, I’ll give you that.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgement of the compliment. He didn’t trust her an inch, though.

“So,” he prompted, “you obviously wanted to meet me.”

She looked at him, and crossed one leg over another. “I was certainly…surprised…to hear that you had been in contact with,” she glanced at Laval and Benôit, “my colleagues.”

“Really? Knowing that I was interested in Pureblood…matters, shall we say?”

“You’re playing with fire.”

Lucius laughed. “And you’re not? Tell me, Mrs Atkins, what exactly are your plans? Which Muggleborns do you think need to be – dealt with - before - now, what was it - ‘the Ministry falls’? And how, exactly, are you going to achieve that?”

“Do not think you’re in a position to threaten me! No-one will believe your word over mine.”

“True,” Lucius agreed, “but in coming here, yourself, you’ve demonstrated very clearly that you need me. So,” he spread his hands across the baize, “the cards, as they say, are on the table. Let’s put aside our differences, shall we, and see what we have to offer each other.”

There was a tense silence.

“Very well.” She sat forward, businesslike and assured. “I think you chose well to come to France, given your family background, but more importantly, your recent history. I think you have the potential to contribute to the Ministry here.”
“In what way?” Laval said, sharply. “You promised me that I’d be First Minister!”

“And you’ll need good men to work with you,” Atkins said. “Malfoy’s British links will stand your government in good stead as we forge our way to a more united future, reflecting the concerns and interests of the people we represent.”

“Purebloods, I take it?” Lucius said, wanting her to say it, for Shacklebolt on the other end of the line to hear her saying it.

“Who else?” she said. “This is what I envisage: if you make a good job of things here, you will improve your reputation; in a couple of years I foresee that we’ll need a new Minister in England. Things will have moved forward considerably by then: people will be ready for a …stronger leader.”

“I don’t see how things will move forward in the direction we require under Benningdean,” Lucius said. “He’s been in post several years, and it’s quite clear that he favours his own kind.”

“I don’t envisage Benningdean being in power for much longer,” she said coolly.

Lucius looked at her, wondering how much of this she had thought out and how much she was making up on the spot.

“I’d be interested to know how you would achieve that,” he raised an eyebrow. “And why you’d see whoever gets put into his place only lasting a couple of years. And where do you see yourself in all this?”

“An oath,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow.

“We swear an oath of secrecy,” she said. “I have no intention of laying myself open otherwise.”

“An oath of secrecy could prove awkward,” Lucius said.

“Yes? Why would you be reluctant to make one?” she demanded.

“Because what happens when we need the assistance of Brouchard or Gilbert or any of the others?”

“That is a good point,” Benôit nodded in agreement. “Oh!” He exclaimed. “An oath of loyalty would work, peut-être?”

Lucius thanked the heavens that he’d been wearing Weasley’s button. It seemed that his spying days were over, if he would be unable, from this point, to speak or behave in a disloyal manner. Would the oath strike him right now, if he took it? What were his options? They had enough information to get them started on Atkins. They already had the information on the rest of the group. How much more could he hope to achieve? He looked over at Atkins. If he could get her to elaborate on her plans, that would definitely be worth a lot. If she knew who was responsible for the death of Ginevra Weasley, and for setting up his son…and it was looking increasingly as if that might be the case…yes, that would be worth it.

After all, what did he have left? He was Potter’s minion.

His thoughts flashed briefly to Nanette.

Well, he felt confident that Potter would take care of her, if it came to it.
If he was not around, or able, to protect her.

“I’m okay with that,” Atkins said.

And so the oath was made.

Lucius could feel the tingling through their joined hands, all placed in the centre of the table. Atkins had cast the spell, binding their magic should they be disloyal to each other. It was a nasty curse, but he was interested to note that she had time-limited it. “We’ll trust each other within the two years,” she said.

Hmmm. More like it gave her an out to stab them in the back, he thought. He could see Laval thought much the same, but Laval wasn’t involved in England, and was happy to accept the terms.

Lucius was interested that this had been done without the involvement of either of the Brouchard men, or the other conspirators. That this meeting had been held at all. On the other hand, it was obvious that the group was in its infancy, and was very loosely organised. And Atkins had quite clearly wanted a meeting to feel him out.

“Very well,” he said. “Now we have the formalities over, let’s get down to business. If you’re talking about an interim appointment, and then me becoming Minister for Magic, I assume you’re looking higher. Are you thinking of re-opening the role of Supreme Mugwamp?”

He could tell by the widening of her eyes that she was.

“Oh. I’ve hit the nail on the head,” he said, for the benefit of Shacklebolt.

“That is a good idea,” Laval said. “I would have no objection to that. It would allow me to concentrate my efforts in France, knowing that I would have your backing. An international backing.”

“Precisely,” she nodded, “and I believe we could all benefit from a more cohesive approach. It will make it more difficult for …dissenters.”

“Vraiment, it is an inspired idea!” Benêt said.

“‘You’ve been planning this for some time,” Lucius prompted.

“Of course. But we are getting to a sticky patch. I’m glad you’ve stepped forward, Malfoy.”

He inclined his head.

“You do not think England is ready for me yet, and I agree. I like France,” he gave a hint of a smile at Laval, “but obviously, I have no intention of being a subordinate for any length of time. Who are you intending to replace Benningdean, and how will you oust him or her?”

“The obvious choice will be Peter Brown,” she said. “Over half of all Headteachers at Hogwarts have gone on to become Minister for Magic. For lack of any obvious alternative, people will look to him.”

“And you think he will fail?”

“He is young and inexperienced: malleable, I give you, but the Minister for Magic needs to be more than that: we’ll be ready for more than that. A strong and charismatic leader is needed. I would be interested to see if that could be you, Malfoy.”
When he was a younger man, how often had he thought of being Minister for Magic? And then, of course, he’d allied himself with Voldemort, and knew that when Voldemort came to power, whether the Dark Lord chose to be Minister or not, he would be the one in control. Being the man at his side would be enough. But that old dream could not fail to stir within him.

“France will be your proving ground. Your opportunity to show the world what you can be. To change British perception of you.”

Potter had offered him much the same: the chance to change the world’s perception of him. More than that, though: to change who he was. He was bound to Potter, and any dream of a different path was no longer open to him. After this, he might well be a squib. He has sworn on his magic, after all.

“The idea has merit,” he said, coolly. “I’m sure you have some plan to oust Benningdean?”

“I had planned to use Nott and Rowle,” she said, looking at him sharply. “Have you any idea where those bastards are hiding out?”

Lucius laughed. “You’re the Head of the MLE. If you don’t know, I’m not sure how you’d expect me to.”

“You have history.”

“Of course.” He looked at her. “You think my participation will bring the old crowd to your door? Is that what you’re planning?”

“I already have several members within my…organisation,” she said.

Lucius sat there, assessing that. “You want people you can control,” he said slowly. “Convicted Death Eaters are perfect, are they not? They already hold the ideals you espouse, but they are entirely under your thumb. One foot out of place and you can have any of them back in Azkaban in a blink.”

Instead of pretending otherwise, she just smiled at him. “You see, I do like an intelligent man. I’d be a fool not to use them, wouldn’t I? And if they do well…well, there’ll be roles for them in the new government.”

“You’ll forgive me for sounding rude, but if the establishment of your new government depended on Nott and Rowle, you’re not a very good judge of character.”

Her eyes narrowed. “Each person plays a part,” she said. “The government would not collapse from the loss of Benningdean alone.”

He looked at her, waiting. He knew of her, of course, but he wished he knew more. His time in Azkaban meant there were whole swathes of things he did not know.

It was all in the play, then.

“In France,” she said, “we are already doing well with infiltrating the Ministry: there are many people here who already believe in the superiority of Purebloods. A slower approach works.”

Laval and Benôit were nodding – hadn’t they said as much, after all?

“In Britain, however, I believe a more – drastic – approach is necessary.”
“Yes?”

“I’m not prepared to discuss it, Malfoy.”

“You don’t have confidence in the oath you yourself bound us by?” He raised an eyebrow.

“Perhaps I’m not yet at a point where I want to share information,” she said.

She’d been a lawyer, Lucius recalled.

“Well,” he stood up, “I’m not prepared to just be your little minion, a pawn in your grand game.” He turned to Benôit. “An interesting evening, thank you. If I could have my cloak?”

“Oh, of course, of course!”

An elf appeared, and the cloak was duly fetched.

Lucius swung it over his shoulders. “I bid you all adieu,” he gave a little bow, and swept out.

He had decided to walk, rather than floo. It had been a risky move, given that his home was at some distance to Benôit’s. He did not dare risk using the floo, or any magical means, however, and potentially expose his loss of magic, should the spell have reacted on his intent rather than actual words.

He had spotted an alley from where he could attempt an apparition, when he heard the sound of footsteps behind him. He spun quickly, wand at the ready.

It was a frightening thought that it might not be any protection at all.

A man was hurrying towards him.

His finger twitched on the wand. A wizard …and then he recognised the robes, and Atkins trying to walk in shoes that were obviously now too large.

“Mrs Atkins; couldn’t have enough of my company?”

“You recognise me?”

“You’re wearing a glamour, Mrs Atkins, but still the robes and shoes you had on as Duncan.”

“Well observed,” she commented, after a moment. “I’m glad I caught you,” she went on. “Do you live near here?”

“I’m sure you know exactly where I live.”

She laughed in acknowledgment. “You can’t possibly be planning to walk all the way there?”

“No, but if you’ve been studying me, you’ll know that I enjoy walking. I find it a good opportunity for thinking.” He paused. “Would you care to join me?”

She slipped into step beside him. The ill-fitting shoes sounded peculiar as they slapped against the pavement.
Nothing was said for several minutes. It was a pleasant evening, and Lucius breathed in deeply, thinking how bizarre the last few hours had been. How bizarre his life was.

“I didn’t want to say this in front of the others,” she said, “but I plan that you should be First Minister in France.”

He didn’t bother turning to look at her. He could hear from the tone of her voice that he was supposed to be flattered. “Instead of in Britain?”

“Before Britain. You can make your mark here, and then you’ll be in a far better position to take charge in England.”

“You’ve had experience as a temptress,” he turned a smile on her, which faltered as the face of the man she was glamoured to look like startled, and his eye lashes fluttered.

It was a number of years since he’d turned the charm on a woman. It had been rather pointless, all things considered. But if it would get under her skin…

“But what you really want,” he added, “is to have me in your power, is it not?”

He looked across at her, trying to ignore the male features, feeling her quick assessment wash over him, and the brief and swiftly hidden flash of desire. He had seen it often enough in the past to recognise it. How easy it was, with a simple play on words. He wondered if her husband didn’t measure up, or if she was just voracious. Perhaps she was a widow. Of course, it was easier for her to play up to the innuendo than respond to the more difficult issue of the power she wanted to have over his life.

“You want me in power so that you can control me. I’ll be your puppet. The Death Eaters are like your little army, aren’t they? You can pull all our strings, and if we don’t dance to your tune, no-one is going to listen to us, or stop you throwing our evil little arses back in Azkaban.”

“Yes,” she said. “And you’d do the same in my shoes.”

“If I was in your shoes, I’d spell them to fit,” he suggested gently.

She glanced down, and then he saw her make the smallest movement with her wand. Interesting to note that she’d had it clutched in her hand the whole while.

His mouth curved into a little smile. Pleasure in small things. But he needed to tread carefully. “They look to be well made,” he said. “And you choose a fine line in robes, too, if I may be so bold.”

She looked down at the man’s robe she was wearing. “Twilfit and Tatting,” she said. “A fine tailors.”

“Indeed. They cater mostly for men, however: I’m surprised you’d think to use them. Or perhaps the robe is your husband’s?”

“I’m a widow,” she said shortly. “Twilfit have the contract for Auror robes and Ministry ceremonial wear.”

“Ah, of course,” he nodded. They walked on a little further. “You said Nott and Rowle had disappeared. Do you have any ideas as to where they could be? What task did you set them?”

She looked at him.
He shrugged. “You trust me or not. You have to decide whether you need an ally as well as a puppet.”

He had to hand it to her: she took her time and thought about it.

“I sent them to Northern Ireland.”

“Well, I can understand wanting them as far away as possible,” he said, “though the Americas are a rather more appropriate distance.”

“They thought they could raise power at The Giant’s Causeway. I’ve not heard a thing from them since.”

Lucius’ brain was whirling. “I’m surprised you’d trust them with such an important task,” he said. “Not only raising power, but whatever you’d want it to be used for: they’d have to be involved in that too.”

She shrugged. “They had links to the area which should have helped. If you hear of where they might be, I’d like to know,” she said. “I know you must have contacts amongst your old… colleagues.”

Did she really think there was an ex-Death Eater network, meeting up to sip afternoon tea? Of course, he knew bits and pieces, but he’d disliked most of his ‘colleagues’ even when they’d shared the same purpose, and he’d liked them even less after spending years in Azkaban with them. Only one or two of them were… ‘friends’ wouldn’t be the right word. People who he’d be willing to share information with. Maybe.

“I’ll let you know if I hear anything,” he said, “but to be honest with you, I hadn’t even heard a murmur about their disappearance.”

She nodded. “They could have got themselves into a scrape.”

“You didn’t send anyone to find out?”

“An Auror team was already tracking them: they came back with nothing.”

“You had Aurors tracking allies you’d sent on a mission?”

“They were given a false lead. Somehow, they managed to discover some…more accurate information.”

“How difficult it must be for you when your work-force can actually do their job,” he murmured.

“There will be plenty of room in my workforce for Purebloods who’re good at their jobs,” she said sharply.

“And the others? How do you plan to change the current state of affairs?”

“That is not something I’m willing to share at this point,” she said firmly.

“Well, I’ll just have to…inspire your confidence in me, won’t I?” he said. This game of wordplay was easier when he wasn’t looking at her. It made him realise how differently men and women related. Although she was glamoured to look like a man, she wasn’t. Even when she was polyjuiced, he had known there was something…off. He wondered how the others hadn’t seen it; perhaps they thought all English people were a little peculiar.
They had crossed the entrance to an alleyway. She stopped. “It has been an instructive evening,” she said.

“Quite.”

“I’ll be in touch.” And she went into the alley, and was gone.

With some trepidation, Lucius cast a small cleaning spell at the hem of his robes. The sense of relief he felt as the dust disappeared swelled, rich and full, in his chest. His magic was intact.

He apparated home, and having thrown off his robes and changed, headed down to George Weasley’s.

Weasley was tinkering at his workbench. Lucius was slightly annoyed that, after such a productive evening, he hadn’t been waiting at the door for him, but as he entered, Weasley leapt up.

“You’re safe!”

His brows drew together. “Of course.”

“The damn button stopped working minutes in. EWA sent people to watch outside, and monitor the magic, but we didn’t want to blow your cover. I’m to take you to HQ at once,” he started heading towards the floo. “Did anything useful happen?”

Lucius’ first feeling was rage, that on the evening when he’d got the most astonishing information, when he’d picked and chosen his words all night so that Shacklebolt and his team would know exactly who was saying and doing what, when he’d led Atkins into revealing so much – that all of it was lost.

And then, the thought flashed into his mind: if they didn’t know about Atkins, they didn’t know what she’d offered him.

And it was within his grasp, wasn’t it?
“Stop it, Draco,” Harry said, for the thirtieth time, as Draco apologised yet again.

The massive intake of alcohol he’d consumed probably didn’t help.

“What about Wilkes, though?” Harry asked Kingsley. “Bugger! If I’ve sent Mitty away for no reason –”

“Who’s Mitty?” Draco asked.

“His house elf,” Snape said. “And elfling. And husband.”

“You’re kidding me!” Draco sniggered.

“Hey!” Harry said, “I delivered that baby myself! Well, Albus and,” he remembered Hetty was Lucius Malfoy’s elf, and though he’d told Draco about his father’s actions, he didn’t think he ought to rub it in that he owned all the Malfoy holdings; “I helped, anyway.”

“When did this happen?” Draco asked.

“Day I came home from court, a free man,” Harry grinned, seeing the funny side of it.

“And you walked straight into being a midwife? For house elves? Only you, Potter,” Draco laughed.

Quickly, though, his face dropped again. “I need another drink,” he said, getting to his feet and bashing his hip against the table.

The three other men looked at each other.

Draco’s guilt was painful, and it was obvious that his grief was also an agony.

“You guys want another?” Draco’s hand gestured at the table.

They all looked at their glasses, still three-quarters full.

“We’re fine,” Snape said.

Kingsley, who’d been penned in by Draco, got up. “Going for a leak,” he said, and disappeared in one direction whilst Draco headed in the other.

Harry found himself alone at the table with Snape. Sitting next to him. There wasn’t a lot of room in the booths and his knee had accidentally bumped into Snape’s several times. “I don’t know how Draco has had room to breath, with Kingsley next to him,” he said, shifting a little so his back was against the wall and he could look at Snape. Their knees bumped again.

“Would you have preferred it to have been you?”

“What?”

“Having Kingsley pressing against you?”

Harry’s mouth opened to answer, and then shut again. “Are you asking if I fancy Kingsley more
“The thought occurs to me that your…ambivalence…might be due to an attraction to one of us, rather than the other. I am aware of my looks, Harry.”

“Molly Weasley would say you’re fishing for compliments.”

“No.”

Harry looked up at Snape at the serious tone. “You’re both – well, you’re very different, of course. Kingsley’s all muscle-y in a way no-one has a right to be, and yet it looks fantastic on him. I’m sure I don’t need to tell you that,” he gave a little smile.

“No, I have a fine appreciation of Kingsley’s musculature. And what it can do,” Snape added, in a smoky tone that coiled in Harry’s gut.

“I like your arms,” he blurted, then buried his head on his own on the table.

“My arms.”

Harry peeked a look sideways. “I know it’s ridiculous, but when you’ve got your sleeves rolled up, and you’re cooking, and they’re covered in hair, and,” he shrugged. “I just like looking at them.”

“Well.”

“And if you must know, I’ve been ogling your hips. They’re so slim. And I’m shutting up,” he sat up, blushing.

“You’ve gone all red, Potter,” Draco said, dropping his glass onto the table. The drink sloshed up the sides.

“And you’ve gone all…tipsy,” Kingsley said, coming up behind Draco and putting his hands on his arms. “We’re heading off for coffee. Sling that down if you must, but you’re coming too.”

“I am?” Draco twisted round to look at him. “Where’re we going?”

“To the best coffee in London,” Kingsley said. “Come on, up everyone. Off we go.”

Draco looked at the drink, shrugged, and said, “S’pose coffee sounds good.”

They left the snug Muggle pub. Outside, the evening was cool, but pleasant. They didn’t have far to walk before they reached an alley between two shops. They walked down past the bins and stacked cardboard, out of sight of the road.

“Harry, if you’ll lend a bit of power, I’ll apparate us,” Kingsley asked.

They placed their hands in the middle, and Harry placed his top and bottom.

The rush of apparition hit, and then he blinked. Overhead, a chandelier twinkled brightly. He looked round. The room was all white, sharp and clean lines, modern, and yet with an ornate gilt-framed mirror and the chandelier, and old-fashioned gilt chairs with modern purple upholstery.

“Welcome!”

And there was Gloria.
She appeared to be wearing gold harem pants with a floating layer of diaphanous fabric covered in a multi-coloured paisley print.

She enveloped Kingsley in a quick hug; it was obvious that she’d just seen him. He must have come to check with her rather than going to the toilet, Harry thought.

Severus was next, and then, “Harry!”

Her perfume enveloped him as he sank into the warmth of her flesh. She patted him on the back, gave him a warm smile, and then moved on to stand in front of Draco.

Draco stood there, slightly listing, looking terrified.

“She looks at you,” Gloria said. “Such a handsome boy and three sheets to the wind. You come here, my chicken, and we’ll have you sorted out in no time.” And she took his face in both hands, kissed his cheeks, and then took him by the hand and led him off.

It was such a marvellous sight that Harry’s face blossomed into an enormous grin. He looked at Severus and Kingsley.

Severus was controlling his smile.

Kingsley said, “If anyone can sort him out, my mother can.”

In a much lighter mood, they followed.

It was the most amazing flat Harry had ever seen. They passed the living room, which again, was white and modern, without any of the Rococo touches of the entrance hall, and yet there were throws and splashes of colour and sumptuous cushions. The kitchen was steel and granite, with the remaining walls painted fluorescent green.

It worked.

They sat at the huge breakfast bar and Gloria poured them tea.

“Good strong English Breakfast,” she said. “Nothing like it for a hangover. Better than coffee. And Draco, dear, would you like this?”

She looked in a cupboard and whipped out a vial, popping it on the counter. “Severus’ best Hangover Potion.” She leant in. “I’d just take half, if I were you. You’ll still feel a little…..loose… without the nasty bits.”

“Only you, Gloria,” Snape said, shaking his head in mock horror.

“Hey? Think I’d tell the kid to do something I hadn’t done myself?” she stuck her hands on her hips and stared at Severus.

Draco picked up the bottle and swigged a rough half, licking his lips.

Harry was still smirking from Gloria calling him ‘the kid’, but she was right: sometimes you wanted to hold onto some of that…relaxation…that came with alcohol.

As they sipped the tea, from huge bone china cups and saucers, with sunflowers painting the sides, Gloria fetched a pan and bowl and started cracking eggs.

“We’re not hungry, Mother,” Kingsley said.
She slapped her hands down on the worktop.

“So you can answer for everyone, can you, son?” she demanded.

In the silence, Kingsley held up his hands.

“Scrambled eggs sounds great, thank you, Mrs Shacklebolt,” Draco said.

“Bless you, boy, it’s Gloria,” she said. “You see?” she turned to Kingsley, giving him a face.

“I remember having scrambled eggs as a child,” he said, his tone mild, a minute or two later.

“You always did like them. With aurors,” she added. “Always did like a man around,” she chuckled, bat ting him on the arm.

Kingsley rolled his eyes, but Draco sniggered. “Scorp always liked aurors too,” he said.

“Everyone likes aurors, usually with boiled egg, though,” Severus sighed.

“God,” Harry said, “I wondered what you were going on about! Muggles call them soldiers, you know.”

“Same thing, then,” Gloria said. “Didn’t your family call them that, Harry?”

“Well,” Harry said, “the Muggles I grew up with called them soldiers. Gin’s family always called them fingers, so that’s what we said to our kids.”

“So do you boys want aurors or a piece of toast underneath?” Gloria asked, as she went to her cool cupboard and took something out.

“You can’t eat scrambled eggs with smoked salmon with aurors,” Draco grinned, watching her slice thin strips of the aromatic fish.

“Sweetheart, you can do anything you like with food in this house,” Gloria contradicted. “As long as it doesn’t end up all over the walls, of course. I’ve only just had them painted.”

“It’s amazing,” Harry said, looking around again.

“You like it?” she beamed. “Kingsley hates the lime.”

“Yeah, I like it,” Harry agreed, grinning. “Suits you.”

“You see?” Gloria turned to Kingsley.

“I’m sorry,” Draco said, “but no-one can regard Harry as an arbiter of style.”

“Hey!”

“Just saying.”

Everyone was laughing.

“It’s true, I know,” Harry shrugged.

“I could – “Gloria began, but was drowned out by a chorus of “No!”s.

Soon they were all tucking in.
Harry hadn’t felt hungry, but the food was light and delicious.

“And now we’re going to watch ER,” Gloria said, as her elf appeared to clear away. “More tea, Berrie, please.”

“What’s ER?” Draco asked, as they followed her into the sitting room.

Within minutes of Gloria putting on the first ever episode, he was sitting forward in his seat, hands over his eyes, peeking through his fingers. “Is this real?” he kept asking.

“It’s a story. You must have seen a film before?” Harry asked.

“No,” Draco shook his head.


Gloria shook his head.

“But you own a newspaper!”

“What’s that got to do with this?” Draco asked, cringing, and fascinated, as a doctor cracked open a chest. “Do they do that?” he squealed.

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“So this is real?”

“It’s a pretend story but about a hospital full of people with the real sort of things that happen to them,” Gloria said. “You just sit back and enjoy, Love.”

“But why don’t the pretend people die?” Draco asked. “I mean, they don’t have mediwizards or anything, do they?”

“You come sit next to me,” Gloria patted the sofa next to her, “and I’ll explain as we go along, rather than everyone shouting across the room.”

Draco, eyes glued to the screen, walked sideways across the room, and plonked down next to Gloria.

Harry had never seen ER either, though he’d seen a lot of films since they’d had their own converted television.

After the first episode finished, Draco said, “Is that it? How can it just end there?”

Gloria laughed. “There’s hundreds of hours of that in here,” she said, patting a box beside her. “Fifteen series, and each series has lots of episodes just like this one.”

“I’ll have to get a – one of those,” he pointed at the television.

“And a DVD player,” Gloria said. “Want to see another episode?”

“Can we?”

“Well, I’m certainly going to,” she said, shifting herself to get comfortable. “Berrie!” she called, and the elf appeared. “Bring us some rugs, would you, please?”
The elf popped out and returned hidden by a stack of snugly blankets.

“This is what you need for this,” she said, chucking one of them at Draco, and pulling another over her own lap. “What about you boys?”

Kingsley and Snape stood up. “We’re heading home, Mother. Do you need anything?”

“What could I need?” she smiled. “I’ve got this to watch, and company to watch it with, and Berrie to look after us. Harry, you staying or going?”

Harry looked from one group to the other. “I’ll stay for another episode, if I may?”

He knew that Snape’s shoulders didn’t droop, but he could sense, he thought, the slightest tensing of his body.

Kingsley leant over and kissed his mother on the cheek. She patted his in return. “You sleep well, you boys,” she said, to Snape and Kingsley, pulling Snape down for a kiss too, and then they were gone,

Harry couldn’t believe he was sitting snuggled under a blanket, watching an old American series, but so he was. Watching Draco and Gloria was even more entertaining. Draco seemed so involved in the programme that his normal reserve was entirely absent, but then there was something about Gloria that made people entirely at ease with her, if she should choose to encourage it.

She’d obviously decided to take Draco under her wing. He watched and chatted through the second episode, and started off the third the same way. And then he slowly began to droop. He started resting back against the sofa, rather than sitting forward the whole time. Asking fewer and fewer questions. And then he slowly slid into Gloria’s shoulder.

She put a finger to her lips, looking at Harry, and just let him settle there. After fifteen minutes, she beckoned Harry over. By sign language, she showed what she wanted, and Harry levitated Draco so that she could get out, and then Gloria tucked him up on the sofa, leaving the television still playing. She walked Harry out of the room.

“Do you want me to see him home?” Harry whispered.

“Bless you, no,” she patted his arm. “Let the poor lamb sleep.”

Harry couldn’t hold back the grin. He’d wished he’d had a camera to snap Draco asleep on her shoulder, but the thought of him as a ‘poor lamb’, cracked him up completely.

“You’ve no sympathy for him?” Gloria asked.

It took Harry aback.

“Yes,” he said at last. “But –“ he shrugged.

It was weird. Seeing Draco’s childlike enjoyment, he wondered if Ginny had seen this side of him. It would have made him, he thought, a better step-father than he might have supposed. Although he couldn’t fault Draco as a father. But it was astonishing how Gloria made grown men let down their guards.

Gloria seemed to understand his hesitation.

She crossed her arms over her midriff, causing her bosom to rise to even higher prominence, and
asked, “And what are you going to do now, Harry?”

“Er, go home?”

“And where’s home? You’re not leading those poor boys on, are you?”

Harry physically jerked.

“Who - ?”

“What do you mean, who?” she bristled. “My Kingsley and Severus, of course.”

He realized his mouth was hanging open when she leant forward and popped a finger under his chin to snap his jaw shut.

“Has Kingsley talked about this to you?” He could hardly believe it.

“He doesn’t need to,” she said. “I was worried a little when I thought it was just my boy, because I love Severus, and if Kingsley hurt him I’d lay him across my knee like I did when he was a little terror, but I’ve got eyes in my head, haven’t I? And they’re both hungry for you, aren’t they? They must have told you,” she demanded.

Harry nodded.

“So what’s the problem?” she asked. “And don’t say you’re not interested, because staying at their home with you all there – well, I needed to fan myself with all that sexual tension in the air.”

“Gloria!” Harry choked a laugh.

“No point denying what’s in your face,” she said. “So, you scared?”

“You don’t mince words, do you?” Harry spluttered.

“Life’s too short,” she said. She looked at him. “And don’t take that the wrong way, because I’m saying it because I’ve been there too. Good men I’ve loved have died.”

Harry looked at her. She seemed so ebullient, but there was so much below the surface.

“Don’t imagine I mourned them any less, or loved them any less, because I found happiness with someone else. Each of them is still in here,” she laid her hand across her heart.

“I – I still feel – so angry with Ginny,” Harry said the words so quietly that Gloria had to lean forward to catch them.

“Dying doesn’t make you a saint,” she said. “She was human. She hurt you.”

“But I – I wasn’t enough for her.”

She was quiet a moment.

It was strange, standing there in the corridor, having this conversation.

“You think you won’t be enough for them?”

Harry shrugged. “How can I be?” His voice cracked a little.

“They’re not perfect, you know,” she said sharply. “I love them both to bits, of course, but they
“I don’t know if I can do the sex stuff,” Harry blurted, then felt the colour flushing up his face.

“They’re too old for you?”

“What? No!”

“Do you fancy them? Like the look of them? Because it sure as hell seemed that way to me back in Spain.”

“Yes, of course I do, but – ”

“Harry, love, we’re all a bit scared of sex sometimes. Do you think I find it easy at my age to show my stuff to a new man? I could live another seventy years or more: I don’t plan on giving up sex for the lack of a bit of courage.”

“But – I mean, I like them, Gloria! I don’t want to disappoint them.”

“They ain’t going to expect you to be some sort of Lothario in the sack, now are they? They know where you’re coming from.”

“But – I mean, no offence, but men are different, aren’t they? I – I don’t think I’ll be any good at giving…giving myself up. I can’t believe I’m saying this to you. I’m sorry, I should go.”

“No need to get spooked with me, silly. And I don’t mean to be crude, but from what I hear, you gave up your needs entirely to that wife of yours. Now, instead of thinking about ‘giving yourself up’, what about thinking of what you can give?”

“Huh?”

“When I’m in bed with a man, especially the first time or two, and you are not telling this to my son, what I’m thinking about is what I can give to him, what I can do to please him. And I’m not giving up anything to do that, you see? It puts you in control.”

Harry had never thought of things that way.

“And the way I see it,” she added, “one of them big tough guys at least has to like bottoming, which means if you’re scared they’re both hoping to do you, and not the other way round, I think there’s got to be some room for manoeuvre there.”

“Gloria! Oh my god! How can you say such things!” Harry was bent forward, cringing, his arms up to his face.

“Well, I don’t want to think about what my son does in bed, but let’s be practical here: I’m not an idiot.” She looked at Harry and leant forward and hugged him. “Ah, chicken, it’s your life. But a little bit of happiness goes a long way.”

“It’s more,” he said, from the depths of her bosom, “that they’re so – well, it’s not just the sex.”

“Of course it isn’t,” she said, letting go of him. “And if you think you’re rubbish at relationships just because of your wife, you’re wrong. I’ve seen you with your friends, and with your children. You’re lovely.”

“But – well, they’re not the same sort of relationship – ”
“No, they’re not. But it shows you know how to deal with people, and you do. I’ve been divorced twice, Harry, as well as being widowed far too often. I chose wrong, it went wrong, I made mistakes. Doesn’t mean I haven’t had the most wonderful love with my other men, hmm?”


She laughed. “An interfering old woman, I know.”

“I was going to say – amazing.”

“Oh, you! Can’t stand seeing people miserable when they don’t need to be. Now,” she said in a business-like tone, “what are you going to do now?”

He looked at his watch. It was nearly three in the morning. “Go home to bed?”

“You being a coward already?”

“But – I mean, I can’t go there now!”

“Why not? They’re sleeping, you want to sleep. Simple.”

He laughed. “You make it sound as if it is.”

“It is. Go and see.”

She led him to the floo, and kissed his cheek. “I only want you for another son-in-law so you can do my house renovations, you know,” she teased.

Harry laughed. He took a pinch of floo powder. Looked at her.

She nodded.

He threw in the powder, and stepped into the flames.

Back in Gloria’s kitchen, Draco stood in the doorway, wrapped in the blanket, his hair tousled.

“He’s in love with them,” he said.

“They’re all as antsy as billiwigs in a jar,” she shook her head. “My stars, they could be good for each other,” she mused. She turned, and gave Draco her full attention.

He straightened a little, but just let her look at him.

“I’m tired,” she said. “Are you coming to bed?”

Draco looked back, and nodded.

It was quiet in Villa Olorosa. Dion appeared, rubbing his eyes sleepily.
“I’m just going to bed,” Harry said, and the elf nodded, and disappeared.

Harry’s heart was already racing, before the thought of those words added to his tension. He walked up the stairs, and past their shut door to the loo, wishing he’d done that at Gloria’s first; he did a cleaning spell on his teeth, looked at himself in the mirror, and then braced himself. He went to open the door, then shucked out of his trousers, and with a spell, turned his shirt into a tee-shirt.

He walked along the corridor. The few steps felt like a mile. Were they already awake, wondering who was in the house?

They’d know it was him, of course, because of their wards.

Were they – but his hand took hold of the door knob. Time to stop dithering.

He took a deep breath, and turned the handle.

Inside it was dark.

He stood, allowing his eyes to adjust.

The moon came out from behind a cloud, and grey light flooded the room for a moment. He caught the flash of their eyes, watching him.

His heart thudded.

Then Snape lifted the duvet.

Inviting him in.

He stumbled over to the bed.

“Get in,” Kingsley said, voice sleepy. “I’ve got work tomorrow.”

Harry wondered where to go. Snape was on the edge, holding the cover still.

“Climb over,” he said. “Kingsley and I both like an edge and it’s not a time for a logistics discussion.”

“I could – ” he took a step back.

“In,” Snape said.

And Harry put a knee on the edge and climbed over awkwardly.

“Urgh,” Snape groaned, as Harry’s knee caught his hip.

“Sorry!” Harry was mortified as he fell into the middle.

Kingsley’s arm came out and hauled him back against his chest.

“Welcome,” he said, into Harry’s ear.

Harry lay there, barely daring to breath, his body stiff.

“Relax,” Kingsley said again. “We’re just going to sleep, alright? Let Severus know he’s with us.”

Harry tried to relax, tentatively reaching out a hand. It found Snape’s hip. Snape was turned away,
but his hand came across and took Harry’s in his.

“Very welcome,” he said. “Sleep, Harry. You’re safe with us.”

He lay there, conscious of everything.

The steady rise and fall of Kingsley’s chest against his back. The awareness of Kingsley’s nakedness, the feeling of what must be his genitals, soft and unthreatening, just there, one layer of clothing separating them. The strength of his arm under Harry’s neck.

Snape’s hip, bony and smooth under his hand. The desire itching his fingers to map its shape. The scent of Snape’s shampoo, and the musky clean male scent in the bed. Snape’s long fingers around his.

The familiar sounds of the night through the open window.

The patterns the moon made against his eyelids when the clouds passed.

He slept.
The Next Morning

“He looks good there,” Snape whispered, looking across the bed at Harry, fast asleep and still snuggled up against Kingsley.

“My arm’s gone dead, but I didn’t want to disturb him,” Kingsley answered back. “He came.” His voice expressed his wonder.

“Do you think your mother had anything to do with it?”

“If she has, I’ll kill her,” Kingsley said. His other arm was now draped across Harry’s stomach, protectively, and his grip tightened reflexively.

“Don’t,” Harry murmured, eyes opening. He blinked, and felt his glasses handed to him.

“You fell asleep in them,” Snape said. “They seem alright.”

“Oh, thanks. I was a bit nervous,” Harry said. He shifted a little.

Kingsley let out a little sound, and shifted too.

“Sorry,” Harry began, freezing.

Snape’s eyes were alive with humour. “It’s morning, he has a beautiful man in his arms, and doesn’t want to spook you,” he said, from his position a foot away from Harry on the pillow. “Have a little compassion.”

“And I haven’t time to give you the demonstration we promised,” Kingsley said. “You’ll come back tonight?”

Harry swivelled his head, looked from one to the other, and then nodded slowly.

“God. I’m going to have to wank in the shower,” Kingsley groaned, pulling away and sitting up. He flexed his arm.

Harry scooted back on the pillows and watched. Kingsley’s body was fascinating. Then he clicked. “Your arm went to sleep! I’m so sorry! You should have – “

“Given up holding you? I was enjoying it too much.” He turned towards the two men. “I’m sorry I’ve got to go – “

Their elf appeared. “Dion is sorry to be disturbing the masters, but Señor George Weasley is floo-calling for you, Master Kingsley.”

“Tell him I’ll be down in a moment, thank you, Dion.”

The elf disappeared, and Kingsley stood up.

Harry stared.

And swallowed.

Kingsley was entirely naked. Every muscle rippled and bulged.
And his erection, thick and powerful, bobbed as he walked across the room.

“Oh my god,” Harry said.

“He is an impressive sight, isn’t he?” Snape agreed, smiling.

Kingsley turned and grinned at them both, a casual hand ghosting over the turgid flesh. “It’s not bad, is it?” he said, glancing down.

“How does that fit?” Harry asked, then covered his face as he went bright red.

“It fits,” Snape’s voice was full of warmth and desire.

“Why’s George after you?” Harry changed the subject, as Kingsley dragged clothes from the wardrobe. His backside was astonishing too. Round and …Harry couldn’t look away.

“That’s why I was getting up anyway. Malfoy – Lucius – had a meeting last night.”

“And you weren’t monitoring him?” Harry’s brows drew together.

“George was listening in, and so were my team,” Kingsley said.

“But –” Harry frowned.

“Lucius isn’t Kingsley’s only spy, or only work,” Snape said. “You know the hours he puts in.”

“Yes, but –”

“I have to trust my team, Harry. They’re good at what they do.”

Harry nodded. “I should have been listening –”

“No, you shouldn’t,” Kingsley said. “But if you’re not committed elsewhere, you can come and hear George’s report.”

Harry scrambled out of the bed. “Yes, please.”

Snape slipped elegantly out of the sheets. “And I have potions to make, if I’m not going to be spending the morning seducing Harry.”

Harry realised that he was standing between two naked and aroused men.

His own morning wood jerked against his pants. He looked from Kingsley’s bulky, dusky form to Snape’s slender, golden one.

And swallowed again.

“I don’t want to be seduced,” he said, thinking of his conversation with Gloria, and wondered how he could possibly mean it.

“Oh?” Kingsley said, stepping close. “And I was just about to tell Severus no action until we’re all together.”


“Us making love?” Snape’s voice was deep. He leant back against a chest of drawers, making sure not to crowd Harry. He glanced at Kingsley. “That will be our pleasure, then,” he said, as Harry...
nodded.

Unlike Snape, Kingsley stood close. “I know you want to watch and that’s all, but how do you feel about a kiss?”

“A kiss?”

“A single kiss, now. Just a taste of each other. Of what things could be. I’d like to kiss you,” Kingsley said.

Harry licked his lips. His cock jerked again as he saw Kingsley’s eyes following the movement. “What about Sn – Severus?”

“Would you like to kiss him too?” Kingsley asked.

Harry took a quick breath, and nodded.

“Go on, then,” Kingsley said. He put a hand on Harry’s arse and turned him towards Snape.

Harry walked over as if in a dream.

Snape straightened up, waiting.

“May I?” Harry croaked.

“You’re in charge.”

Something relaxed in Harry. He stepped forward.

Snape was a lot taller, but he didn’t bend.

Harry looped a hand up round his neck, and tilted his head down. They had kissed before, but this time, he took control, feathering his lips over Snape’s. Then he leapt back, and performed a quick spell.

“Sorry,” he said, blushing. “Mouth-freshening charm. I should have done that before. Was it disgusting?”

“Do me too,” Snape said, and Harry made the slightest motion.

Kingsley reached for his wand and did the same.

“Didn’t want you to hate the first time I did this to you,” Harry said, and leant in again, looking up at Snape’s face, the nose looming. He shut his eyes, and angled his head, brushing lips.

Snape let him, waited for Harry’s tongue to tease his lips open.

There was an inch or two of space between them.

Snape inhaled as his mouth finally opened, and Harry’s tongue started to explore. Harry’s hands fluttered, not quite sure where to land, and then he felt Kingsley behind him, just putting them lightly on Severus’ hips.

He could feel Snape’s erection brushing his stomach, his own trying to prod Snape’s thigh.

He pulled away, feeling light-headed.
“Alright?” Snape asked.

“Lovely,” Harry said, and then buried his head against Snape’s chest for a moment.

Behind him, Kingsley ran a soothing hand down his back, and it was Snape who had a gentle hold of his hips, light and lacking pressure.

Harry turned in the circle of their arms, leaning back a little on Snape, despite the erection nudging him.

Kingsley and Snape were looking at each other over his shoulder. Kingsley leant forward and kissed Snape.

Harry didn’t think he’d ever seen or felt anything so erotic, feeling himself between the two naked bodies who were – cherishing him – was the odd word that came to mind, and yet so much enthralled in each other. His hand slipped up Kingsley’s chest, smoothing across his nipple.

Kingsley groaned, rocked his hips forward.

Harry moaned.

Kingsley pulled away from Snape and smiled down at him. “You liked that?”

Harry nodded. “Sorry.”

“Harry, don’t be sorry for that. I hope to hear a lot more wonderful noises out of you, if you want to share them with us. Do I get my kiss now?” his lips quirked.

“Sure you wouldn’t rather be kissing Severus?”

“I’ll never have enough of kissing Severus,” Kingsley said, and that too comforted Harry. “But I think it’s time we had a real, proper kiss too, don’t you? Not just a couple of seconds of windswept pleasure.”

Harry was taken straight back to Ireland, but the next moment, Kingsley’s mouth was on his, and his tongue was exploring Harry’s, and a moment later, his hand was cupping Harry’s chin, and before he knew it, Kingsley had turned his head and Snape’s tongue was there too and it was just –

“Bloody hell,” he breathed, as they both pulled back.

“Mmm,” Kingsley agreed, licking his own lips.

Harry turned to look up at Severus.

“Alright?” he repeated Snape’s question from a moment ago.

“Yes,” Snape said, “most definitely alright.”

“But now we must get a move on,” Kingsley said reluctantly. “There must be something to report that George has called us. Some spellwork instead of a shower, perhaps.” And he stepped away, performing a detumescence spell and a cleaning spell, and started hauling his clothes on. “I’ll go speak to him, and we’ll go through after a bit of breakfast.”

Harry nodded, then fidgeted, then said, “Is it okay if I come through with you? I mean, he’ll wonder…”
“You want to keep this secret?” Snape asked, tone flat.

Did he? “You don’t mind? I mean, we don’t know if…”

“People know you’re our friend; why shouldn’t you sleep here?” Kingsley asked. “And if you become our lover – well, it’s no-one’s business except our own. But it isn’t something I’ll want to hide. And I won’t want you to pretend that we aren’t in your life. But I understand you have family, and you decide the pace.”

“Thank you,” Harry nodded. “If – if – we do – you know – become lovers, like, properly,” he stuttered, “well, I can’t understand why you’d want me. But if it happens – well, I’d always feel very strong with you two at my side. That’s not something that I’d need to hide. Does that sound stupid?”

“No, I always feel stronger with Severus beside me,” Kingsley smiled at him. “Right, see you downstairs in a moment.” And he was off.

Severus seemed to make a point of not crowding him, though his comfort with his own body made it impossible for Harry not to stare. He too was collecting fresh clothes.

“Would you like to borrow anything?” Severus asked. “I can lend you a clean robe, and a shirt and trousers if you’d like?”

“Thanks, but I’ll just spell my own clean,” Harry said. He was thinking what an idiot he’d been not to leave any.

“Do you want to shower?”

“I do, but I’d rather get downstairs. I’ll just go for a pee.”

Severus nodded, and sat himself down on the chair by the window, picking up a book that was on the windowsill. “I’ll go in when you’re done then.” And he crossed one long, lean naked thigh over the other, and started reading.

And that was that.

Harry entered the kitchen to see the floo blocked by the sight of tight denim straining over Kingsley’s behind, as he leant down to talk, one hand on the mantel for balance.

“…and have you any idea where Harry is?” George was asking. “I tried Grimmauld Place and it’s totally blocked. I’d better try the flat above his shop – “

“Don’t panic, he’s here,” Kingsley said easily. “He spent half the night with my mother and Draco watching Muggle TV, then crashed with us. Yeah, don’t ask,” he chuckled, “we started off watching too. My mother’s got the stamina of someone a quarter her age.”

“Yup,” Harry said, girding his loins and heading over. “I left Draco snoring on the sofa and Gloria looking as fresh as a daisy. Morning George,” he leant down. “How’s things?”

“Well, we’ve had a problem, as Kingsley will explain. Malfoy’s not been debriefed yet, but we agreed – he, I and Kingsley’s team – to do it this morning. Lucius got in touch half an hour ago and asked if you could be there, Harry.”
“Fine,” Harry said. He needed to be more aware of what Lucius was up to, anyway. He looked at George’s face, flickering in the flames. “Something odd going on?”

“Yeah. No. Well, I don’t know. He was mad that the button didn’t work, and then seemed to clam up last night. I don’t know if it was because he felt we’d left him in the lurch after promising protection…”

“Understandable,” Harry said.

“Well, Kingsley’s team sent a couple of agents to keep their eye on the place, but without blowing his cover, I agree, they were pretty hog-tied. I – I just got a weird feeling…..” He rubbed his hand over his face.

Harry looked at Kingsley. “Could we ask Severus to come too?”

“You thinking of using Veritaserum on him?” George asked.

“Well, I wasn’t thinking of that. It’s just that Snape knows him better than any of us, and he’s pretty good at reading what isn’t being said.”

“Good idea: we’ll ask him,” Kingsley said. “George, we’ll meet you at HQ in twenty minutes. Will you let Malfoy know?”

“Sure.” George rubbed his eyes.

“Thank you, George,” Harry said.

George looked up, and gave one of his rare smiles. “No problem. I feel we’re getting somewhere, bit by bit. Just a tad tired, as I’ve been up trying to work out what went wrong with the button. I think it’s sorted. I hope so,” he sighed. “See you in a mo’, then.”

They ate breakfast; Severus agreed to leave the potions and come. Kingsley read through the messages that had been sent by his team, keeping him abreast of what had happened the night before.

“I’m surprised your office didn’t say there was a problem,” Harry said, with as much tact as he could muster.

“Donal’s my second in command,” Kingsley said, shuffling the notes as he chewed on a thick piece of toast. “It’s always tricky to know when to disturb the boss, or not. He’s good at his job. He made the right calls: he put in a surveillance team outside who monitored for any activity.”

“But Lucius could have been killed inside and we wouldn’t have known anything about it,” Harry said.

“He could have been killed even if the button was working,” Kingsley argued. “It wouldn’t have prevented it.”

“I suppose not,” Harry agreed reluctantly. He took a mouthful of coffee, and shrugged. “I feel I’ve let him down.”

“My gut says I’d like to have known about this,” Kingsley said, “but the bottom line is, would I, or could I, have done anything different to what Donal did? And the answer is no. He did exactly
what he should to protect Malfoy as much as possible, and that includes not blowing his cover.”

“I suppose,” Harry said.

“Spying is never without risk,” Snape said quietly.

“I suppose he has a lot more back-up than you ever had,” Harry nodded.

“That wasn’t what I meant, but you’re right. I suspect Lucius enjoys the element of risk,” Snape mused.

“God. I’d hate it,” Harry said.

“Your face is an open book, you wouldn’t be any good at it at all,” Snape smirked.

“Don’t be so quick to judge,” Kingsley suggested.

They both looked at him.

“You kept your knowledge about your wife’s affairs secret from your family and everyone else. That takes a lot of skill and nerve and control of emotion.” He stood up. “Let’s go, if you’re done?”

They got to their feet and headed to the floo.

Kingsley turned back as he took his pinch of floo powder. “Not to mention you’ve hidden your rampant homosexuality for half your life,” he grinned, and leapt into the floo as Harry was spluttering behind him.

Five minutes later, they were seated in a conference room at EWA Headquarters, when Malfoy and George walked in.

Kingsley stood up, and shook hands with them both, much to Harry’s surprise.

“Mr Potter,” Lucius gave him a small bow. “Thank you for coming.”

“No problem,” Harry said, sitting down again awkwardly. He smiled a greeting at George.

“Severus,” Lucius said. “I’m surprised – but actually rather relieved – to see you.”

“Oh?” Kingsley prompted.

“I was forced to take an oath of loyalty last night.”

“What? What on earth possessed you to do that?” George asked.

Lucius quirked his head. “The likelihood of being found out and tortured for information, or killed, if I did not?”

“Fair point,” George conceded, sitting back. “Sorry. Damn, I’m so sorry this stopped working,” he put the button down on the table.

“It could be that the fact that it wasn’t working that saved my magic,” Lucius said. “I was unsure of whether my - disloyalty of intent - would be enough to trigger the consequences of the oath.”
“Which would be what?” Harry asked, brows furrowed.

“The loss of my magic.”

“Oh. Shit.”

“Quite,” Lucius said. “As it is now, I’ve been wondering how I can report on what occurred. My magic is intact at present. I wonder if Severus reads me through Legilimency, whether that might over-ride matters.”

“Interesting point,” Kingsley nodded. “What do you think, Severus?”

“I think it’s a risk we’ll have to take. Perhaps it would be best if you show me the oath-taking part first.”

“But – but he might lose his magic!” Harry exclaimed. “Hold on! We can’t just go barging into his brain if it might trigger – I mean, we need an expert on oaths, surely? Who would that be?” He looked around the table.

“Commendable as your concern for my welfare is,” Lucius looked at him, “I have spent most of the night reading up on oaths. I have a feeling that my vow to you will have over-ridden the second oath. I keep thinking back, and although there was the wash of magic, I’m not aware of the feeling of it taking hold, as I was when I have taken other oaths.”

“You’ve taken other oaths?” Harry asked. “As well as to me?”

“A marriage oath, and, of course -” he rubbed his forearm.

“The taking of the Dark Mark included an oath?” Harry asked. “Of what?”

“Of obedience to the Dark Lord.”

“But…” Harry turned to look to Snape. “How…?”

“The Dark Lord did not consider taking magic. That would have long-term consequences. Instead, lack of obedience resulted in the infliction of pain.” Severus’ tone was completely devoid of any emotion.

“Hold on,” Harry said. “So…but…I mean, Voldemort ….I mean, I witnessed him casting Cruciatu many times…”

“The oath itself inflicted pain,” Lucius said. He was looking at Snape. “I disobeyed a minor order once, and it was as if a fractionally milder form of Cruciatu had been cast, but without anyone actually doing it. As soon as I did what was expected, it stopped.”

“That’s a very powerful spell,” Kingsley said.

“Oaths usually are,” Lucius said, glancing at him before returning his gaze to Snape. “That was why I never guessed you were a spy. That anyone could be. How did you do it?”

They were all looking at Snape. Even Kingsley, who obviously knew the answer, was looking at him with love and sympathy in his eyes.

“I learnt Occlumency. It can be used to block the pain.”

“You – you felt the pain? For – for how long? Years?” Lucius had gone even paler than usual.
“As I said, *Occlumency*—"

“Bollocks!” Lucius snapped.

It was so unexpected that even Snape quirked a lip.

“I was taught to use *Occlumency* when I had the injury to my hip,” Lucius said, “as other pain relief had little effect. I am not without skill at the art, but it did not remove the pain, only allowed me to…function.”

“Yes.” Snape sat quietly, and said nothing else.

“You – you were in pain all those years?” Harry asked. “Who taught you *Occlumency*?” he added sharply.

“I think you know the answer to that,” Snape said, glancing at Harry. “Do not think ill of him for that: there was nothing else.”

“But he expected you to go spying knowing the agony you would suffer?” Harry could feel his magic storming through him in outrage.

“Calm yourself,” Snape said sharply. “I had taken the oath, and it was irrevocable. The only way to avoid the pain entirely was to do as the Dark Lord asked. I assure you, at that point, there was no way that I was going back into his loyal service. I was glad to have Albus’ support.”

“Fucking hell, Snape,” George said.

“We do not need to talk of it. Thankfully, it is over.”

“No wonder you look better,” Harry said.

Snape’s eyes lit a little at that. “What you mean is, no wonder I was a mean-spirited, grumpy bastard then.”

“Well, that too,” Harry smiled, allowing Snape to lead him away from the horrifying thoughts washing through him. “What happened to your hip?” Harry asked Lucius. “Is that why you have a cane?”

“It is, but I do not wish to discuss it. We have more important matters to attend to.”

“Well, I think we ought to get an expert in,” Harry said again.

“Whilst I acknowledge you as my owner, and understand that you might wish me to keep my magic intact for your own reasons, the taking of the oath will reveal information of such import that I would prefer it be kept in this room,” Lucius said. “I trust Severus’ skill, and I have a feeling that the oath did not take effect. From my reading, that would be because my vow to you would override it.”

“That idea certainly has merit,” Snape said thoughtfully. He looked to Harry. “It’s your decision.”

“There must be an expert we can trust,” Harry said doggedly. He didn’t like Malfoy, but he certainly felt responsible for him. “He doesn’t need to do the *Legilimency* part. We just need to ask someone for their advice. In general. Don’t the Ministry have someone who specialises in oaths?”

“No!” Lucius burst out, and then wondered if that, in itself, was enough to trigger it, but he felt nothing change, and pulled out his wand.
Snape already had his pointing at him.

Lucius looked to Harry for permission.

Harry nodded.

“Levicorpus,” he said, and watched as his water glass floated in the air. He set it down again.

“Well, that was instructive,” George said. “No Ministry involvement, then. This is getting interesting. How about Bill? Curses and oaths have a lot in common. And if not Bill,” he looked at Harry, smiling –

“- then Hermione,” Harry finished for him. “Yes. Where’s Bill?”

“At a camp in Egypt.”

“Have you been there?”

George nodded.

Harry stood up. “You guide, then.” And he came and linked arms with George, and they were gone.

“This could take a while, I presume,” Lucius said, into the silence.

Snape stood up, and walked to the windows. He would not normally turn his back on Malfoy, but Kingsley was there to cover him. Outside, it was raining. People scurried along the street, hidden under umbrellas. The leaves on the trees were bright green with fresh life and plentiful water. That was one of the disadvantages of Spain – the need to water things to prevent the quick turn from fresh life to browned leaf. Still, he loved it. It was interesting that Kingsley had chosen to have his office in a place so different.

Moment’s later, they were back.

“That was quick!” Kingsley smiled. “Was he there?” He poured them both coffee from the ever-hot flasks at the side of the room.

“Yes. He’d go with the view that a life-exchange oath would have over-riding priority.”

“Then may I go ahead?” Snape said, looking at Harry but turning to Lucius.

Harry nodded, and took the coffee.

Snape quietly cast the spell, and then came out again.

“I agree, it does not feel as if it took hold. Who was that woman?”

“A woman?” Kingsley said. “Your meeting was with Laval, Benoit and Duncan, wasn’t it? And my team saw a rather odd man with you afterwards. Shoes too big. Ah. Was that a woman?”

“Well, here goes,” Lucius said. He took a breath. “Dorothy Atkins.”

“Dorothy Atkins the Head of MLE?” Kingsley looked across at the other two.
Lucius nodded. “Disguised as Alfred Duncan.”

“Because they didn’t trust you?” George asked sharply.

“None of them knew. I thought there was something off about Duncan. At just under the hour, he feigned a cough, and took a sip from a flask.”

“Polyjuice,” Harry said, thinking of Barty Crouch Junior. He had to repress a shudder.

Snape glanced at him, but Lucius was nodding. “Yes. So I petrified him, took a sip myself, and we sat it out for the hour.”

“Wow. She must have been spitting mad,” George said.

“The others weren’t too pleased either at her lack of trust.”

“No, I don’t suppose they were,” Kingsley said. “Well, take it from the start, Lucius. I don’t think we want to miss any details in this.”

Half an hour later, Snape asked, “I don’t suppose you have the Polyjuice bottle?”

Lucius fished into his pocket and placed it precisely on the table. “There’s several hours’ worth left, I would imagine. I took a swig, but I presume she was setting up to last the whole evening. I don’t know who the man is in reality.”

Snape opened the bottle and sniffed. He nodded at Kingsley.

“This is something you aren’t going to tell me,” Lucius said, voice flat.

There was a moment of glancing around the table. “Not knowing can keep you safer,” Kingsley said, “but Severus was just ascertaining that the potion is Ministry made.”

“That can’t be much of a surprise, surely? She must have access to anything she wants there.”

“Yes,” Severus said non-comitally.

“Well, if there’s nothing else?” Kingsley asked, looking around the table. “No? Then well done, Lucius: this is exceptionally useful. Our thanks. And again, I apologise that you were left without the sort of back-up you’ve been promised. Are you happy to continue?”

“Of course,” Lucius nodded.

“It’s a help that she thinks she has your oath of loyalty,” George said. “What we need to know now is what exactly she’s planning. If you can find that out…”

“Yes. Some more information on her would be helpful.”

“I’ll get that to you,” Kingsley said, and stood up.

“I’ll see you home,” Harry said.

“There’s no – “

“I’d like a quick word.”
“Very well,” Lucius agreed stiffly.

Harry came round the table and took his arm. “Ready?”

They landed in the large salon.

“You cannot apparate into this room,” Lucius said, moving away.

He rung a little bell, and Mattieu appeared.

“Coffee?” he asked Harry.

“No, thank you. I expect they’re waiting for me. As for the wards, I suppose they recognise me,” he said apologetically.

“No-one should be able to apparate directly into this room,” Lucius said. “There’s a receiving room for apparition.”

“Well, I beg your pardon, but I just thought of this room as being your home, and here we are. I didn’t knock any vases over or anything.”

“I need to check the wards, Mr Potter, is what I’m saying. This room should not allow apparition.”

Harry stood a moment, sensing. “No, they’re all there,” he said. “I thought I had to push a little harder than usual. Sorry about that.”

Lucius sat down.

Harry came and sat opposite him.

“Why did you decide to go with us?” Harry asked.

“Pardon?”

“Don’t mess me around, Mr Malfoy. You know you should have asked to see Kingsley the minute you got back last night with that information. You decided to think it over overnight. Why didn’t you go with Atkins’ offer? The chance to be Minister for Magic?”

Malfoy looked at him. “I was tempted,” he said at last.

“Of course you were.”

“You own me,” Lucius said.

“I’m sure Atkins would happily kill me for you: hell, she’s probably spitting in her tea because she’s failed to do so already.”

“I’d still belong to your son.”

“Yes, and I’m sure you thought about how much more malleable he’d be, and that you could convince him that you being Minister could only bring him prestige and honour. And benefits.”

Lucius said nothing.

“I’m not an idiot,” Harry said. “What I’m asking is what made you give it up: I’ve no doubt you’d
like the idea of being Minister.”

“It was a dream I had in the past, certainly,” Lucius admitted, stiff lipped.

Harry sighed.

“Very well,” Lucius said. “I had assumed yesterday that everything that happened was being recorded. I made a point of asking leading questions so that she would incriminate herself. I was extremely pleased to feel that we were getting somewhere – “

“And that you were doing a good job.”

“- Yes.”

“You were.”

“Yes. So to find that it had all been for nothing – “

“Was very frustrating. But not for nothing, because we have your word.”

Lucius was silent. “It is exactly because of comments like that,” he said, “that I resisted the temptation.”

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“You don’t like me: I understand that. I understand how the past can never be forgotten between us. And yet, despite that, you offered me a chance, and having done so, you – you seem to feel – responsible for me.” He looked at Harry.

Harry shrugged. “Yeah. It feels ridiculous, but I do. I am.”

“You don’t – Kingsley and so on – tell me everything, but as far as I know, you don’t lie.”

“No, I haven’t lied to you. What would be the point of that?”

“Atkins, on the other hand, doesn’t trust these men she’s been working with for several years. If I’d not called her bluff, they still wouldn’t know who she was. She was willing to make them vulnerable whilst protecting herself. And as for the oath of loyalty…”

“Yes?” Harry prompted.

“She must have cast it in such a way that she isn’t tied to it.”

“What?”

“How could she have offered me the job of First Minister in France, a job which she had promised Laval, if it was holding properly? Her intent towards him was not loyal. She’s merely using him. That is not the sort of person one can trust. Add to that, although we don’t have proof yet, what happened to your wife and my son – and yourself – has all happened in England. I can’t believe that they are coincidental. When I have proof, on that ground alone, I wish her a long and miserable life in Azkaban.”

“I thought you’d be casting an Avada Kedavra on the quiet, if that proves to be the case,” Harry commented.

“There are things far worse than a swift death, Mr Potter.”
“Yes,” Harry said, feeling the chill run down his spine.

“Also,” Lucius glanced away. “You have promised to keep Mademoiselle Odont safe. “

“Yes.”

“I don’t believe Atkins has any – sense of responsibility – for any of the people she’s dealing with. And also, I am – apprehensive - about what she’s planning to do. Raising power. Something drastic that gets rid of Benningdean. I don’t like it. If she is responsible for your wife’s death, and Professor Longbottom’s, then she does not care how many others - even Purebloods - die for her to achieve her goal.”

“And the death of Purebloods can’t be accepted,” Harry said sarcastically.

Lucius looked at him, and looking older than he had in a while, he hauled himself to his feet and walked over to his spot at the window.

“Hard as I find it to say this, my – involvement – has led to me doing a great deal of re-thinking.”

“That sounds painful.”

“Yes,” Lucius snapped at the facetious comment.

“Sorry,” Harry said, “I didn’t mean it to sound quite as it did. Are you saying you don’t believe in Pureblood supremacy anymore?”

“I am still – rationalizing - my views. I do believe it’s important to maintain Pureblood families, and their history.”

“Right,” Harry’s voice registered his disappointment.

“I am coming to find it hard to condone both the methods being used to do so, however, and the long term outcomes.”

“Er?” Harry said, his hands hanging between his knees. He could not believe he was having this conversation.

“I do not believe it is wise to try to eradicate Muggleborns or halfbloods,” Lucius said.

“Oh god. Hurrah!” Harry said. “Really?”

“I look at people like you – well, there is no-one like you,” Lucius said, turning round and sweeping cold grey eyes over Harry. “You are not a true Pureblood, and yet you are the strongest wizard I have ever known. Your Mrs Ronald Weasley – “

“Yes,” Harry said. “You don’t get much cleverer than Hermione. Powerful, too.”

“Yes. I confess to having been reading some ancient texts on the nature of magic.”

“Yeah? And?”

“For several centuries – well, more – we have considered magic as something that passes down in the bloodline. Earlier magicians did not favour this argument.”

“Personally, I think it’s a bit of both,” Harry said easily. “God knows, I’m no scholar, but it’s obvious, isn’t it, that magic is an earth force, as well as a human one? I mean, if Atkins, for all her
Pureblood ideals, didn’t believe that, then why was she trying to have power raised from the sea?”

Lucius had turned towards him. His mouth opened, and then snapped shut.

“You have the knack of putting a whole almanac full of argument into a nutshell.”

Harry shrugged. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot to argue about on that one.”

“You’re wrong. Many writers have said earth forces did not exist, and that raising power was just a fool’s idea.”

“Nonsense!” Harry said.

Lucius’ eyebrow lifted. “You have evidence to the contrary?”

“Er…yes,” Harry said, dithering on whether he should say anything.

“I am all ears.”

Harry laughed. “No doubt. Look, I just came through your wards. Your family created them, and I can feel they’re old. They aren’t yours. They’re rooted in the fabric of this building. The physical nature of it.”

Lucius stared at him. “You can feel all that.”

“Yes. And I work with natural materials and space. A lot of the magic I use is rooted in the properties of the wood and in the physical aspects of space – the air, light, the molecules that make it all up - “

“Molecules?”

“Well, I think that’s what Muggles call them. But just,” he waved his hand at the air in front of him, “all that this apparent nothingness is made up of. It isn’t nothing, and you can manipulate it. That’s what my job involves.”

“I see.”

“Do you?”

Lucius laughed. A clean sound. “I must admit, I’m a little – taken aback.”

“Yeah, well, usually, we just do magic without thinking about it much.”

“And raising power? That is real, and easy too, I take it?” Lucius was smirking.

“Well, I don’t know about easy. I did it by mistake. But,” he paused, wondering if he should reveal this. “Well, I’ll trust you with this: Nott and Rowle tried, and failed.”

“You know this?” Lucius’ brows snapped together.

“Their bodies are at the bottom of the ocean.”

“And you know that for a fact?”

“Unless there are two other Death Eaters missing in action?”

Lucius poured himself a cup of coffee with a slightly shaky hand, casting a quick heating spell on
“I beg your pardon, have you changed your mind?” he waved a hand at the cafetiere.

“No,” Harry said, standing, “but I ought to go.”

Lucius put his cup down and stood up.

“Thank you.”

“What for?”

“I’m not quite sure,” Lucius said. “An interesting discussion? Hope for a better world? Acceptance?”

“Woah,” Harry laughed, putting up his hands. He sobered. “Thank you for what you’re doing. I’m glad you chose our side last night.”

“As I said, logically, there was really no choice.”

“You think what you want, Malfoy. You have skills: we’re glad to have them. Call on me if you need me.” And he was gone.
“What was that all about?” George asked, as Harry returned to EWA Headquarters.

“Ron! Hi!” he came forward and gave his friend a hug.

“Kingsley floo-called – said I might be able to help. I’ve got to be at The Leaky in an hour, though.”

“Mione?”

“In court.”

Harry nodded. “Remember Felton coming to see us?”

“Yeah, I’ve done some work on his scenarios -”

Harry nodded. “I know I wanted to go easy, but – our spy in France has just had a very interesting meeting with Dorothy Atkins.”

They agreed that the information was so valuable that it was worth getting everyone together that night.

“The youngsters might be out: it’s Friday, after all,” Ron said.

“Well, anyone who can make it,” Kingsley shrugged. “I think this is worth sharing.”

“I agree. And I’ll think this over some more whilst I’m at work today,” Ron added. He looked at Harry. “Were you planning on doing anything tonight, Mate?”

Harry had to force himself not to look at Kingsley or Severus, but he could feel the heat rising in his face.

“You were,” Ron grinned. “Spill.”

“Certainly not,” Harry said, trying to sound dignified. “I’ll make something for supper, shall I?”

“Why don’t you get your elves back?” Snape suggested. “You don’t want to be washing up all night.”

Harry’s blush deepened at what he thought they’d be doing instead. He shifted in his seat.

Kingsley was smirking.

“Is it – you think that would be alright now?”

“The information came as much from Malfoy’s worker as from – “

“What?” Ron interrupted. “When did we discuss that?”

“We didn’t,” Kingsley said, “which is why we need a meeting tonight, to get everything on the
“But – Malfoy? Which one?”

“Someone in Draco’s office gave information about the interview Ginny was due to have that day to – wait for it – Peter Stubbins. Son of Phillip Stubbins and – “

“ – Samantha Donnelly. And what’s more, he works at the Ministry in the Potions Department. “

“Holy shit.”

“Yes, my thoughts exactly.”

“When did you find this out?”

“Draco discovered it last night, just chatting with this guy about match tickets for the international.”

“So the guy in his office wasn’t involved, or anything?”

“No, but Draco was totally beating himself up about it. Got completely rat-arsed last night.”

“But the interview was cancelled anyway,” Ron frowned. “And Wilkes did ask his elf to report when Mitty was there?”

“Yes.”

“So why is it alright to ask your elf back?”

“Because an elf has to be loyal, and because he doesn’t want to do the washing up for a dozen people or more?” George suggested. He stood up. “I need to get some sleep. Can we talk about this tonight?”

“Yes, that’s exactly the plan,” Kingsley said. “Thanks, George.”

“I told Malfoy – Lucius – about Nott and Rowle, by the way,” Harry said quickly. “Just thought I ought to say before I forgot.”

“Any particular reason?” Kingsley asked.

“Well, we were having a discussion about raising power,” Harry said.

“There’s so much to go over tonight,” Ron said. “We’ll be up till midnight.”

“I do hope not,” Snape said, “At least, not discussing… raising… power.”

Ron and George laughed, and Harry found a certain part of his anatomy rising, as if just the word in Snape’s voice was a command; his head felt dizzy with it.

“You alright, Harry?” Ron asked. “You’ve gone all blotchy.”

“Fine,” he bit out, wondering if he could speak and cast a wordless and wandless detumescence spell at the same time. “I’ll go and have a chat with Minerva.”

“Yeah, she always makes my face screw up like that too,” Ron said. “It’s the sarcasm. She gives you a run for your money, Severus, for mastery of it.”
“I’ll take that as a compliment. She was an inspiration to me as a teacher.”

“Yeah? I always thought of her telling me off whenever I wanted to get rid of an inappropriate hard-on. Wearing that tartan hat.”

Kingsley was laughing, and Harry just groaned and thumped his head on the table.

“What?” Ron looked around. “You cannot be embarrassed because I said ‘hard-on’. I mean, we’re all men.”

“I think that’s the problem,” George grinned. “Come on, brother. Work to do,” and he winked at Harry as he whisked a bemused-looking Ron off to the floo.

“Oh dear god,” Harry covered his face. “How am I going to get through till tonight? And I just said that aloud, didn’t I?”

Kingsley was laughing still. “I’m glad you’re looking forward to it.”

“I feel like – well, worse than a randy kid.”

“Excellent,” Snape said. “But I agree with Ron, in that I’m sure an hour with Minerva will sort that out.”

Harry cast the spell and got up. His balls still ached. “You think it’s alright to get the elves back? I don’t really need elves – “ He paused. “I suppose they need us…”

Snape rolled his eyes. Kingsley laughed.

Harry apparated home before going to see Minerva. He headed into the little room off the kitchen, where Mitty lived. He felt like an intruder.

He looked around. There was very little in there. The room had only a high grid up on one wall. The kitchen was itself in the basement of the house, and it looked as if the little room could once have been a coal-hole, although that seemed a bit weird to Harry. He assumed it had always been a wizarding house, so surely elves had always lived here? There had been enough elf-heads on the wall the first time he had come to the house to suggest so.

The room was empty apart from the collection of rags heaped into the corner on which Mitty slept. And now Dinky and the baby slept.

It looked awful. The room certainly had never been decorated in the time that Harry had been there. Kreacher might have softened towards him, but it was hard enough to get the old elf to accept the changes they’d made to the rest of the house: it had never occurred to Harry to suggest doing anything to his own domain. The walls might have had a coat of whitewash once, but now they were just a filthy grey.

Harry was torn between feeling that he had no right to judge anyone else’s choices, and wondering if this was, in fact, a choice.

If house elves didn’t own anything, or earn anything, how could they have anything else unless their masters chose to give it to them?

He needed to ask Hetty. Not that he had expectations that a Malfoy elf lived in good conditions. He
could go and see where Dion, Kingsley’s and Severus’ elf lived, but his stomach was all churned up at the thought of the night ahead. If he went now, and saw Severus…

And if Dion lived in similar conditions, he didn’t want to start a conversation that might set Severus’ back up, either.

He was just about to head to the floo to call Malfoy’s elf, when a thought occurred to him.

“Hetty!”

The elf popped in instantly.

“Oh! I beg your pardon, I hope I haven’t disturbed you, Hetty – “

“Hetty is always at Master’s service,” the elf bowed.

It was as Harry had thought. She would respond to him despite the distance.

“Well, I need to ask you some things, and so I’ll need a few minutes of your time. I just wanted to know when would be convenient – “

“Answering Master’s call must always be Hetty’s priority,” the elf said, and then added, a trifle woefully, “and with Master Lucius away so much, Hetty is not having very much to do.”

“Then I’ll be very glad of your help, but I need you to be very honest with me.”

“Elves is always being honest – “

“Hmm. I know quite well that elves know what to say and what not to say, and will always try to avoid saying anything that will offend their masters.”

“Master is wanting Hetty to offend him?”

“I’m just wanting you to give me truthful answers. I won’t be offended, so don’t try to avoid answering, please. Now,” Harry said, thinking he’d better get on or the conversation could get fixated on the wrong thing. He waved a hand around. “This is the room where elves live in this house.”

Hetty looked around. “I is being in here before,” she reminded him, “when the elfling is being born. But why is Mitty and the elfling not here? Master did not have to give MItty to Dinky’s owner? ” she asked, eyes huge.

“No, I sent them away for a little while,” Harry said.

“Is they being bad elves? Hetty can sort them into shape for you, Master! Why didn’t Master call Hetty at once? Masters cannot be living without their elves!”

“Dinky’s old Master may have been involved in helping bring about the harm to my wife,” Harry said. “It wasn’t Dinky’s fault, but his old Master wanted him to continue to give him information.”

“But Dinky’s loyalty is to his new Master only,” Hetty said. “Master needn’t be worrying – “

“Hetty, I mean no offence, because your son saved my life, but elves do not always put their Master’s wishes first,” Harry said gently.

“Dobby was a very bad elf,” she said, looking, for the first time, upset.
Harry was regretting having sought her help.

“Dobby was a very good elf who used his conscience to do the right thing. I hold him in the highest regard,” Harry said firmly.

Hetty looked at him. “Dobby was taking payment and not following our ways,” she said, wringing her hands.

“I respect elves for behaving so loyally, Hetty, but I respect Dobby more for breaking the rules to do the right thing. It must have been very hard for him. And he saved not just my life, but my friends too, and I won’t hear a word of criticism of him. He was wonderful.” And to his shock, Harry found himself feeling tearful.

To his surprise, he found Hetty patting his leg. Harry patted her shoulder in return and sympathy.

“Now,” Harry said, sniffing loudly, “I want to have Mitty and the others back. I presume if I ban Dinky from contacting his old Master, he’ll obey? And his old Master can’t force him to come?”

Hetty nodded.

“I can’t let them see Toaster – Mitty’s brother who still works for Wilkes – while this is going on,” he said reluctantly.

“Elves is often not seeing their families for yearsies and yearsies, Master. Elves is not usually leaving their homes.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good,” he said, relieved. “I’m afraid those elves you recommended are working for Wilkes now. And I think he might be a bad man,” he said.

“Elves is not worrying – not most elves, only Dobby – about their Master’s business,” she said simply.

“Right,” Harry said, relieved again. “The thing is, Hetty, before Mitty and Dinky and Allie come back, I want to make things nice for them. But I don’t want to upset them by changing things if this is how they like it. So I wanted to ask honestly, do elves like living like this? I mean, don’t elves like furniture?”

“Elves is liking furniture. Elves is always looking after Master’s furniture – “

“Yes, they do, but do elves usually have furniture of their own? Have I been a terrible master to not provide proper furniture?”

“Elves is accepting – “

“Yes, but what would they like?

“Elves is liking whatever Master provides – “

Harry sighed. “So, if I gave them furniture, they’d use it? They wouldn’t be upset?”

“Elves is used – “

“Come and have a cup of tea,” Harry said.

“Hetty is happy to be making tea – “
“I’ll make the tea,” Harry said, and then, at Hetty’s crestfallen look, “I could do with something to eat, though, if you have time?”

Soon, Hetty was whizzing around the kitchen, sorting pans and cooking bacon and eggs and mushrooms for Harry. And answering questions. The knack with Hetty appeared to be to talk to her when she was busy. Soon, she was telling him what she knew of how elves lived in the grand houses of the past, and the different requirements of garden elves, who apparently needed to live in a little hut in the garden. “Because elves is needing to be near the heart of their work,” she said, turning the mushrooms.

“Is that why house elves usually live near the kitchen? So, they wouldn’t like it if I gave them a room upstairs?”

“No,no,no!” Hetty burst out, horrified. “Elves is not being upstairs!”

“I thought it might be nice to have a window to look out of,” Harry said, apologetically.

“What is elves wanting to look outside for?” she demanded. “Elves is needing to be inside their house.”

“So – the baby doesn’t need to go out for walks? Fresh air?” Harry asked, remembering pushing a Muggle pushchair around the park with James strapped in it, waving a rattle with a flapping snitch on the end.

Hetty waved her hand around. “There is plenty of air everywhere, Master Harry,” she said in as close to a condescending tone as an elf could get.

“Well, yes, but – I mean, don’t you need sunlight? I mean, we get vitamins through the skin, or something, in the sunlight – “

“Elves is having skin that is not needing sunlight,” the elf said firmly, pinching her leathery arm.

“Alright, then,” Harry said, looking in some fascination at the warty bumps on it, “but how about a – a copy of the window? In the room. So there’s light, and a view…’’

“Elves is seeing all that when they is doing their work,” Hetty said, summoning a plate.

“You are going to eat some of that too, aren’t you?” Harry asked, and at Hetty’s horrified look, added, “Well, you’re going to have some tea, aren’t you? Please?” And he poured some into the cups he’d already got out.

Hetty dished up the food.


“Hetty is being happy to please her Master. Most Masters is happy when they is having tasty food,” she said.

Harry laughed. It made him think, for some reason, of the Dursleys, and how different he would have felt about life there if he hadn’t sat, praying and hoping that they’d leave some of the food he’d cooked them, so that he’d have something to eat off of their plates when they’d finished.

But thinking of the Dursleys…he savoured several mouthfuls of the meal, and then said, “When I grew up, the family I lived with kept me in the cupboard under the stairs.”
Hetty’s eyes widened alarmingly.

“Yeah, it was a bit of a weird thing to do, because they had enough bedrooms,” Harry said. “The thing is, there were some things I liked about the cupboard: watching the spiders, even feeling...snug, with everything so close. Mostly that I felt safe in there, I suppose.” He took another forkful of bacon and mushrooms, dipped it in the egg, and popped it in his mouth. When he’d swallowed, he went on, “But although there were some things that were alright about it, and – well, I accepted it because there was nothing else – when I did move into a bedroom – that was better. Do you see what I’m saying? I know Mitty and Dinky are accepting what they’re given, and making the best of it, but I don’t want to be like the Dursleys, with rooms that I’m not letting them use. I want them to have a room that they’ll really be happy in.”

Hetty had her head to the side. “Elves is liking to be snug too,” she said at last.

“Yes? So – not too big, then?”

Hetty nodded. “Not too big.”

“And – dark?”

“Windows is…alright, but only if it can be dark too.”

“Curtains, then?”

“For elves?”


“Elves can be sleeping in beds,” Hetty said cautiously. “But elflings is usually sleeping with their mothers and fathers.”

“Okay,” Harry said, “no cradle. And what about the walls? Do they need to be dark?”

Hetty raised anxious eyes.

“Tell me, please.”

“Elves is liking bright colours,” she whispered.

“Dobby’s socks! He knitted me very bright socks!”

Hetty’s head was nodding vigorously.

Harry stood up and hugged her, much to the elf’s consternation. “Thank you, Hetty. I’m so grateful.”

“Hetty is happy to be pleasing her master,” she bobbed a little curtsey, and picked up the dishes and took them to the sink.

Harry looked at her.

“What about you, Hetty?”

“What about Hetty, Master?”

“Do you like your living accommodation?”
Her mouth opened and shut. “Hetty has been living – “

“Hm-hmm. Do you like it?”

“Hetty is not thinking – “ she began wringing her tea-towel.

“Well, I’d like you to think. I’d like you to think about exactly what you’d like. I can change it without it affecting Mr Malfoy or the structure of the Manor at all, and I’ll discuss it with him first. But have a think, hmm?”

“Hetty is seeing why Dobby gave up being a good elf for Master,” the elf said, with another little curtsey. “Is Master needing Hetty anymore?”

And at Harry’s nod, she was gone, leaving Harry feeling rather discomfited by her last comment.

He returned to the little room.

A while later, he had it totally clean, with the walls painted bright pink. There was a window which showed the view from the room upstairs, out into the little back garden, and he’d used the curtains from James’ room, which he remembered blocked out the light entirely. They’d had them when James was a baby, and they had magical seagulls hovering over the sea and dolphins jumping from the waves on them. James had wanted to change them years ago, but they’d never got round to it and in the end he’d moved out. Harry would get some more sophisticated curtains for his room.

He dithered about the furniture, and then went to his shop.

He had a small jeweller’s chest he’d been working on. He’d not yet done any of the magic on it, and the wizard for whom he’d been making it had withdrawn his order. He took it home, and began working the spells. An hour later, he was done.

He glanced at his watch. It was getting late. He apparated to Minerva’s, and over a sturdy cup of tea and some rather heavy scones that reminded him of Hagrid’s rock cakes, he updated her with the latest news. She agreed to come to the meeting that night.

And then he called his elves.

A woebegone sight met him. Minerva had warned him that they were miserable, but he hadn’t realised how much. He thanked heaven that Albus, according to Minerva, had been to visit them a couple of times.

“I’ve come to take you home,” he said, and Mitty began sobbing at once. He glanced at Minerva, and with a nod of thanks, walked straight up to them, put his arms around them and apparated them all into the kitchen at Grimmauld Place.

Mitty fell to the floor and started rubbing her nose over it, wailing. Dinky was holding the baby, whose big eyes were staring at him, ears flapping. It stuck its thumb in its mouth and began sucking. Dinky was shaking.

“Mitty is home!” the elf wailed. “Mitty is home! Mitty will be a good elf, Master! Mitty is never doing anything bad if only Master is never sending Mitty away again!” she howled.

Harry felt terrible.

He knew he had acted precipitately, but he just hadn’t been able to have Dinky in the house knowing that Wilkeshad been following the details of Ginny’s affair through the interaction of the
elves, and that Wilkes had expected Dinky to continue to keep him informed on events in their household. He knew that Draco finding out about his worker’s involvement with Peter Stubbins didn’t take away from that, but somehow his raw feelings had dissipated.

“Sit down, please,” he said firmly. Mitty paused for a second in her wailing, and then leapt on to a chair, as if obeying instantly was essential.

Dinky handed her the baby, and got up on to the chair next to her too.

“I’m sorry I had to send you to Madam McGonagall’s, but I’m sure she was very glad of your help,” he said. “She said you were perfectly behaved and a great help to her Lucy, who as you know, is getting very old.”

They nodded, eyes staring hopefully at him.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“You is not sending us to work for Mistress McGonagall when Lucy is being dead? We has been giving Lucy a big rest – “

“Not unless you’d prefer to go and work there?” Harry asked.

They both shook their heads furiously.

“So you want to stay here, and to work for our family?”

They both nodded just as vigorously. Allie tried to copy them, his head wobbling from side to side and round and round.

Harry leant forward and gently stroked the elfling’s face. It raised huge eyes at him, and sucked its thumb again.

“I need to know that you’re absolutely loyal to us and to no-one else,” Harry said. “I’m sure you want to protect Allie, and I feel the same way about my children,” he said. “I’m sorry if I hurt you, but their safety came first.”

“Mistress McGonagall is not allowing Dinky to punish himself,” the elf said woefully, falling from the chair to his knees, and bashing his head on the floor.

Harry put a hand on his head quickly. “Neither do I allow it,” he said, firmly. “All I require is honesty and loyalty. If you think you have done something wrong, accidentally or deliberately, I want to know. But no punishments. That is for me to decide,” Harry added.

That awful thought seemed to calm the elf.

“Dinky is wanting to be a good elf, and will always be serving Master Potter’s family as Master wishes,” the elf said. “Master has brought Dinky to his family,” he looked at Mitty and the elfling, “and Dinky is never hurting Master’s family again.”

“Good,” Harry said. “Now, there have been some changes. Firstly, I have to apologise to you, Mitty. This house was very run down when I inherited it, but bit by bit, we did it up. Kreacher had been here a very long time, though, and…didn’t like change much. But I should have taken advantage of the time when the room was empty, before you came to us, to freshen it up. So I hope you don’t mind me invading your privacy, but while you were gone I’ve made one or two changes. Now, I don’t know what you’d really like, but I’ve done my best. But I want you two to promise to
do something for me.”

“Yes, Master Harry, of course we is doing anything you is asking of us,” Dinky said.

Harry could see Mitty was shaking again.

“What I want you to do, then, is to see what you think of what I’ve done. I want you to try it out, and unless anything is dangerous or upsetting you, I want you to mull it over, and in a week we’ll get together, and if you want me to put it back as it was, I will, and if you want me to make it different at all, I will. Can you do that for me?”

Both of them nodded, but Harry could feel the anxiety reeking off of them.

“Come on then,” and he led them to the room, and threw open the door.

Neither of them said a word.

“Well?” Harry prompted.

“This is not being our room,” Mitty whispered.

“Yes, it is,” Harry said. “I asked Hetty for advice, and she says elves can sleep on beds, but no cradle for Allie. So I made him a little rocking chair – he won’t fall out, it has straps, see? – in case you’d like to put him down now and then. James liked to rock in his cradle and look at the seagulls on the curtains – sometimes you’ll catch them diving for fish.”

“But they is Master James’ curtains,” Mitty gasped.

“Yes, and I hope you don’t mind second-hand, but he’s too old for them, and I thought they might be fun for Allie. They shut out the light, but if you need some light you can draw them and there’s a magical window. Now, if you don’t like the walls, or the window, you must tell me, but the bed and chair and covers you can put away yourself.”

He patted the little chest of drawers.

“This is one of my magical pieces, and you can see some of the drawers are missing?”

They both nodded, silent and in awe.

“That’s because the bed goes into this one – if you want to put it away, and Allie’s chair into this one, and the little table into this one. It’s up to you whether you want to use them, or use them and put them away in the day, or do whatever you wish. This drawer,” he pulled one out, “has your old bedding in, if you’d rather use it, but I thought the new duvet matched the paint colour better, so I hope you don’t mind giving it a try. Oh, and this little door,” he walked across the room, “goes to your bathroom.” He seriously had no idea how the elf had gone to the toilet before, or washed, and wondered if they dealt with it all by magic.

“A bathroom? For us?” Mitty squeaked.

“Only if you want to use it,” Harry said anxiously. “My children loved playing in the bath, and I didn’t know if Allie would, or if elves didn’t like water, but I made it smaller and lower than the ones upstairs so you can hold him – “

The elves looked so flabbergasted that Harry hoped he hadn’t made a dreadful mistake. But being firm with elves was the way to be, he thought, so he said, “I hope you’ll like everything because I want you to be happy in this house and serve this family for a very, very long time. Will you do as I ask and try it?”
Both elves just nodded, ears flapping, eyes rolling in strange directions as they looked around.

“Bwah!” Allie said, popping his thumb out and waving it, and then popped it back in again, eyes on Harry.

“Well, hopefully Allie likes it,” Harry grinned. “Now, I hope you don’t mind, but I’ve also got a lot of work for you to do. We have a lot of people coming over tonight, and I haven’t managed to keep everything as clean and tidy without you, and we’ll need food – “

The relief on the elves’ faces was palpable.

“Mitty is cooking at once!” the elf said happily.

“And Dinky is cleaning everywhere!”

“Bo!” Allie said.

And that, rather anticlimactically, was that.

Harry went up to his room. He had a couple of hours before the meeting. He was immensely glad of having had so much to do, because it meant that the thoughts about the night to come could simmer in the background.

Now, with a little time, they were lurching to the fore again, and Harry was aware of the lurking arousal aching in his groin.

He went over to the mirror and looked at himself. He peered at his face, and his body, then cast a spell and stood there, naked.

He was slim and fit, though small. The hair on his chest had grey flecks in it. He slid a hand down the trail that ran from his navel to his cock. He wasn’t thick like Kingsley, or long and slender like Snape, and then it struck him that he knew what their cocks looked like, their aroused cocks, and suddenly his own was jumping in his hand. He looked at it in the mirror. It was very ordinary, but there was nothing wrong with it. Well, he thought, it was all he had: if they hoped that he was hung like a horse they were going to be disappointed.

Then his heart leapt as he wondered if they’d actually see him – like this, naked – tonight. Where would he sit? What exactly was he supposed to do? Just sit beside the bed and watch them at it? With his clothes on?

Naked?

He licked his lips.

His hand tugged his cock. He ought to get in the shower….but there was something very erotic about standing in front of the mirror…touching himself.

His heart sped up again, and he squeezed, deliberately, and gave himself a good stroke. His legs quaked. He spat in his hand, and tugged again. He let his other hand come up, and pinched his nipple. And groaned, loudly.

It was only a matter of minutes before he jerked forward, one hand coming flat against the mirror to support himself, and then he was spurting all over his own reflection.
He didn’t know if it was pervy or not, but it was one of the hottest wanks he’d ever had.

As his breath slowed, and feeling even more daring, he stuck his finger out, scooped up some come and put his finger in his mouth. It seemed ridiculous that Kingsley had tasted it and he hadn’t, not since he was at Hogwarts, anyway, and had licked his own hand once or twice after he’d cast the cleaning spell.

He wondered what Severus tasted like. Did he taste different from himself? From Kingsley? How would it feel to have Severus’ cock in his mouth? He didn’t know if it would be possible to get Kingsley’s in. He opened his mouth, stretching it wide.

Then, embarrassed, and feeling ridiculous, he cast a cleaning spell on himself, and the mirror, and headed into the shower.

Perhaps, he thought, under the hot spray, he might not like what he saw – that what they did together would be just like what he’d seen other men doing.

But both Kingsley and Severus were – powerful. Dominant. One of them had to – give in. Severus said so, anyway. And they’d been together for thirty years, it wasn’t as if they were looking to take him in just because they were both tops, so that they could both fuck his brains out.

He gasped aloud at the thought.

His ideas were getting all mixed up.

He knew it wasn’t just about topping and bottoming, but whatever it was about, he thought, looking down at his once again hard cock, the idea of it was driving him to distraction.
An Awkward Evening

The house was bursting at the meeting; nobody seemed to mind that it was Friday night. Allie was cuddled and cooed over. When they’d all settled down, Kingsley went over all the new information.

Then Mitty and Dinky served up a rather hot curry, and everyone was quiet as they ate and blew to cool the heat from their mouths, and drank the water and beer that Harry had put out. He hadn’t gone for wine – they had a lot to think about, and needed clear heads.

He wanted a clear head…for later.

“Ron,” Kingsley said, once the plates were cleared, “you’ve been working on links. Can you go over that with us? This is important,” he said, looking round, “and if anyone else knows any more, chip in.”

Ron pulled out a parchment, enlarged it with his wand, and then stuck it onto the front of the dresser. He pointed his wand at it, and in the middle, the name Dorothy Atkins appeared.

“Dorothy Atkins: suspicions were first raised about her by Ramsey Felton, the Head of Auror Services. Kingsley’s investigations at that time didn’t bring up anything suspicious, over and above what Felton had already told us about her employment policies, and we more or less wrote it off as sour grapes, but this latest information is - well, this is enormous, and completely shifts the focus of our investigations. Or does it?” he said, tapping his wand against his hand and looking at the faces staring up at him.

“Obviously, my gut feeling, and I expect pretty much everyone else’s, after what we’ve heard, is that Dorothy Atkins is our main player. And if she is, we know that she’s spent years covering her tracks, and we’re going to have to have an absolutely sterling case against her, because as far as it seems, she’s squeaky clean.

“So, apart from the fact that she holds just about the highest rank in the Ministry underneath the Minister for Magic himself, and is in charge of the MLE, which makes investigating her through normal channels impossible, what do we know?” He looked around again, and continued, adding the odd word to the board.

“She was born a Kettleburn: her uncle taught Care of Magical Creatures at Hogwarts, before Hagrid. That is,” he said, directing his attention at the younger generation, “until 1993. I don’t remember anything out of the ordinary about him,” he shrugged.

“Yeah, but there didn’t seem anything odd about him,” Ron said.

“He was a very efficient teacher,” Minerva commented, “but his views tended to levity.”

“Really? He treated me with contempt,” Snape said quietly. “I think we can feel assured that he had no love of Death Eaters.”

Into the silence, Ron turned back to the board, and added Charles Atkins. “Her husband,” he said. “Appears to have died of a weak heart, fifteen years ago, despite his youth. We’ll look into that further, of course,” he nodded at Kingsley. “Anyone here heard of him?”
“I can’t think he went to Hogwarts,” Minerva said. “The name doesn’t ring a bell at all.”

“Dorothy Atkins – Kettleburn as she was, did. She was a Hufflepuff, believe it or not.”

“And what is so surprising about that?” Minerva demanded.

“Er, aren’t they supposed to be loyal - and a bit thick?” Ron said, looking round the table and not spotting any Hufflepuffs.

“My Mum was a Hufflepuff,” Teddy said.

“Mine too,” Andy added, “and she’s not exactly a dimbo, is she?”

“It would be completely ridiculous to have a house without its fair quotient of intelligence,” Minerva said. “It is just that the outstanding characteristics of Hufflepuffs are hard work, loyalty, and patience.”

“I don’t think my Mum was very patient, from what Gran said about her,” Teddy said.

“Well, people have qualities in different measures,” Minerva said tightly.

“Why don’t you just come out and be honest?” Gloria waved her arms. “House traits are a complete nonsense! You could slot anyone into any house and say they have some of the house qualities. Admit it, Minerva!”

“I will not!” Minerva bristled, ready for an argument. “Just look at Harry! There’s Gryffindor courage for you!”

“Just think of Peter Pettigrew, the most cowardly little shit ever, ‘scuse the language, Ladies,” Harry said, looking at Minerva and Gloria. “Anyway, the Hat nearly put me in Slytherin, and Severus is by far the most courageous man I’ve ever met. Sorry, Minerva, I agree with Gloria.”

“The House system –” Minerva began, as everyone was looking across the table from Harry to Snape.

“I’m sorry, let’s save that discussion for another time,” Kingsley said, looking from his mother to Minerva.

“Ah well, you know my views on it,” Gloria agreed.

“And you know mine,” Minerva said, mouth pinched, as she looked back at Gloria.

Harry glanced at Snape and saw that his lips were twitching. His own mouth began to follow suit.

“Ron?” Kingsley prompted.

“Well,” Ron said, “I’m sorry to stick with Hogwarts, Kingsley, but I’ll just mention that Samantha Donnelly was a Hufflepuff too, in the same year.”

There was an outcry around the table.

“Yeah, thought you’d like that one,” Ron grinned. “And keeping with Hogwarts: setting aside the students for the moment, our suspects there are obviously Samantha Donnelly, her husband Adrian, and Peter Brown, the Headmaster. Going back to Samantha Donnelly, just for a quick refresh: she was a quidditch player, who wasn’t picked up for the Harpies by Draco, so we have a link there, and she was previously married to Phillip Stubbins, who had an affair with Gin, which led to the
break-up of her marriage.” He flicked his wand at the chart, and lines formed, linking all the names mentioned, with tags of explanation along the lines.

“So we’ve whopping motive there,” he continued, “and as you know, we were wondering if that’s all there was. With this new information, we can be pretty certain that isn’t very likely. So, the next question is, did Atkins use Sam Donnelly’s anger to manipulate her into killing Gin? That’s certainly an argument that Donnelly might use in court in defence. Did Atkins Imperius her? Knowing that her old classmate had a solid motive which we might not look beyond?” Again, he looked at the faces watching him attentively, or looking at the chart. “We don’t know,” he shrugged. “Yet. I’m just thinking about this, so chuck any ideas in.”

No-one volunteered anything.

“You’re doing well, there, Ron, Keep going,” Bill said.

Ron nodded, a quick smile of thanks on his face. “Let’s not forget the other players. We don’t know how much her husband knows of what she gets up to. And ‘getting up to things’ includes running a secret club, where she uses intimidation and violence on the members, who’re all pupils. That alone is enough to make her lose her job, but we’re looking at the bigger picture for a moment. Another fact: she uses Ministry-issued Polyjuice. Now, apart from the link, which I’ll come back to in a minute, we have to consider whether the two other people involved in Ginny’s murder were actually using Polyjuice. It could be Donnelly and her son. Who just happens to work in the Ministry, as a bit of a drone in the labs.”

“Really?” Andy said. “That’s pretty handy.”

“Yes,” Ron agreed. “Isn’t it just?”

“But we also have to consider Atkins was using Ministry-issue Polyjuice too, to transform into a man,” Kingsley cautioned. “We know this for certain, whereas we only know that Donnelly forced her students to use it.”

“Could the students have been involved in killing Harry’s wife?” Gloria asked. Her massive bosom sat itself on the table as she rested her face on her fists and grimaced. “That’s such a shocking thought.”

“It’s possible,” Ron said, looking again at Kingsley.

“It’s a dreadful thought,” Minerva’s face pinched up. “Hogwarts should be protecting students, not inciting them to crime.”

“None of us would disagree with that,” Harry said, thinking that he was incited to murder when he was there, and how easily he had gone along with doing what was expected of him, “but one at least of those kids was very scared indeed, and another two were brazening it out. Which means that Donnelly had something on them.”

“Something is being done for them, isn’t it?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, Neville’s replacement, who works for me, has made contact with them,” Kingsley said. “They don’t know she’s an Auror, but they do know she’s an authority figure who’s worked out something bad is going on and can help them. They know they have a safety net.”

“Is that enough?”

“Well, there’s a little more, but rest assured, we have their safety as our first priority.”
“Shouldn’t their parents know?”

“All three of them are over the age of majority. We don’t have the right to do that, and obviously, they’ve chosen not to tell their parents themselves. Or leave the school.”

“Are you hoping to get them to spy for you?” Draco asked.

There were protests around the table.

“Possibly,” Kingsley said.

“That’s outrageous!” Minerva said.

“I don’t like that,” Charlie shook his head.

But the younger generation were all for giving the youngsters the opportunity to help, to dig themselves out of the pit they were in, if they were trustworthy and had the chance.

“Just because you’re young doesn’t make you stupid,” Andy said. “I mean, they’ve obviously been stupid and they regret it. It sounds like they might already have done something illegal. If I were in their position, I’d want the chance to try and make up for what I’d done. Wouldn’t anyone?” He looked around the table. His eyes alighted on Snape, and then looked away quickly.

“Yes,” Snape said, answering the unasked question. “Obviously, I was glad of the chance. It is not for everyone, though, and the Auror too needs to be sure that she isn’t going to get a metaphorical – or real – knife in the back.”

“Well, moving on, so that we can actually get home sometime this weekend,” Ron said into the awkward silence, heavy with disagreement. “Another link is between The Ministry, Hogwarts, and Twilfit and Tattings. Twilfit are obviously of interest because Albert Thruxton, who worked there, killed Neville. Also, Twilfit created a washing solution to use on Auror robes so that they were traceable – not that I knew that, despite working there all those years, so I don’t know who was doing the tracking. Hogwarts are now using it to keep an eye on their pupils.”

“How come Twilfit makes that?” Scorpius asked. “I mean, that’s potions’ work, surely?”

“Shops like Twilfit have always employed Potions Masters,” Snape said. “They make and create potions that prevent staining, provide weatherproofing, create fabric effects, strengthen the material, and so on.”

“Blimey,” James said. “I had no idea.”

“There’s two of them,” Gloria said. “I’ve talked to them both. The Master is Gabriel Eaton, and he has an apprentice, Oliver Darby. But they’re rather – what do you young people say? Nerdy. All they think about and talk about is potions. And I don’t think they’ve got any interest in politics, or anything else, much. Severus, they made me realise that’s it’s a miracle that you came out so human,” she beamed at him.

There was a stunned silence.

Snape’s lips twitched. “Thank you, Gloria. I suspect any of my ex-pupils in the room are disagreeing with you.”

“Actually,” Bill said, “I agree with Gloria. Not that it’s a miracle,” he said quickly. “But this might be the time to say – publicly – that I owe Severus a debt of gratitude.”
“Bill – “

“No, I need to say this,” Bill said, “even if I do delay the evening a bit.” He glanced apologetically at Ron.

The room went quiet.

“It took Severus confronting me to make me realise that I’m perhaps not as 100% human as I’d like to be – “

There was an outcry. People stared from Bill to Snape.

Snape sat quietly, looking down.

Bill held his hands up. “Listen, please,” he said. “You’re all here, so really this is the chance I need. I tried to deny – all these years – that I was bitten by a werewolf, even though the evidence,” he ran a hand down his scarred cheek, “was literally staring me in the face. I was so glad, that first full moon, that I didn’t change, and I just told myself that it hadn’t affected me. I’m sure a lot of you –” he looked around at his family, “knew that it had. That I was angrier and tetchier and all the rest than I was before.”


“That too,” Bill nodded. “But I just wrote everything off as normal reactions to what was going on then – that I was scared; later, that Fred was dead;” he looked at George, “that I worked out, and so on and so on. And there were other things –” he looked away, colour blotching his cheeks.

You could have heard a pin drop.

“Anyway,” he looked back and swept his gaze around the table. “Recently, I almost – well, I did – attack Severus.”

There were gasps of horror.

He shook his head. “If anyone can defend themselves, it’s Snape. And he did. He shouldn’t have had to, I know. And he made me realise I could be a danger to others. I didn’t know that I emitted pheromones and things that affected other people. I didn’t realise a lot of stuff.” He shrugged. “Snape was strong enough to tell me. And generous enough to offer me help. The potion he makes me for before the full moon – well. I can’t believe how different I feel. It makes me aware of how I was, and that how I was, wasn’t entirely human. That I’m not. But I have help, and friends, and I wanted to thank you all, and to apologise for how I’ve been in the past. I don’t know how you’ve all put up with me. And I want to thank Severus most of all.” He took a deep breath. “Thank you.”

The following silence was thoughtful.

“Well said, bro’,” George said at last.

“In fairness,” Snape said, “there are few who have been bitten by an untransformed werewolf. You should have been offered more follow-up at the time, but with the state of affairs then, it didn’t happen. You should not have had to suffer for years as you did. And you did well to control the wolf within.”

“You can’t say that!” Percy said, shocked.

“No, he’s right,” Bill said. “Exactly right. There is a wolf within. I’m never going to transform, and
I don’t know what it’s really like to be a werewolf, but it changed me. I – I think Snape has helped me accept that it’s part of me. And knowing that, that I’m not just a horrible person, but that this is something that it’s alright for me to have help with. That it’s alright to control it.”

“You’re not a horrible person!” James exclaimed.

“Thanks,” Bill said, his smile twisting his already ravaged face.

“Are you sure he’s not just giving you something to stop you hating homos?” James said.

The silence was deathly.

Anger and hurt and disgust swirled up in Harry. He stood up. “I can’t believe you just said that. Think again, James.” His magic was rising, and it was all he could do to tamp it down. He was so ashamed.

James stood up too. “Look around, Dad. Something’s going on. There were four gays when we started this, and that was bad enough. Now you’re turning queer. And Bill, who’s always been normal and straight and despised poufs as much as the next wizard, is sitting here praising Severus and taking it all back. Something’s going on!” He was red in the face, and shaking, but Harry could see he meant every word.

“Sit down,” Bill barked.

James stuck his chin out.

“Stand, if you bloody well want, then, James,” Bill said again. “You’re right. I’ve hated gay wizards and said shitty things, and Merlin knows, there are enough wizards around who’ll join in laughing.” He leant back in his chair and stared up at his nephew. “And yes, I’d call myself straight. I love my wife with all my heart, and my daughter, who is sitting here listening to this,” he looked at her down the table. “And I apologise that she has to hear this, but you need to hear this, and I need to admit it. If he hadn’t cut through all the crap, and told me what I needed to know when I was physically assaulting him, I would have raped Snape.”

There were more gasps around the table. Kingsley looked across at Severus, who sat still, and quiet.

He’d always been good at that, Harry thought.

“Most of the month, I don’t have eyes for anyone but my wife. And I didn’t understand why I should ever fancy anyone else, but - I did. You can’t imagine what it’s like to love someone so much and be so overwhelmed with lust for others. But I was. I fought it. I hated it. I got angry and aggressive. When I was younger, not long after the bite, even though I was married, I had sex with a man.”

Teddy had his arm around Victoire, but Victoire didn’t look tearful. She looked proudly at her father. There had obviously already been some conversations in the family.

“I blamed him. For the fact that I’d had sex with a man, for the fact that I was unfaithful to Fleur. I started staying home during that time, shifting my work schedules. Hiding away. Do you know what? I blamed it on Fleur’s Veela hormones affecting me. I couldn’t admit that it was me. Well, Severus shoved it in my face and offered me hope, and absolution. Now I know it was me, but there were reasons. And the potion can help me control those reasons. And before you say another word, about me becoming a homosexual or something – I’m not. But I can tell you this, Snape has damn well saved my marriage, and I’ll take that potion, and thank him every day of my life for it.
He’s a good man, and that is all I need to know about him. I’m trying to become a better one. I know I encouraged the views you’re spouting now, James, and I apologise to you for it, and to the people in the room who you’ve just offended. I think you owe an apology too.”

James stood there, white-faced. His eyes darted around the table. Then his chair clattered against the tiles as he shoved it back, and strode out.

Harry sat there, and swallowed. He was embarrassed for his son’s behaviour. He felt responsible for the hurt caused. And he was crashingly disappointed.

“It was actually a valid and practical thought, to wonder if I was employing some potion to influence thought,” Snape said calmly. “I have been supplying a potion to Bill, and you have lived in our home. He was not without reason.”

“You were always his favourite uncle,” George said, shrugging at Bill. “He believed every word that came out of your mouth.”

“Then it’s another shock that he’s trying to cope with,” Gloria said. “I presume he loved his mother?”

Harry nodded. James and Gin had been particularly close. Not that they played favourites, but that was how it was.

“First, he finds his mother is not the statue on a pedestal that all sons want their mothers to be,” she said. “Not that I’m saying anything against your wife, Harry: just that she was human.” She looked at Kingsley, smiling a little. “It’s a shock when your children find that out.”

“You’re human, Mother?” Kingsley said, trying to lighten the mood.

There was only a snigger or two.

Gloria continued: “Then to find that one of the figures you’ve idolised is not who you thought they were either…and these children have been brave, and marvellous, but they’ve still lost their mother, and it’s hard. Damn hard.”

“And he’s probably scared of losing you too,” Hermione said, reaching over and putting a hand over his.

“Well, he’s going the right way about it,” Minerva said sharply.

“I apologise to you all,” Harry said. “For the scene, and for those offended. But we’re not going to discuss James’ behaviour. Can we move on, Ron, please?”

Into the pause, Draco spoke. “If I can hold up proceedings for another moment: I don’t want it to sound like I’m jumping on the apology bandwagon, but I can’t ever take back what I did.” He glanced around the room, and if James had been pale, Draco looked ghostly. “I’ve – I let time – Ginny accepted me, and your father and mother were so kind. But hearing that….” He swallowed. “What I did – I let him into the school. All your suffering – “

He got up, and the room fell into absolute stillness again as he walked along behind the seats and dropped to his knee, head bowed, beside Bill.

“I can’t beg your forgiveness,” he said, quietly. “The harm I’ve done you – it’s unforgivable. I can only tell you how very sorry I am.” He took a breath.
Everyone else in the room seemed to be holding theirs.

“I don’t know what to say,” Bill said. “I’m still angry.”

Draco nodded.

“But Snape has helped me, despite what I did to him. I can’t help you, but you can help us catch the people who did this to Gin, yeah?”

“I’ll do my best,” Draco nodded, not looking up.

“Yeah. Get up and sit down again, then. Ron’s right, I want to get home sometime tonight,” he lightened his tone, and turned back to the table.

Draco got up, head still bowed, and went and sat down.

It was awkward.

It could have been worse.

“Well,” Ron said. “If anyone else wants to apologise for anything, you know, a silent but deadly, or nicking a Chocolate Frog card, can you save it till next time? My brain’s fried already here.”

There was a bit of laughing. Scorpius was looking at his father. Andy was looking at Scorpius. Other people were trying hard not to look at each other.

Ron looked at his notes, and then flicked his wand at the chart, and put on the sort of voice he probably used when lecturing Junior Aurors. “Now, going back to Hogwarts and a different generation: Peter Stubbins. He was there with Daniel Poulter, who we know to be the third man – or perhaps person, I should say – who murdered Gin. We do know he didn’t use Polyjuice, so we need to bear that in mind.”

He picked up a piece of parchment, sent it with his wand to hang next to the first, and enlarged it. With a flick, Ginny’s name was in the middle.

“I should have started like this before,” he said. He put Daniel Poulter’s name down, with a solid black line linking it to Ginny’s, then drew two more lines coming from her name in blue. He put big question marks at the end of the line, then ‘Samantha Donnelly/Stubbins/Dawson’ and ‘Peter Stubbins’ with further question marks underneath. He turned to look around the table. “If Peter Stubbins was one of the other two, why would he use Polyjuice and Poulter not? If the second man was Stubbins, did Poulter know that it was his mate Peter? And if he did know, wouldn’t he be asking why wasn’t he given Polyjuice too?”

“Could it have been someone Polyjuiced to look like Daniel Poulter?” Teddy asked. It was the first time he’d spoken in a long time. He’d been thinking about everything Bill had said. His father had been a werewolf, but he hadn’t inherited any of the traits himself. He’d wondered what it had meant to his father.

He’d never know.

“Interesting question,” Ron said, “but Poulter’s skills at mind magic - what he did to Draco - are what identified him here. He’s our one definite.”

“Sorry, I forgot that,” Teddy shook his head. “It’s hard to even think that people I was at school with can have done that to Ginny.”
“Yeah, I understand that, Mate,” Ron nodded sympathetically, “and there are a lot of strands to keep in mind here.”

“Our next link is between Nott and Rowle and Donnelly. The Giant’s Causeway link.” He marked them on the first chart. “Now, we know Adrian Donnelly’s family came from the area, and that Nott and Rowle were Scottish, but died there. Our latest information is that Dorothy Atkins sent them there, though my team and I were sent on a wild goose chase,” he added grimly. “She’s stated that they were there to raise power.” He wrote the words across the bottom of both charts in capitals. “We seriously need to worry about what she wanted that done for, and how she hoped to use Nott and Rowle. If anyone has any ideas on that, anything at all, let me know. Anytime. Seriously. Because it looks as if she’s planning on bringing down the Ministry, and I have a very nasty feeling about this. Nott and Rowle weren’t the brightest buttons in the box, and to be honest, I’m wondering if they were chosen because they were expendable.”

“Bloody hell, Ron, are you serious? Do you really think she could be that – I mean, that’s – cold,” Charlie said.

“I agree,” Andy said, shuddering. “But then, if she was involved in what happened to Mrs Potter….”

“Yes, exactly,” Ron said, grimly. “And she talked about getting rid of Benningdean. I’m not sure how we can get him more security without alerting her.”


“– would put our spy completely at risk,” Kingsley said.

“Merlin. Whoever it is must already be in tremendous danger, mustn’t they?” Scorpius said. “I mean, she must be nervy now that her identity has been revealed. She’d made a point of keeping it secret for so long.”

There was a silence around the table, as those who knew the spy’s identity wondered what Scorpius would say, or think, if he knew it was his grandfather. Others just thought of the perilous situation.

“Should we pull him out?” Hermione asked, tentatively.

“He wants to continue,” Kingsley said.

“This is big, isn’t it?” Andy said, then blushed. “Not that Mrs Potter’s death wasn’t – “

“Yes, I agree,” Harry said, gently. “It really does look very worrying.”

“Other links,” Ron said, into the heavy silence. “Thomas Wilkes, Dinky’s owner, used Mitty’s visits to gain information about Ginny. He’s a regular customer at Twilfit and Tatting’s. But Draco’s chap, Paul Edwards, at The Prophet, gave Peter Stubbin’s the information about the interview with the reporters which had been scheduled for the afternoon Gin was killed. Peter Stubbins also visited Daniel Poulter in France and had a brief fling with a young lady in the group that includes Artur Brouchard.”

Harry jerked. “What?”

“Huh?” Ron said.

“Who was the girl?” Harry asked, trying to restrain his urgency.
“Umm,” Ron looked at his notes, before adding the name to the board. “Léonie Laval. Why? Does that ring any bells?”

Harry shook his head, hugely relieved. “Only the Laval part. Her father’s in the French group too?”

“Yes, one of the older set,” Ron nodded. “And these are other people in the French connection,” Ron used his wand to place the list of names on the side of the parchment board. “If anyone knows anything about any of them, let me know.”

There were no comments. The list, Harry noted, did not include Nanette.

“Okay, other things we need to consider,” he went on. “The Governors. Now, Kingsley’s looked into that, with Minerva’s help. It looks like we might have nothing there: the quorum is ridiculously high – ten of the thirteen Governors must be present for a meeting to take place; two of them have been ill for some time, and there’s always been one here or there who just hasn’t been able to make the meetings. Looking back, historically, periods like this haven’t been unusual.”

“No, but it isn’t good enough,” Minerva said. “I’ve had a word with a couple of them: Dexter, a Griffindor governor, is unlikely to get better and is willing to stand down. Same for the Ravenclaw witch. I’ve suggested to Hermione that she stand for the Griffindor post.”

There were cheers around the table, lightening the atmosphere.

“Make sure you all vote,” Minerva said. “You’d be surprised at how few people do, in the end.”

“I’ll help you with your campaign, if you like,” Draco offered.

“That’d be great, thanks,” Hermione smiled at him.

“I – I could stand for the Ravenclaw post, couldn’t I?” Scorpius suggested quietly.

“You want to?” Draco asked, bending round to look at his son.

“Well, it’s all pretty fresh and familiar. If they aren’t going to have Pupil Governors, wouldn’t it make sense to have someone who’s actually been in school recently?”

“I think that’s an excellent idea,” Minerva said. “And I think you’d be ideal, Scorpius.”

“People probably won’t vote for you,” Andy said, touching his leg under the table, “you know, because…”

“That doesn’t really matter,” Scorpius said. “I’m sure there’ll be other, better candidates than me standing anyway, but if it starts people thinking about young people being candidates, it might lead to them having a pupil rep on the board, and younger people thinking about applying. And maybe it’ll just show people that gay people don’t have to hide away, and that we want to be active and useful in society. No offence, Kingsley, Severus,” he said quickly, realising what he’d said.

“None taken. I think it’s an excellent idea too, for all the reasons you’ve given,” Kingsley smiled his encouragement.

“Right,” Ron looked at his chart. “I don’t know if that’s everything. Anyone got anything else to add?”

“I’ve been thinking about History,” Draco said. “Harry reported that History of Magic has become
a minor part of the curriculum, and we can tie that to either the Headmaster or Adrian Donnelly. I don’t know who decides the curriculum?” He looked at Minerva. “Given that Samantha Donnelly appears to be teaching only the earlier periods.”

“It’s usually the Headteacher, although what is taught can actually depend on the skills and knowledge base of the teachers you’ve been able to employ,” she said. “As for the School Secretary, I never had one, so I can’t really comment on how much influence he might have.”

“The other thing I’ve been looking into is *Hogwarts: A History,*” Draco said.

“Well done,” Hermione said. “What was going on there?”

“I’m not sure, and they’re definitely very cagey. So I’ve put in an offer for the company.”

“Really?” Hermione looked excited.

“The company prints textbooks for several wizarding schools, including translations and works for younger learners, but frankly, the market is small and the costs are high. I’ve put in a really low bid, with the offer price open to negotiation based on honest disclosure, so I’ll let you know if I find out anything useful.”

“Do you want the company?” Charlie asked, curious.

Draco shrugged. “Not really, but it could be interesting. I wouldn’t have gone there if I didn’t feel it might give us some information.”

“Well, thanks for that,” Ron said. He looked around at them all again. “There’s probably much more, and I’m keeping these charts updated, but I think that’s about it for tonight – I think we’ve all reached our capacity for taking anything else in – I certainly have. Kingsley? Anything else to add?”

“No, that was excellent, Ron. If anyone else has anything further, or avenues that they think we should explore…?”

There was silence and head shaking.

“Let’s call it a day, then. Once again, thank you, everyone. Your efforts are really appreciated. See you all next week, and if you need me before that, don’t hesitate to contact me.”

Harry had seen practically everyone off. Albus was in the kitchen. Hermione and Ron were standing by the floo.

“Come over to dinner with us, Harry,” Hermione said. “I saw you all the time when we were doing your case, and now we only see you in company.”

“Oh my god. I never paid you!” Harry said in horror.

“No, and you won’t either,” Hermione said. “Don’t be daft.”

“But it was your job.”

Hermione opened her mouth, and then shut it again.
“I’m really sorry – “ Harry began.

“Oh, shut up. I’m thinking. Are you willing to do a trade?”

“What? Anything. What do you want?”

“One of your pieces of furniture.”

“Are you sure?” Harry said.

Hermione nodded, happily. “Yes. Come over and discuss it with us. How about next Saturday?”

She turned to Ron. “You’ve got the day off, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, because Hugo’s coming home – Lils too, isn’t she, Harry?”

“Oh, damn, I forgot that!” Hermione exclaimed.

“That’s not like you,” Harry smiled at his friend.

“Well, the dates are different to Hogwarts, and then they’re doing this summer language course thing – “

“Getting senile?” Harry teased.

She swatted his arm.

“Well, we’ll make a date soon,” she said.

“That would be great,” Harry agreed.

Hermione kissed him on the cheek.

“You – you smell different. Different perfume?” he asked.

She laughed. “I don’t wear it.”

“Oh. Well, you smell nice,” he raised his brows.

“Keep your hands off,” Ron teased, his own hand sliding possessively round her.

Harry grinned, and with quickly-said goodbyes to Severus and Kingsley, Ron and Hermione left.

Harry looked at the two men he’d spent all day looking forward to spending the night with. He swallowed.

“You’re going to see James?” Snape asked.

Harry nodded in relief that Snape had known he’d need to go.

“I meant it: he was right to bring it up. Maybe not the way he did,” Snape’s eyes twinkled.

“He was so offensive,” Harry groaned. “I’m so sorry – “

“He’s his own man. You can’t apologise for him. And you can’t say you must have brought him up badly, because Albus has rather a different way about him. Tell him to ask Bill for his empty bottle – there’ll be enough for him to take it to Slug & Jiggers, and he can ask them to do an analysis. Set his mind at rest.”

"Oh, shut up. I’m thinking. Are you willing to do a trade?”

“What? Anything. What do you want?”

“One of your pieces of furniture.”

“Are you sure?” Harry said.

Hermione nodded, happily. “Yes. Come over and discuss it with us. How about next Saturday?”

She turned to Ron. “You’ve got the day off, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, because Hugo’s coming home – Lils too, isn’t she, Harry?”

“Oh, damn, I forgot that!” Hermione exclaimed.

“That’s not like you,” Harry smiled at his friend.

“Well, the dates are different to Hogwarts, and then they’re doing this summer language course thing – “

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“How can you be so – unoffended?” Harry asked.

“I appreciate his thought process,” Snape said. “And Harry, before you give him hell: years ago, Slytherin were due to win the House Cup, and then Dumbledore awarded extra points at the feast itself. Do you remember?”

Harry nodded, watching Snape.

“And what finally tipped the balance?”

“The points Dumbledore gave Neville for standing up to his friends?”

Snape nodded. “He deserved more points than he got, but the way Albus played it made the point. James did the same today.”

Harry nodded thoughtfully. He glanced up. Kingsley was leaning against the mantelpiece with one elbow, standing behind Snape, who was very close.

“I was really looking forward to tonight,” Harry whispered. “I’ve hardly been able to think of anything else all day.”

Snape’s hand caressed his cheek.

“I was going to suggest you come for the weekend, anyway,” Kingsley said. “Get a better picture. Otherwise it’ll just look like a marathon sex session, and that isn’t really how it is.”

Harry blushed bright red. “I can’t believe – “ he swallowed.

Kingsley straightened, shoving his hands in his pockets. “It’s new for us too, Harry. We’ve never had someone share our bed, or watch us.”

“So, don’t expect some fantasy. Just us,” Snape said. “We’re going to go home and do our normal thing, and when you’re ready, come and join us. Kingsley will undoubtedly be snoring if you leave it too long, but you know how he sounds already, hmmm?”

“Me? Snore?” Kingsley feigned innocence.

Harry grinned. He had indeed heard the odd grunt, and had been rather relieved about the ordinariness of it.

“So – I mean – shouldn’t I sleep in my – the guest room?”

“If you prefer,” Snape said. “But we’ve enlarged the bed. You’re most welcome in it.”

Harry nodded, blushing.

Snape lifted his chin. “I know we’re not going to touch you tonight, or whenever it is we do this, but may I kiss you now? You look…delectable.”

“Really?” Harry choked. “You – you want to?”

“God,” Kingsley groaned. “Of course he does! Me too, dickhead.”

Harry laughed, and then Severus’ head was coming down, and his lips were taken, and Severus tasted of the beer they’d been drinking, and his tongue was stroking his…Harry felt his body swaying into Snape’s, and hands on his hips –
In the doorway, Albus’ mouth opened and shut like a fish.

His father looked like he was melting in Severus’ arms, and Kingsley was standing there, watching, a hand on Severus’ shoulder and the other on his father’s hip. And then Kingsley saw him, and squeezed both men, who broke apart.

“Oh shit,” Harry said.

He turned towards Albus, taking a step.

“No, no it’s alright,” Albus said, taking a step forward himself, and then stopping. “Really, Dad. Just – well –”

“A shock?” Snape said.

“Er, yes. I –”

“It’s not everyday that you see your father kiss another man. I’m sorry, we should have waited till we were at home,” Kingsley said, stepping round.

Albus’ mouth opened and shut some more. He knew he’d encouraged them to be together, but seeing it was another matter – oh! “I think it’s just that I’ve never seen Dad kissing anyone,” he said. He looked at his father. “Not even Mum. Not like *that*. So – you heading to Spain, then?” he said, awkwardly. “I just came to use the floo – thought I’d go and have a word with my twat of a brother.” He rolled his eyes.

“I’m just going there,” Harry said.

“With – all of you?” Albus’ voice squawked again.

Harry snorted a laugh. “I don’t think that would go down very well! No, I’ll go and have a word, and then, if it’s – well, not too bad – Severus and Kingsley have invited me to go for the weekend.”

Harry went bright red.

“Wow. Ummm.”

“If – if you didn’t have other plans,” Harry said. “We didn’t talk of anything – “

“You go right ahead,” Albus rocked on his heels. He looked at the two men. “He – you’ll take care of him, right?” he said, and went crimson himself.

“This has to be one of the most awkward conversations I’ve ever had,” Snape said, “and I’ve had some rather astonishing ones. Your concern for your father is admirable, Albus, but you do know he can look after himself?”

“I – well yes, with magic, and all that – but this is different. Isn’t it?”

“Albus,” Harry began.

“You’re right,” Kingsley said. “It is different, but it might help you to know that we’re all novices in this relationship. We’ll look after your father, and hopefully he’ll look after our hearts too,” he
said.


“Yes?”

“Not that I’m being opportunistic, or anything, but – seeing as you’re away – er. Can I bring Laura back here?”

Snape laughed.

Kingsley was grinning.

“You trust her?” Harry said. “You know, we talked before – “

“I – yes.”

“Alright then,” Harry said. “Get in touch if you have any worries, though – any at all. Apparate out if there’s anything really bad. And the house is yours. Even if I decide to come home, I’ll go to the flat, alright? And I’ll tell James, so you won’t have him wandering in when you’re having a romantic moment, or anything.”

Albus grinned. “You’re the best, Dad. Go and – be safe.”

Harry groaned.

And apparated.

Snape looked at Albus. “Thank you. We’ll take care of him.”

“You care about him, right?”

“We do,” Kingsley said.

Albus nodded. “Well. Umm. Welcome to the family?”
...And A Long Awaited Night

Harry walked up to James’ flat and rang the bell. He hadn’t wanted to call ahead, and although he could have got in through the floo or apparated straight into the flat, he had to give James the choice of refusing him.

James answered the door. It was quite obvious that he’d been crying.

“May I come in?”

James stood back, and Harry breathed a silent sigh of relief as he stepped over the threshold.

He was totally unprepared for James’ next statement.

“I’m really sorry, Dad.”

Harry swung round.

James was leaning back against the front door, holding his arms around himself.

Harry walked back, and pulled him into his embrace. James was a lot taller, and his head burrowed into Harry’s shoulder. A huge sob shook him.

Harry stroked his back, as he had when this young man was a boy.

“I don’t know why that all came out,” James said, pulling away eventually, and wiping his nose on his sleeve. Harry didn’t have a hanky either, so he didn’t say anything.

“Got any tea?” he asked.

James nodded, and led the way into the kitchen. “I – really – I’ve been trying to judge people on what I see, and I know they’re all okay, and I don’t know why – it’s just – Bill,” he said, as he clattered around filling the kettle.

“He’s always been your favourite uncle,” Harry nodded, resting his backside against the worktop.

“Yeah. And to hear him say he – he tried – he tried to – to rape – to rape anyone,” he looked up, red-eyed, at Harry. “I mean, how could he? How could he, Dad?”

“Because he wasn’t getting the help he needed – “

“Yeah, but that’s like – like an excuse. I mean, it’s a terrible thing to do. We’re trying to find the people who did this awful thing to Mum, and just listening to one of us admitting that – that – “

Harry’s heart went out to his son. Gloria had been right, about people on pedestals. “He didn’t rape him, though, James.”

“Yeah, because Severus stopped him.”

“Don’t you think Bill was being hard on himself? I expect he would’ve stopped himself anyway; from what he says, he’s been dealing with this every month for years. And think of the pressure he was under: his sister has been murdered, his nephew was taken…maybe it was just enough to shake his control. And it meant he was out and about – from the sound of it, he normally stays home every month.”
“He said he raped another guy – “

“No. He said he had sex with another guy. Not the same thing at all, is it?”

“But he hated gay men!”

“Well, I suspect that’s part of the reason for that, don’t you?”

“But – I mean, how could he?”

Harry picked up the cup, coming up alongside his son as he did so. James didn’t move away. Harry took it through to the living room, sitting down in one of James’ comfy chairs. He took a sip. “I don’t want you to ever tell Teddy this, and I mean it.”

James, with the cup halfway to his mouth, paused, and nodded, before blowing on it and taking a swallow.

“When his father, Remus, was DADA professor, he came gallivanting to the rescue, one day – Sirius, my godfather, who gave us the house, had appeared, and at that time everyone thought he was a mass-murderer, and Peter Pettigrew, the traitor, was there – anyway, to cut a long story short, we were in danger, he came to save us - and forgot to take his Wolfsbane.”

“What happened?” James’ eyes were glued to his father’s.

“He wasn’t human,” Harry said, remembering the werewolf that Remus had become, and the terror.

“Did something happen?”

“No, Snape protected us, even then, and then Sirius distracted Remus in his animagus form. But he would have gone for us. I haven’t the slightest doubt.”

“Shit.”

“Yes. I’m sure he would have been filled with remorse the next day, but that couldn’t have stopped him. I expect Bill has been struggling with a similar thing. The wolf is trying to force its normal behaviour on him. I think he’s done incredibly well to resist and manage it. But now he has help, and it’ll be a lot easier for him. I hadn’t realised the strain it was placing on his marriage, to be honest – but then, however close the family, we keep things to ourselves. Only Ron had an inkling about the state of our marriage, and he didn’t say.”

“Mum would have been furious with me,” James said morosely.

“Yes. I don’t know what she thought about gay people, but she never accepted rudeness to guests,” Harry agreed. “In your favour, Snape said you’d got a good point. He says take one of Bill’s used vials to Slug & Jiggers and get it tested to put your mind at rest.”

“He said that?”

“Yes. And also that it took courage to speak up in front of your friends, when you were saying something they didn’t want to hear.”

“How can he be that forgiving?” James hunched his shoulders.

Harry laughed. “I don’t think he’s the forgiving sort, but – he was a DADA teacher too. He appreciated what you did. From a logical point of view.”
“I know he’s been good to us. I was so rude.”

“Yes, you were.”

“I’d better apologise at the next meeting – “

“God, no,” Harry groaned.

James stared at him.

“Write, or something. To Kingsley, and Scorpius and Andy too. But we’ve had enough of public apologies.”

“What?”

“Oh. You were gone. Well, after Bill’s apology to Snape, Draco apologised to Bill…it’s bloody awkward for everyone else,” Harry said, “sitting there squirming and wishing the ground would open up.”

“But – I’ll write, of course – but I want everyone to know I’m sorry.”

“Then show it in your behaviour,” Harry said, firmly. “And if you’re lucky, the men will show kindness back. An apology isn’t about other people thinking you’re nice after all,” he said bluntly.

“No.”

They sat, drinking the tea, in a relieved sort of silence.

“I miss Mum,” James said, after a bit.

“I know,” Harry said. He fidgeted. “I – I can’t be her for you. I wish there was something I could do to fill the gap, but – she was your mum. No-one can fill that gap.”

James nodded. “I – it’s - sometimes it just hits me that I’ll never see her again. It’s stupid, I know – “

“Of course it isn’t,” Harry said. “Sometimes I think, ‘oh, I must just tell Gin about blah-di-blah’, or, like when I took Lils out of Hogwarts. I really – I mean, that was the first big decision about you kids that I’d ever taken on my own. We always discussed what was best for you together. It felt – weird – and hard, and lonely – making that sort of important decision without her. Even though I had Hermione and Ron as well as you three to discuss it with, and it wasn’t exactly a tough choice, anyway.”

James was quiet. They both sat remembering.

“It – it must be easier for you without her, though. I mean, it must have been hard. Knowing what she was like,” James flashed a look at his father and away.

“What she was like? What she was like was a good mother,” Harry said.

“Yeah, but, come on, Dad! She was seeing all those other guys! You must have hated her guts.”

Harry sat forward. “I didn’t hate her. Yes, I was hurt and angry. Of course I was! But I felt I’d failed her too. If – if I’d been able to make her happy, she wouldn’t have needed to do that.” He rubbed his hands up his face. “We’d shared our lives for a very long time. Not everything, obviously,” he added, seeing James about to interrupt. “I know this might be hard to understand,
but just because we weren’t in love, didn’t mean we didn’t love each other at all. You can still love someone you’re mad at. It was just a – well, old affection and history sort of love, and I think she still felt a bit like that about me too. We were considerate - ”

“She treated you like shit,” James said, bluntly. “I don’t think I could let a woman treat me like that.”

Harry thought about his answer. “She never treated me badly to my face, and whatever she did behind my back, that counts for a lot. She knew I’d never give you up, and she accepted that behaving well together mattered. And whatever she did in her – her private life – she was a good mother to you. Wasn’t she?”

James nodded.

“She gave me three wonderful kids. How can I be unhappy about that?” Harry asked. “And – well, maybe I was unfair too. Especially once she found Malfoy. She would have been a lot happier if she’d married him, and I should have let them. I’m guilty of that.” He shrugged. “I treated you as kids. I was wrong. You’re all wise and sensible.”

“Umm…”

“Most of the time,” Harry smiled at his son, who grinned sheepishly back.

“I’m so embarrassed,” James said, rubbing his hand over his face. “I really didn’t mean for that to happen, or to say those things – not like they came out – “

“Does it bother you so much?” Harry asked, trying not to invest his words with the anxiety he felt.

“Gay people?”

Harry nodded.

“I – society doesn’t like it. Maybe I’m – boring, and like to stick to the rules.”

“Well, it’s easier to, certainly.”

“Is that all you’re going to say?” James demanded, after a quiet couple of minutes passed.

“I can’t make you think differently.”

“You think people can’t change?”

“Of course people can change. You just can’t force it on them.”

Again, there was silence. Harry had finished his tea, and wondered whether it was time to go. Things had gone better than he’d hoped.

“So what about you, Dad? This gay thing? Are you? Did you choose to become gay, then?”

Harry laughed, a little hysterically. “Who’d choose it? To be vilified and looked down on? Kingsley was Minister for Magic. Do you think he chose to be gay, knowing that he had to give that up, give up helping his country that he’d worked so hard to protect, and that he could do so much more for, because people’s prejudices made it impossible for him to be both?”

“So…so you aren’t, then?”
Harry couldn’t fail to hear the hope in his son’s voice, and it made his stomach tie up in knots.

“James, I was married and had three children. But I also like men. I’m bisexual.”

“So – I mean, that’s lucky, isn’t it?”

“You think?”

“Well, you don’t have to choose the hard road. You can choose women and still be happy. You know, when you’re ready, and all this is over.”

It was as if the honest truth had just rushed up like a tide and enveloped him in its waters. Harry was so dazed by it that he let it swamp him for a moment.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean – “James began.

Harry took a breath. “Life doesn’t necessarily do what’s convenient, and at convenient times.”

“Yeah, I know, but, you know, there are lots of women out there, and…and I want you to be happy, Dad, I know I’ve got up your nose a lot lately, but – “

“You’ve astonished me lately,” Harry said. “You’ve been brave; you were straight in to help Hugo without a second thought, and backed me and Snape up at Hogwarts, and you make good use of your magic, you’ve been dealing with lots of stuff like Lils’ education, and you’ve been coping really well with a shitty situation. Families do get up each other’s noses, it’s par for the course.”

“Do I feel a ‘but’ coming on?”

“Yes, and it might be more than you can accept.”

James looked at his father, and then got up, picking the cups up.

“You’re choosing to be gay,” he said flatly, as he put the crockery in the sink and started running water.

“I’m choosing love,” Harry said, and his heart was thumping so loudly he wondered if James could hear it.

His son swung round. “What on earth does that mean?”

“I’m falling in love, and I’m not willing to turn my back on it.”

“Now? You’ve met someone now? How the hell did - oh fucking Merlin, not Lucius Malfoy after all?”

Harry laughed, holding back the hysteria. “Definitely and never Lucius Malfoy. Not Draco either, before you go there.”

“But it’s a man.”

“Two men.” Harry was feeling dizzy with the anxiety, but somehow it seemed important to say it, to not deny it.

James leant back against the sink. “You’re falling in love with two men at the same time? Is that possible?”
“James, I love three children at the same time. Molly and Arthur loved seven.”

“But – that’s children.”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know much about love. Only that I love you all so that my heart bursts thinking about you, and that when we had Albus I didn’t love you any less, and when Lils came along, there just seemed to be even more love all around, because sibling rivalry aside, there was love going everywhere. Don’t tell me Molly and Arthur hardly noticed Gin dying because they had five other children, or that Fred’s death was any less agonising because they’d got George and the others.”

“But – but what are you going to do about it? I mean, you can’t play them off against each other - ”

“James. It’s Severus and Kingsley.”

His son’s face was comical.

“I think I need to sit down.”

Harry wanted to laugh. He knew it was shock, and excitement.

He wasn’t quite sure how he came to be telling the person who would most hate the idea first. But the realisation had hit him so strongly, that the joy was greater than the fear.

“You’re having sex with Severus and Kingsley? At the same time?” James croaked, from the chair.

“Not yet. Not with either of them yet. I – well, I think I hope we can, but this isn’t really about sex.”

“Not about sex?”

“No. It’s about - I like being with them. I feel – happy – really happy – in their company.”

“So, you mean, you want to house-share. Like friends.”

“Well, if the sex doesn’t work, sort of, though I think my feelings are stronger than the house-mate sort, and I hope they feel the same.”

“They – you’ve talked about this?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my god.”

“I’m sorry, I know I just landed a shocker on you. I haven’t even told them yet – “

“What?”

“I only just realised. Sitting here.”

“That – that – “

“That what I feel – that I’m falling in love. I know it sounds silly at my age – “

“It’s not your age that’s the problem!”

“I’d better go. I’m sorry if this offends you – “
“Offends me! Dad, you – you can’t.”

Something strengthened in Harry.

“I can’t? Can’t embarrass you? Can’t love someone? Can’t be happy?”

“Why can’t you be normal?” James exclaimed.

Harry stood up and put his hands in his pockets. “I spent all my life trying to be ‘normal’,” he said quietly. “The Dursleys hated me because I wasn’t ‘normal’. The wizarding world expected bloody miracles of me, when I hardly knew how to be a wizard, let alone a sodding saviour. I did everything I could to give you three as ‘normal’ a life as possible, and I think I succeeded, more or less. But look where it’s got us.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sorry, but if I don’t end up back in court again, on more trumped up charges, I’m just going to be me, James. It’s obvious that I can’t be ‘normal’, whatever that is, so I’m just going to try for ‘happy’ instead. I’ll always love you, and I’ll always be there for you, but you’re grown up. You don’t need me, and if you choose to live your life without me, that’s up to you.”

“You’re putting them before me?”

“I’m hoping to have all of you in my life. It will be your choice if you don’t want to be part of it.”

“What about Lily? She hasn’t even left school yet.”

“She’s a legal adult. I’ll talk to her.”

“So – so what’s going on exactly? You – you’re moving in with them? In Spain?”

Harry sighed. “It’s very early days. None of us know if it’ll work. But they’ve invited me to live with them, on whatever basis I like. And I could live there, and work there. I haven’t really thought about it. I’m not planning on selling Grimmauld Place, if that’s what you mean.”

“This is too much for me to take in,” James said.

“I’m sorry. There’s nothing affecting you in this at the moment, you know.”

“Apart from the world knowing my Dad is a – “

Harry waited, watching.

“I don’t even know what you’d call that. Three men living together.”

Harry laughed. “Neither do I.” He sobered. “I think I could be happy there, James. Is that so difficult to accept?”

James made a strange sound, half disbelief, half derision. “You make it sound so simple – “

“It is simple,” Harry said, and surprised himself. He’d been throwing up so many blocks himself. “If I moved in with Ron and Mione, would you object?”

“They’re your friends!”

“So are Kingsley and Severus. And it’s nobody’s business but ours what we do in our own home.”

“So you won’t be letting them fuck you in Grimmauld Place?” James sneered.
“I have a very strong urge to scrub your mouth out with soap,” Harry snapped.

“I – I’m sorry – “

“Are you? Would you have said that if I was talking about a woman?”

“But you’re not – “

“No, I’m not, I’m talking about two human beings whom I admire very much. And much as I prefer Villa Olorosa, if I want my lovers to fuck me in my own home, I don’t think that’s anyone else’s business except ours.”

“You can’t expect us to watch that!”

“James, I realise your mother and I aren’t exactly prime examples, as we didn’t have sex together for years, but your mother had lovers in our house, and you have a lot of uncles and relations. Have you ever – ever – seen any of them having sex? Have any of your friends?”

“No, of course not – “

“Then why, because we’re gay, are you suddenly expecting us to be going at it at the supper table? Albus saw us kissing tonight, but that’s the most anyone is likely to ever see us doing. I don’t even want to be talking to you about it. It’s weird.”

“Albus saw you kissing?”

Harry sighed. “Yes.”

“Right. So Albus knew about all this, and of course, he isn’t shocked?”

Harry could almost hear the sibling jealousy firing up.

“Of course he was shocked! But he was also grateful that I’m spending the weekend in Spain so that he can bring his girlfriend to the house.”

“Albus has a girlfriend?”

“You didn’t know?”

“Everyone has secrets – “ James began, looking aggrieved.

“Well,” Harry said, rubbing the back of his head, “I think the thing is about telling you all this before I’m really ready, is that I was trying not to have secrets. You might not like what I told you, but you can’t have it both ways.”

James paused. “You’re right, I suppose. I - you can’t expect me to be pleased. You’re my Dad.”

Harry nodded. “I know.”

“I need to think about it all.”

“Well, there isn’t really much to think about,” Harry said. “Why don’t you do something fun instead? What’re you doing this weekend?”

“I don’t know. I’ll meet up with some mates, I expect.”
Harry nodded. “Alright. I don’t like leaving you like this, but I suppose I’ve moved you on from dying of embarrassment at your behaviour to cringing at mine.”

James snorted another laugh, and nodded.

It was as much as Harry could hope for.

Harry apparated straight to Villa Olorosa. He’d had some clothes, packed and shrunk, in a tiny bag in his pocket since before the meeting. His enthusiasm had waned somewhat.

He smiled a greeting at Dion, and headed up the stairs. He could see, as soon as he reached the landing, that the bedroom door was open. Anticipation slid up his spine. Were they still awake? He’d been gone a long time.

The thought that he could just slip into bed with them and sleep was – well, it just made him want to smile.

Love. His heart skipped. He wrapped the feeling around himself, warm and strengthening.

He reached the doorway, and stopped on the threshold. Every thought he’d ever had in his head seemed to fall out of it.

Kingsley was stretched out on the bed, dark skin on white sheets, one arm flung out over the pillows, one leg raised, and Severus, the long line of his back sliding in to the almost flat planes of his arse, was nestled between his thighs.

Kingsley turned to the door. Severus’ head bobbed up, and down, and up again, before Kingsley reached for his hair and gave it a tug. Severus’ mouth pulled off Kingsley’s thick cock with a pop!

“Oh my god,” Harry breathed.

“You’re here,” Kingsley smiled. “How’d it go?”

Harry stumbled a couple of steps into the room.

Severus had turned his head, leaning it back against Kingsley’s thigh. Kingsley’s penis bobbed as he turned towards Harry.

“Could be worse,” Harry said. “I told him to write his apology: I can’t stand any more embarrassing bits at the meeting.”

“You did not, I hope, force him to make an apology?” Snape said, a hand lazily gliding over the inside of Kingsley’s other thigh.

“No, he’s very sorry. Not very pleased that I’m gay, though. I need to go to the loo. You won’t have finished that before I get back, will you?” he stared at Kingsley’s cock.

Kingsley laughed. “I think we can manage to restrain ourselves.” He thrust a little in the air, and Snape’s hand moved, circling him and sliding up the length of his shaft.

Kingsley groaned. “On the other hand, don’t take too long.”
Harry dashed out to the bathroom, used the facilities and returned in his tee-shirt and boxers at double-quick speed.

Severus was lying on top of Kingsley, and they were kissing.

They didn’t stop.

Harry was unsure of where he was supposed to go. He couldn’t take his eyes off them. He realised that Snape’s bottom was undulating, just slightly, and that Kingsley was returning the pressure, and the thought of what that meant, of their cocks trapped in there, and the friction, made a wash of sweat break out on his forehead.

His hand wanted to reach out and smooth over the contours of Snape’s backside. He wanted to place his hand on Kingsley’s thigh and feel the flex of his muscles, to see how small his hand was in comparison to the girth of his leg.

He dragged his eyes away, and realised there was a chair in the corner. He staggered over and sat in it. It was a bit low, so barely thinking, he spelled it higher so that he could see what was happening on the bed. He shifted it a bit closer, hovering over the floor, so that he was closer but not quite in a position to touch.

Kingsley had set rules, for his benefit, and he was going to try to keep to them.

He didn’t know what to do with his hands.

Snape broke the kiss and they both turned to look at him.

“Come here,” Kingsley said, his hand stretching out in invitation.

Harry stood up. “I – I thought I was just watching.”

“You are,” Kingsley said, “but I think one kiss – just so you know how welcome you are – wouldn’t hurt. If you’d like?”

Harry nodded, and scrambled awkwardly onto the bed.

He wasn’t sure what to do with himself. Both men had turned towards him. Severus’ whole weight was on Kingsley, as he lay on top of him at right angles, but Kingsley didn’t seem to object. They were both there, open to his view, their bodies so different, and yet….Harry’s eyes took in the twin lines of shoulders, and chests, and flat nipples, Kingsley’s small and almost black, Severus’ with their shadowing of hair; the ripple of muscles in Kingsley’s abdomen, the ribs defined on Severus’. They both had flat stomachs; Severus’ hip bone was visible, but what drew Harry’s eyes more was the two cocks, so close to each other, Severus’ angling sideways towards Kingsley’s as if pulled by attraction rather than gravity. Severus’ legs were long and lean, with a fine covering of hair, whilst Kingsley’s were hairless and curving with muscle.

Carefully, Harry stretched out so he was alongside them, only a small gap separating them, as he measured his body against theirs.

It felt odd to be wearing the tee-shirt and shorts, and with a thought, he was naked.

He heard the indrawn breaths of the two men, and his erection jerked. He looked down at himself, at his body beside theirs. He stretched out a foot and touched Kingsley’s calf.

“I’m much shorter than both of you.”
“So you are,” Kingsley said, shifting so that he could look at Harry better. His arm anchored Severus, but Severus twisted as he moved, and they ended up with Kingsley stretched out on his side, Severus cross-legged, leaning back against Kingsley, with his shins a fraction of an inch from Harry’s stomach. And from his cock, which was bobbing against it.

“You have a lovely body,” Snape said, eyes wandering over it. “And looking much healthier than when I last saw it.”

“I - I probably never thanked you properly –“ Harry said. Unbelievably, he’d forgotten that Snape had seen him naked before. He’d been so out of it then, and seeing someone to nurse them was very different to what was going on now.

“Shhsh,” Snape said.

“Well, I’m glad Snape nursed you back,” Kingsley said, kissing his lover on the shoulder. “Otherwise we wouldn’t be enjoying this now.”

Harry smiled, shyly.

“Now,” Kingsley said, “a kiss, and then, much as I’d like you to stay exactly where you are, I think that chair is a good idea, because you’re looking pretty damn irresistible right now.”

Harry knelt up; Snape was directly in front of him.

“Is it alright?” Harry asked, anxiously.

“Very,” Snape said, and leant forward.

The kiss was gentle and full of – tenderness – Harry thought, in surprise. Snape pulled away, and his hand stroked down Harry’s arm as he shifted, climbing deftly over Kingsley’s body, then guiding Harry down to lie beside Kingsley.

“This is nice,” Kingsley said, a slow hand gliding up over Harry’s side, mapping the curve of his body.

Harry’s whole being prickled with anticipation. He shifted his hips forward a fraction, and his erection brushed against Kingsley’s.

He moaned.

“Oh god, sorry,” he gasped.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Kingsley said. “Feels good, doesn’t it?”

Harry nodded, head on the pillow, just under where Kingsley had his elbow out, supporting himself. And then Kingsley was kissing him, firm and deep, and Kingsley’s hand swept down his side, holding them together.

Harry’s cock was pushing against Kingsley, and his hand came up to grab his bicep, to have something to hold on to, and the next minute it was over, and Kingsley was pulling back.

“Alright?” Snape repeated Harry’s earlier question.

“I – thank god I wanked this afternoon,” he groaned.

Kingsley laughed, and kissed the tip of his nose.
“Go sit in the chair. Tissues and lube are on the side,” he said easily.

“I – I can’t - I can’t wank watching you!” Harry gasped. “Oh god, but I’m expecting you two to –”

“You do whatever you think best,” Kingsley said. “We just want you to be comfortable.”

“Go invisible, have a blanket, put your clothes on,” Snape said. “This is a bit – unusual – for all of us.”

“You – you don’t have to – “

“Don’t have to fuck Kingsley? I’ve been looking forward to it all day,” Snape said, looking at his lover.

Kingsley smiled, and shifted his position to allow Snape back between his legs.

“I – I meant –” Harry said, swallowing, “if it’s embarrassing, like – I could join in a bit. If you want.”

They both turned to look at him again.

“Much as we both look forward to that,” Snape said, “I think we’ll stick to the original plan.”

“You – would it be better if - if I went?” Harry asked, suddenly unsure of himself.

“We’re not rejecting you, you twit,” Snape said, with some of his former acerbity. “We want this so much we’re willing to wait for you.” He took a breath. “We want you to be sure.”

“What he said,” Kingsley nodded, his eyes warm. “Luscious as you look, and as much as I’m wondering how you’d feel inside me, with Severus sucking my cock – oh Merlin –!”

Severus had dropped down the bed and swallowed him.

“Oh, fuck, yes, Severus!”

He turned to Harry, panting. “Severus is incredible at this,” he gestured at Severus’ head as it rose slowly up the length of his cock, mouth tight, Severus meeting his eyes for a moment.

Harry could see that just the head was in Snape’s mouth, could see the movement of Snape’s tongue against his cheek, and groaned, both at what he was watching and at what Kingsley had said. He knelt on the bed, unable to tear his eyes away.

Despite Gloria’s comments, he hadn’t really given much thought to the logistics. The idea of being inside Kingsley, and watching Snape sucking him off over his shoulder, was …mindblowingly hot.

Severus held out a hand and Harry ducked as the lube from the bedside table shot towards them.

He scrambled off the bed out of the way, almost falling into the hovering chair. He watched as Snape stuck his fingers in the pot, and then gasped as Snape’s hand moved under Kingsley’s balls and disappeared, even while he was still sucking him.

“Oh god, Severus,” Kingsley groaned, lifting his hips.

Harry’s chair whizzed lower down and he could see – “Oh! It’s – it’s going right inside – oh! How many are you going to put in there? Is – is it – I mean – do you – how do you make it clean?”
“Spell,” Kingsley bit out, pushing back against Snape. “God, get in, Severus, or I’m going to come!”

Snape’s mouth slid off, his tongue teasing the frenulum as he pulled away. “I’ll teach you it later,” Snape said, turning to Harry.

And then there were no more questions.

Harry watched, enthralled, as Snape slicked up his own cock, and lifted Kingsley enough to slide his knees underneath him. He watched as Snape’s slim length disappeared into Kingsley’s body, and Snape leant forward until they were kissing, and panting, and Snape started to build up his pace.

He moved his chair back. The two were now totally wrapped up in each other.

It was beautiful to watch, Harry thought.

He pressed his hand against his own cock, and bit back the moan that rose in his throat. Snape’s head turned to look at him, and Harry felt charged by the hot intensity of his gaze. And then Snape was arching himself, biting at Kingsley’s nipple, and Kingsley was swearing and encouraging him and Snape pulled Kingsley even tighter against him and Harry couldn’t believe how strong Snape’s wiry arms and thighs were, and the pace was incredible, and then Kingsley had his own cock in his hand and Harry watched, open mouthed, as he spurted over his own stomach, and they were both making amazing sounds, and as Snape slumped over Kingsley he leapt up, ran to the bathroom, and came in about two tugs.

He stood there gasping, stunned, and then did a quick cleaning spell. He threw water over his face, then slipped back into the bedroom, not wanting to miss anything.

Both men were still breathing heavily, but Snape had got a cloth from somewhere and was gently wiping Kingsley’s stomach clean.

They both looked up at him, and smiled.

“Alright?” Kingsley asked, his body gleaming with sweat in the candlelight.

Harry licked his lips, and nodded. The free movement of his tackle made him realise he was naked, and with a thought he was back in his nightwear.

“If you don’t mind us all sweaty…” Kingsley’s hand was out, inviting him in.

“Where do you want me?” Harry asked tentatively.

“I want to hold Severus, so either snug up behind me or in front of Severus,” Kingsley said.

Harry’s first thought was to be held, but then Kingsley turned, taking Snape into his arms, and his vast back was facing Harry, and there was no rejection in it at all, and Harry slipped in behind him. He wiggled till he felt comfortable, then raised a hand and draped it over Kingsley’s hip.

“That’s nice,” Kingsley’s voice rumbled through his chest.

Harry snuggled down a bit.

“You didn’t mind? Me being there?” he asked quietly after a moment.

“I was a bit anxious beforehand,” Severus’ disembodied voice admitted, from the far side. “But no.
You didn’t find it too nerve-wracking?”

“It was hot,” Harry said, and buried his face in Kingsley’s shoulder blades as he felt him laugh.

“Good,” he said. “Severus is amazing. You’ll find out.”

Harry’s hand slid a little over his hip. “You were amazing together. I think I’m an old perv for enjoying watching.”

“No more pervy than joining in. I’m looking forward to that.” And he laughed again.

Harry fell asleep with his smile pressed into Kingsley’s back.
Lucius took a glass of champagne from a passing elf, glad of anything to interrupt the tedium of discourse with the stately matron who had endeavoured to engage his attention.

Not that he really objected; his position gave him the opportunity to watch the other party-goers interacting.

Artur, as usual, was drinking heavily, and had consumed three glasses of champagne in the time it had taken Lucius to drink his first. Léonie Laval was dancing immodestly with some young man. Henri Odont was playing the doting father and welcoming host.

Nanette was elegant in a silk robe in a luxurious teal; the colour provided a delicious contrast with her pale and creamy skin, whilst the scooped neckline and fitted waist hinted at her voluptuous figure. She barely came up to the shoulder of the man she was dancing with, yet still moved lightly on her feet, following his lead, chatting to him at the same time.

She looked very lovely, and was managing to act as both the perfect hostess and the shy birthday girl.

And yet, Lucius couldn’t help but feel that something was not right.

Henri had gone all-out to provide a splendid occasion to mark his daughter’s coming of age, with a quintet of musicians, and from the looks of things, there was to be a band later, with more modern music for the younger generation. He presumed the oldies were supposed to have discreetly removed themselves by then. The cream of Parisian pureblood society, of all ages, was present.

He moved on from the woman, threading his way across the room, and was accosted by René Laval.

“How delightful to meet a new face!” Aimée Laval responded, her eyes travelling with approval over Lucius.

“Ah, I am recently returned to France,” Lucius said, “and have had the joy of meeting many new acquaintances. I cannot confess to the slightest moment of boredom at all.”

“Acquaintances?” Laval queried. “How reserved the English are! I had hoped we were amis, Lucius.”

So Laval had decided he was worth sticking to, had he? Was that because he saw him as an ally, or a threat?

“Aimée obviously wasn’t either. “I hope we can become friends too. Perhaps you would care to
dance, Lucius?”

“I’m afraid I don’t dance,” Lucius said, indicating his cane to soften the rejection. “But there is a gentleman behind you, who has been trying to catch your attention these last few minutes.”

She spun round. “Oh, François! Ça va?” She turned back to Lucius and her husband. “You will not mind if I leave you, to dance with François?”

“Not in the least,” Lucius smiled, as her husband waved her off.

“Well, Lucius,” Laval said. “Talking of acquaintances, have you seen Benôit?”

“Should I have?” Lucius enquired, his eyes following the movements on the dance floor.

“I wondered,” Laval said.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. “Forgive me if I sound…ungenerous…but I find Benôit’s company…somewhat stultifying. I would not choose to seek him out for an evening of electrifying conversation.”

Laval’s smile of agreement lasted only a second. “Then you know nothing about the fact that he appears to be – missing?”

Lucius continued watching the dancers. “Is that so?”

“He should have been here,” Laval shrugged.

“Perhaps he felt unwell.”

“Brouchard was expecting him for supper last night. He didn’t show.”

“Perhaps he was ill even then. Or a family emergency arose.”

“It is possible,” Laval said dubiously.

Lucius glanced across at him. “You’re worried. This behaviour is unusual for him?”

“He’s a toady little fellow: he would not miss tonight – with so many of the echelons of our society present – unless he was on his deathbed. And to give him his due, he has excellent manners: he would not fail to owl his apologies, in the normal way of things.”

“So you thought I might have murdered him,” Lucius said. He turned a glance on Laval. “And you think I would tell you, had I done so?”

“It would be you, or…”

“Indeed. We are, then, both likely to be at risk.”

“Surely…?”

“You are already thinking it, René. Just be careful what you say.”

“Mais -”

But Lucius raised a hand to silence him. Making her way towards them, smiling at everyone as she went, was Nanette.
“Monsieur Laval, Monsieur Malfoy,” she gave a little bob of a curtsey.

“Nanette. You are very kind to find a moment to speak to us old fogies. How are you enjoying your party?” Lucius asked.

“Very much, merci,” she said. “I am making it my aim to dance with every gentleman in the room. Monsieur Laval has already given me that pleasure: perhaps you would be kind enough to indulge me, Monsieur Malfoy?”

“You will be out of luck, Nanette,” Laval said. “Lucius has already refused my wife: he says he does not dance.” He gestured at Lucius’ cane.

“I saw you were leaning on it a little tonight,” Nanette nodded, “and that is why I have just asked the musicians to play a slow waltz as soon as we go onto the floor, so that we can dance at whatever pace is comfortable to you.” She looked up at Lucius, and added, “And I am so short, that you could lean on me instead of your cane. I will not let you stumble, Monsieur, never fear.”

This tiny, innocent girl had no idea of the affect of her words on him, Lucius thought. That she had noticed his use of the cane this evening, and taken the time to organise fitting music, and that she offered herself as support…she was far too enchanting.

That she should be throwing herself away on Artur infuriated him.

“But what if I should step on your toes, my dear?” he smiled down at her.

“You would not be the first, Monsieur,” she confided, her eyes twinkling, “but I have a cushioning charm on my shoes. You cannot hurt me.”

Laval laughed outright. “Go, Lucius! How can you resist? And I will be delighted to see the look on Aimée’s face when she sees you dancing after all!”

Lucius kept his eyes on Nanette. He cast a small wandless spell, shrinking his cane down and slipping it into the wand holster in his sleeve, and held out his arm. “I would be delighted, then, Mademoiselle, and I hope your feet do not come to regret it.”

They moved onto the dance floor, and just as Nanette had promised, the music morphed into a waltz.

Lucius had always thought that his hands were one of his best features. They had gone to wrack and ruin in Azkaban, of course, but since his return, he had had them manicured regularly. He liked their slender strength, and the length of his fingers. As Nanette’s hand slipped into his, he was conscious only of how tiny hers was, encased in his, of the beautiful shape of her nails, the innocence of the colourless varnish, and the cool touch of her soft skin against his.

He took her into his arms, his hand firm against her shoulder blade, and danced. Despite the long years since he had last done so, the steps were ingrained, and Nanette, as he had previously seen, was the perfect partner, following his every move, floating on his arm.

He had laughed when he had first heard that Muggles had called this dance shocking when it was introduced: now, moving around the floor with Nanette, he could understand. There was an extraordinary eroticism in the formality contrasting with the touch points between them: the movement of her back against his fingers, her hand light on his bicep, the slight pressure of their torsos, the nakedness of their joined hands.

He felt, for the first time in many years, thunderously aware of sensation and emotion: of his desire
to protect this lovely child; of awareness of her unashamed femininity; of regret.

He felt more alive than he could remember feeling, and yet more aware of his age.

He didn’t know how Nanette did it; he had thought that he was cold by nature, and had always been perfectly glad of it, but this slip of a girl fired feelings that he hadn’t known were possible.

“You’re a beautiful dancer,” she said wistfully, “but I hope I haven’t upset you?”

He looked down at her. “It’s many years since I last danced: I wouldn’t have missed it for the world.”

“Oh, good! You were so quiet - I hoped that you were not cross with me.”

“I think I would find it very difficult to be cross with you,” Lucius said, as he guided her around a corner. “But I thought you looked a little…sad,” he prompted. “When I was watching you earlier.”

“You were watching me? But – of course I am not sad! Father has gone to so much trouble – “

“Nanette, forgive me. I do not wish to spoil your evening. We will discuss something else.”

Her eyes fluttered up to his, and then down.

Lucius could just see the flush of colour on her cheeks.

“How is it you know me so well?” she whispered. “Or perhaps I have not presented myself properly,” she began, worriedly.

Lucius’ arm around her tightened just fractionally as he turned her again. “You have been the perfect, charming hostess,” he said.

“And yet you knew,” she murmured.

Something heavy, pregnant with feeling, rose between them.

“We shan’t talk about anything that upsets you –“ Lucius began.

“The – the marriage date has been fixed,” she said, and swallowed. “For next month. Apparently – apparently, things are moving forward.” Her look was a question. “Monsieur Brouchard says Artur needs to cement his…his…”

“Respectability?”

She nodded. “Is – have things changed?” she asked.

“Their judgement is not incorrect,” Lucius said, wondering what, and how, the Brouchards knew of the developments. “You intend to go ahead, then?”

“I – since I last saw you – I have been organising this party – I thought I had time – “

“Yes.” Lucius knew that it was in some measure his own involvement, his own actions, that had been a catalyst. Had he not revealed Atkins’ identity…

“I have a small birthday present for you,” he said. “Perhaps you will have a minute this evening when I could give it to you?”
“Oh! Monsieur! There was no need – “

“It is but a trifling thing,” he said, “but needs a moment’s explanation. And did you not agree to call me Lucius?”

She glanced up at him, and smiled shyly. “Thank you, Lucius. Perhaps you would care to see my mother’s portrait?”

“I would be honoured.”

Nanette laid her fingers on his arm as they made their way through the dancers. They passed Henri.

“I am just going to show Monsieur Malfoy Maman’s portrait,” she said. “I need to catch my breath,” she whispered in her father’s ear.

“It’s a fine picture,” Odont said to Lucius. “It was painted by Lagalle two years after our marriage. Delphine looks as beautiful as our daughter has become,” he patted his daughter’s arm affectionately. She gave her father a quick hug, and then they had left the crush of the ballroom, and a few moment’s later, were standing in a small and comfortable room next to Henri Odont’s study. Lucius had made sure to leave the door open.

A large portrait of a handsome woman took pride of place over the fireplace. She was sitting very straight in an upright chair, but appeared to be asleep.

“Your father was right: you look remarkably like her,” Lucius said, standing in front of it and studying the picture critically.

“Yes. I miss having her. Having a mother,” she said.

“I’m sure it would have helped to have a mother with whom to discuss things,” Lucius said. He withdrew a small package from his pocket.

Nanette opened it. “Oh! They’re beautiful!” she breathed, picking up one of the pair of ear-rings. Her face fell a fraction. “They are truly lovely,” she said, handling them.

“But?”

She glanced at him, embarrassed. “Father has not permitted me to have my ears pierced.” She touched her lobe, and the earring hanging there. “These are fixed by magic.”

Lucius nodded. “It was important to have ones that did not use magic, as these have another charm on them,” he said quietly.

Her hand was moving over the small diamond at the centre of the stud. “Yes?”

“Nanette, I hope you will forgive my presumption, but the backing piece of this one,” he took the earring from her fingers and showed that there was an engraver’s mark on the reverse, “is a port-key. Should you ever be in dire need, if you touch it and say the word ‘Safety’, you will be transported at once.”

She looked at him, and down at the jewelry held in his palm. “Where will it take me?” she whispered.

“I hope you won’t be offended, but it will take you to my house, here in Paris. If I am not there, I have instructed my house-elf to attend to you and to do everything in his power to keep you safe.
He will alert me at once, and knows who can be called on should I not be available. The wards are excellent. I considered a more neutral location, but I can guarantee your safety more effectively there. I hope that you will never need it, but had I a daughter, I would wish her to wear such an item. It is just a security, should an emergency arise. I chose a rather – quiet – piece of jewelry, that would not look out of place for everyday wear,” he added.

“Diamonds?” she said, with a chuckle.

“They will not clash with any colour, and they are not ostentatious,” he said.

A smile played around her mouth. “It is my birthday, and I am now of age.”

“Indeed,” he commented, wondering where her statement was going.

She looked directly at him.

“Would you pierce them for me now? Piercing by magic wouldn’t affect the charm, would it?”

Something thudded again in Lucius. The job was minor, but painful. There was something in the fact that she would trust him with it, that moved him.

“I will do it, if you wish it. It will hurt a little.”

“I know,” she nodded, and removed her existing earrings, popping them into a drawer in the desk in front of the window.

She came back and stood still in front of him.

Lucius took out his wand, and holding her earlobe between fingers and thumb, he cast the spell. He felt her jump.

“I’m sorry – “

“No, no,” she said. “It was nothing. Can you put the earring in for me?”

With a gentle finger, he wiped the blood from her skin, feeling the shiver that ran through her. The ear was a sensitive place, he knew. He forced himself not to think of the intimacy of touching her there. “Would you prefer the charmed one in your left or right ear?”

“What do you think?” she asked, looking up at him.

She was so close, and his hand was still touching her earlobe. He breathed in, and regretted it as the movement made their bodies touch.

“I would suggest the left ear: you’re right-handed, and if you’re in danger, you’ll be wanting to hold your wand.”

“I would never have thought of that,” she sighed, and tipped her head a little so Lucius could insert the pin.

His fingers felt huge as he moved, the wing nut tiny as he wound it onto the pin.

He repeated it with the other ear.

For the first time in his life, he was glad of the curse that had been placed upon him. He could not pretend, standing so close to Nanette, aware of the sweet delicate scent of her, feeling the soft,
fleshy skin under his fingers and the brush of her breasts against his chest, that he was unaffected. Not that his body could respond, but in some way that he didn’t understand, she gripped him viscerally. The desire to protect her was overwhelming. She trusted him so utterly, and he would not fail her.

He stepped back the moment he had finished.

“How do I look?” she asked, touching her own fingers to her ears.

“As lovely as ever,” Lucius said. “But you will be missed. You had better run back: you’re the birthday girl, after all.”

She laughed, and then stepped forward, leant her hands on his chest, and kissed his cheek. “Thank you. I will not forget.”

Lucius swallowed, and nodded as she slipped out of the door.

He turned to look again at the portrait.

He did not hear his attacker, but the spell hit him square in the back. He toppled forward, his nose hitting the brass rail surrounding the hearth. He felt the skin split.

At least his eye had not been poked out.

He heard the door slam, and then a foot, stuck under his midriff, endeavoured to turn him over. His assailant had misjudged his weight, and bent down, grasping him and rolling him onto his back.

Artur.

“What was my fiancée doing kissing you?” he demanded.

Lucius would have liked to have sneered about the stupidity of asking questions when one had petrified the person to whom one was addressing them, but as it was, he could but listen…

Artur launched into a tirade about Lucius’ presumption; about his interference; about his irrelevance to French politics. He stormed around the room. Lucius thought that either he had severe mental issues as well as his intoxication, or that he had also imbibed mind-altering potions.

Lucius was very aware that Artur was twirling his wand in his hand.

The door opened.

“I just came – what in Merlin’s name is going on here?”

Artur stood in front of him. “He is a slug. Nanette was kissing him – “

“Lucius had just given her a birthday present – she has kissed many guests tonight, I do not doubt. Release him at once, Artur.”

Lucius recognised Henri’s voice. He was interested that the man was strong enough to stand up to this bully.

“They were in here alone – “

“I knew perfectly well where they were. Nanette told me they were coming here.”
Lucius suddenly found himself able to move. Henri had found the balls to cast the spell himself. He rolled to his knees, pushing himself up.

“She is to be my wife – “ Artur snapped.

“Papa – oh no! What has happened!”

Lucius was on his feet, and had his wand in his hand, pointing at Artur.

“Do not trouble yourself, Mademoiselle,” he said.

“But – you’re bleeding!”

“It is nothing. Your guests need you.”

Nanette turned to Artur. “You did this? Why?” she demanded, hands on her hips.

“You kissed him! I saw you! You were here alone with him! Are you having an affair?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said, snapping her fingers as she spoke. An elf appeared. “Water, and a cloth, please, Louis.” She turned back to Artur. “If you saw me kiss Monsieur Malfoy, you will know that the door was wide open. I was showing him my mother’s portrait. Do you think I would conduct myself improperly in front of my mother?”

The woman in the portrait, who had been sleeping in her chair, opened her eyes. “What is this noise?” she complained. “Good heavens, Nanette, there is a man bleeding! Why are you not taking care of the poor fellow?”

“I will any moment now, Maman,” the girl said. “When Papa has taken Artur away.” She stared at the two men.

“Yes indeed, Artur, we can’t have this sort of thing, now can we? It’s Nanette’s birthday party! What on earth were you thinking?”

“I don’t trust him,” he glared at Lucius. “Everything has changed since he came! We’re being pushed out of the running, I tell you! He’s had Benoît murdered – “

“I beg your pardon?” Lucius said. “Benoît? He’s dead?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know – “

“Benoit was alive and well and playing cards when I last saw him. He’s appalling at poker.”

Henri choked a laugh. “He was never any good. Artur, I have heard nothing of him being dead: where did you get such an idea?”

“I saw it.”

“Excuse me?” Lucius said.

The elf had reappeared. Nanette had wrung out a cloth. Lucius took it from her and was holding it to his face.

“I have visions.”

“That is the wine, my dear boy – “
“Do not treat me as if I’m an imbecile, Henri!” Artur snapped. “I have visions. I’m a seer.”

“And you saw me kill Benôit? He is most irritating, so I suppose it is a future possibility, but I swear on my magic that I have done no such thing,” Lucius said, with as much hauteur as could be managed with a swollen nose and split lip.

“Not you precisely, but who else could it be? I saw him dead in a stream.”

“In a stream? You feel that I go round pushing people into streams?”

“I don’t like you around!” Artur said savagely.

“And I do not wish to have you around if you are going to assault my guests,” Nanette said.

“I am your fiancé – “

“No,” she said. “you are not. I have no intention of marrying someone who behaves this way.”

Artur stood there, mouth opening and shutting. He turned to Henri. “Surely you’re going to say something! She won’t get a better offer – who would want her? – she has nothing to – “

Lucius cast, and Artur disappeared.

Nanette gasped.

“Where has he gone? What have you done with him?” Henri babbled.

“I am sure you agree that we do not want to listen to any more of his nonsense,” Lucius said firmly.

“He – I – but Nanette – “

“Should not have to listen to such utter rubbish.”

“He is much better when he is not intoxicated – “

“This is a matter for you to discuss together, and not on the night of Nanette’s party,” Lucius said. “But I don’t doubt, as her father, Henri, you appreciate what a wonderful daughter you have, and will wish her to be happy.”

“Of course, of course – “

“If you will excuse me, I had best retire – “

“Papa, see to our guests. You must allow me to heal this, Monsieur. Maman would be furious if I did not, would she not?”

“Yes, of course. I beg your forgiveness, Lucius, I am so sorry that this happened in my house – “

“Not at all,” Lucius bowed.

Henri left, closing the door after him.

“Sit,” Nanette said.

Lucius obeyed. Nanette knelt in front of him, and bathed away the remains of the blood with deft hands.
“He has made a terrible mess of your face,” she said crossly.

Lucius laughed, but felt his lip split again. “It can cope. I am no pin-up.”

“You’re very striking,” Nanette said. “Would you allow me to touch you? I have a little skill in healing.”

“Oh, of course.”

Her fingers touched his nose, lightly. Lucius heard her murmur a spell, and tried to restrain the flinch as the broken cartilage realigned.

“I’m sorry – “

“We’ve both caused each other a little pain in the hope of future improvement,” he said. “I’m sure I can cope.”

But when her fingers gently touched his lip, he felt his heart unravelling.

He was a sorry old man.

He kept still, eyes lowered. He would not discomfit her.

“It’s done,” she said. “There will still be some swelling, but it is much better.”

“And you said to me you did not have talents.”

She smiled shyly. “Father does not approve of Mediwizardry: he feels it brings you into contact with too many people that are not the sort one would like to mix with.”

“True,” Lucius said, “but you have natural skill as a Healer: that is not to be taken lightly. I must go. I am sorry that your party was spoiled – “

“And I will enjoy the rest more without worrying about what Artur will do,” she said. “My apologies that you should be assaulted in my home, when you came to give me safety.”

“My pride is bruised more than this,” he said, gesturing at his face. “I do not wish to advertise it, or discomfit your guests. May I apparate?”

“Oh, of course. Goodnight, Lucius.”

He nodded, and with a clap of displaced air, was gone.

He arrived in his flat and headed down to see George Weasley, but there was no answer at his door. He could not have expected that Weasley would spend all his evenings listening in on every occasion that Lucius wore the button, though he assumed someone in Shacklebolt’s organisation had that pleasure. The news, however, was important, and he wanted to be sure that they had heard it.

Benôit had been murdered, if Artur was correct. If Artur was indeed a Seer, which was a problem in itself. At the very least, Benôit was, apparently, missing.
He was about to walk back upstairs when Weasley opened the door.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. I was at home. Problem?” Weasley said, in his no-nonsense manner.

Lucius followed him into his office, and explained the evening’s events.

“Hmm,” Weasley said. “I wonder how much Artur can see? That’s a bit of a worry.” He looked Lucius over. “That looks a pretty decent healing job, but it must have hurt like shit. Bad form to attack a man from behind, without warning, too.”

“Artur is bad form personified. I should have been on my guard. I need to ask a favour.”

“Yes?”

“I mentioned Nanette Odont to you before, and I’ve asked Potter to take care of her if she needs help. My elf will get him if she uses the port-key and I’m not here. If Potter is unavailable, will you assist her? I’m assuming from the way you arrived tonight, that you have some monitoring charm set up at your door.”

“Yes. You want me to set one up in your apartment?” Weasley’s astonishment was evident.

“As surprising as it may seem, I do not entertain a stream of degenerates in my home,” Lucius said. “You know practically all the details of my life. If you can set up a spell that detects an arrival by port-key, excellent. If not, you can monitor all my visitors, if you wish: you will not find anything to keep you glued to your listening device.”

“I don’t have the time to waste either,” Weasley said. “Do you have anything that she’s touched? So I can link the spell to her?”

“My nose?” Lucius said. “Though I’d prefer to keep it.”

Weasley didn’t seem to find the comment facetious. He took a piece of cloth out of the drawer, and took a swipe down Lucius’ nose.

“This’ll pick up both of you, but I can rule you out,” he said. “Okay. She’s eighteen, you say?”

“Just. It was her birthday party tonight.”

“And engaged to Artur. Or not. You suspect she’ll be in more trouble because of her breaking the engagement?”

Lucius’ brows drew together. “I’m not sure if any of them will regard it as broken from what has happened tonight: it was said in haste. But yes, that could be an extra cause for concern.”

“You think her father will still want her to marry that twat?”

“It looks likely.”

“She can tell them both to piss off. She needs to grow a backbone – “

“I am not interested in your opinion. I would not ask for your help if you were not on the doorstep, and if I hadn’t taken you to be an honourable man - ”

“Calm down; I said yes, alright? I’ll come by tomorrow and fix the spell: your elf can see me in, yeah?”
“Thank you,” Lucius said tightly.

“You sure she’s not a honey-trap, Malfoy? You’re in a dangerous position.”

“I would stake my life on it.”

“Well, I hope you know what you’re doing,” Weasley said, standing up. “That life belongs to Harry, and I don’t like to see his possessions come to harm.”

“I’m rather fond of it myself,” Lucius said, somewhat surprised to find that he meant it.
James went to work on the Saturday. It was their busiest day, and he’d been working extra shifts to make up for the time he’d had off when his father was in court. He enjoyed his job – his clients were always happy, excited, planning something to look forward to. He’d been glad of it since everything had happened. Since his mother….

He left work with a couple of colleagues, went to a bar, and later to a nightclub. He went home with a rather quirky-looking blonde, who had some rather quirky ideas about what she liked in bed, and he left her at 4.30 in the morning, walking home as dawn cast red and yellow stripes behind the grey buildings along his route.

He fell back into bed, and was woken rudely by the sound of his floo alarm. He cast a glance at his clock before hauling himself from the comfort of his duvet. It was 10.35 am.

“You look like crap,” Victoire said, through the flames. “Let me through, will you? I’ve got coffee.”

The next moment she was in his living room. She walked past him to his kitchen, where she rooted around in his cupboards, and fished out a pair of cups and saucers that she’d given him after he’d moved in. She opened the lid of one of the cardboard mugs and divided the contents between the two china cups.

“Second round at the ready,” she tapped at the second takeaway mug, and picking up one of the cups, went and sat at his breakfast bar, reaching across to the owl chute where the Sunday paper lay waiting.

He sighed, picked up his, and came and sat opposite her.

He never liked to agree with her, on principle, but there was something about having the coffee out of china, savoured and rich, followed by a little pause, and then the second cup, which somehow seemed to … work. By the end of the second one, the cobwebs had always cleared from his brain, and he felt more ready to fight dragons, or whatever the day demanded. Usually dealing with Victoire, who was as determined as any dragon, once she put her mind to it.

But she gave him time.

She didn’t say anything, just flipped through the paper. She shoved the quidditch section at him.

He let himself be organised, and started reading himself. He was oddly glad of the company, and though he knew Victoire would have an agenda, he was happy to enjoy the quiet moment while it lasted.

After half an hour, they’d finished the coffee.

“What’ve you got for brunch?” she asked, getting up and looking in his cool cupboard. “Hmm, eggs, bacon – could you be more of a typical bachelor? Merlin, these tomatoes are squishy,” she said, picking one out of the salad drawer, which contained said tomatoes, three onions and two rather desiccated chillies. She looked through his cupboards.

James kept quiet. One thing about Victoire was that she seemed to have a French flair for knocking up a miracle out of what appeared to be nothing, and he wasn’t going to protest if she was about to make him something to eat. His stomach rumbled loudly at the thought.
She laughed.

“Why don’t you go and put something on and I’ll see what I can do?”

He looked down at himself. He was dressed in loose sweat pants, riding low on his hips.

“The sight of my pecs distracting you?” he said, doing a bunching thing with them that he’d practiced in front of the mirror.

“Urrgh,” she said. “Put it away. I’m fed up looking at all those bite marks. Went to bed with a vampire, did you?”

He looked down. There was a bite on his nipple and another on the side of his abdomen, just below his ribs. “There’s only two. She was passionate.”

“Yeah, right. And you liked it enough that you hurried straight home rather than staying the night,” she said, with far too much insight. “Also, you have three on your back.”

He tried turning to look.

“One on your shoulder, one mid-way, and one on the top of your bum. Merlin knows where-else,” she shuddered.

James had to acknowledge that whilst he’d found the first bite or two arousing, it had ended up being painful. The girl had thought it funny when he’d told her to tone it down. He’d distracted her by just really going for it, but he’d ended up with his shoulders gnawed to shreds. He didn’t tell Victoire of the ones he’d already dealt with.

He turned round. “Heal them, would you?”

She stood behind him and cast, dealing with them one at a time. “What about those two?” she said, walking round him, pointing at his nipple and abdomen. “Did you save them as trophies? Or reminders to keep away from the bitch?”

He laughed. “Something like that. Do them,” he shrugged.

She nodded, and pointed her wand at him.

It was nice having cousins that he felt so comfortable with.

“Thanks.”

“Was it worth it?”

“Not really,” he grinned. “She was a bit spooky.”

“I’ll say,” she laughed. “Go on, then, go get decent.”

Twenty minutes later he was tucking in to a mouth-watering breakfast.

He was just finishing up when she said, “You ready for the serious talk, then?”

“Get it over with,” he sighed.

He wasn’t prepared for what she said next.
“You’ve really upset my Dad.”

“What? Me?”

“Do you think it was easy for him to bring that up in front of everyone?”

“What? No, but – “

“I don’t know whether it’s the wolf thing, or being the eldest child in the family, but he’s used to people looking up to him. He’s never been very good with criticism, to be honest. To do what he did – and then you just stomped all over it – “

“But – I mean, Dad says Severus said I had a point,” he defended himself.

“And in the cold light of day? After embarrassing everyone? What do you feel now?” she asked bluntly.

He ran a hand around his neck.

“Dad says he’s falling in love with Kingsley and Severus,” he said instead of answering, and was pleased to see her eyes widening.

Once again, though, her response was not what he expected.

“Wow. Really? The three of them?”

He nodded.

“Phew!” she fanned herself. “That’s hot!”

“Victoire!”

“What? Alright, I know it’s your Dad, but….steam!”

“Three men together?” he squawked.

“Have you ever looked at them? They’re all so…male.”

“Yeah, that’s the bit that’s bugging me,” he said sarcastically.

“You’re so narrow-minded,” she said.

He picked up the plates and stomped to the sink.

“Me and the rest of the wizarding world,” he snapped.

“True, in England anyway. But they don’t live in England. Your Dad’ll join them in Spain, no doubt? What’s the problem?”

“You expect me to like it?”

She cocked her head and looked at him. “I bet you wouldn’t like it either, if he came home with some gorgeous buxom woman.”

He opened his mouth to protest. And shut it again as a picture of a woman like that standing in his father’s arms in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place came into his head.
“I’d get used to it,” he said, grudgingly.

“You’ll get used to Snape and Kingsley faster. You know that really, they’re great guys. And that they’re not marrying your Dad just to deprive you of your inheritance.”

“Where do you come up with these ideas?” he said, washing up unthinkingly. There were various plates he’d left on the side and he threw them all into the suds.

“Friend of mine. Father remarried, the two kids from his first marriage were sidelined. All the Dad could think about was the new children and his wife.”

“Dad’s not like that.”

“No, he isn’t, is he?” she said, pointedly. “From everything I’ve heard, he’s given up half his life to make yours happy. Are you expecting him to give up the rest of it?”

He was silent a long time.

“That’s low.”

“Yeah? Well, from where I’m looking, you’re behaviour makes you as low as a slug.”

“Hey!” he turned to her, half annoyed, half-grinning. She’d used to say something similar to him when he was a snotty eight-year-old.

“They’re men,” he said again. “How am I supposed to accept that?”

“Why is it your business?”

“He’s my Dad!”

“Yeah, and you’re his pain-in-the-arse son. Is he giving up on you?”

“He’s putting them first,” he said, bitterly.

“Bloody hell, how old are you?” she said. “If you were ten that would work, but you’re grown up. He’s done his job. Would you let what he thinks determine who you should be with? I don’t suppose he’d think too much of Miss Fangs and what she did to you last night, but was that in your mind at the time?”

“I wasn’t thinking of spending my life with her!”

“Fair enough. Be glad that your Dad isn’t thinking of bumping and grinding with every gay wizard or Muggle in sight; he likes two. I take it they return the interest?”

“Looks like it,” James nodded.

“Grow up, then.”

“You’re half French: you’re more accepting – “

“That is the poorest excuse I ever heard. As if you couldn’t choose to be more, yourself.”

“Well, society here won’t be – “

“So you’re really saying that this is about you. You don’t want to handle any reactions from
people, and you’d rather your Dad was miserable than fend off a few stray remarks.”

“You don’t understand – “

“Really? You think people haven’t given us looks over the years? That I haven’t heard comments as we pass about how Dad looks? Those that don’t know him just stare: those who know what happened wonder if he’s a werewolf. They don’t mince their words either way, you know.”

James stared at her, his hands motionless in the water. Its warmth was somehow soothing. “I had no idea – he’s just Bill –“

“- to the family. He’s a guy with hideous scarring to others.”

“How did you cope?”

“Mum was always brilliant. You know, she’s so beautiful, and with the Veela thing, and she’s never treated him as if he was anything but handsome. I didn’t realise he wasn’t until I was six or seven.”

“She’s cool, your Mum.”

“Yeah, but even she’d had enough these last few months. Since your Mum died. Dad sort of went all funny after it happened, and I don’t know what went on, but she’d been staying with her parents in France until Snape made Dad that potion.” She looked at him. “I never connected that we were always sent away coming up to the full moon. You know, we always had visits with our grandparents in France or with Grandma Molly. We were either at school, or away. Mum got us out of the house. I think that tells you something.”

James had gone pale. “You think your father – your father would have done something to you? Or Dominique? Or Louis?”

“I don’t think so,” she said. “But Mum and Dad made sure we were never around. I don’t know what happened between them, but after the family discussion we had last week, it’s clear that – well,” she shrugged. “I feel guilty that I didn’t realise everything Mum was going through. Everything they both went through.”

James made some more coffee, whilst they both mused over their thoughts.

“I don’t think I’m big enough to be accepting,” he said at last, as they sat in the living room, blowing to cool the liquid.

She looked at him and shrugged. “It’s your loss.” She sipped her drink gingerly. “So,” she said, “if my Dad had become a full werewolf– if Teddy’s Dad was alive – you’d shun them too, would you?”

“What? No! Why would you say that?”

“What’s the difference? They’d be something that wasn’t very acceptable in society. That seems to be your sticking point, rather than the people involved.”

“Your Mum’s a Veela – I don’t hold that against her!”

“No, but neither does society, does it? They’re acceptable because they’re so beautiful. It’s such a shallow way of looking at things, don’t you think?”
“Maybe I am shallow,” he said mulishly.

She laughed. “Oh, there’s no doubt about that! But you don’t have to be – it’s your choice.” She put the half-empty cup down. “I’m going.”

“You haven’t finished.”

“Well, I’ve said what I wanted to say.” She stood up. Unlike her sister, Dominique, she didn’t have Veela characteristics, but she was tall, and elegant, and very beautiful.

“Snape has helped my family stay together – don’t break yours up because of your prejudice against him – against your father. And weird as it might seem to someone as shallow as you say you are, I stick by my friends, so although I don’t agree with you, and I’ll tell you so, I’m there if you need me, alright?”

James nodded, clutching his cup.

“And if you ever say anything nasty about werewolves in front of Teddy, I’ll personally perform some serious spells on you that’ll leave you looking in far worse shape than last-night’s bitch, okay?”

He nodded again.

“Good. Glad we understand each other.” Then she leant forward, gave him a quick hug and peck on the cheek, and stepped into the floo.

Harry woke up slowly. The sun was filtering through the branches overhead. It was hot, but just the noise of the river, tumbling over the submerged stones, was refreshing.

Harry didn’t know what he’d expected: he’d stayed with Severus and Kingsley long enough before, though, that he’d happily gone along with the weekend’s activities. It had not been a non-stop orgy, which, to be honest, had been something of a relief. It would have made him feel retrospectively guilty for stopping things when he’d been staying with them on remand.

As it was, they’d got up early on the Saturday, before it had got too hot, and spent the morning in the vineyard, working hard, before returning to the house, where they’d all showered before eating. They’d all fallen asleep outside, Harry cuddling into Kingsley’s body again, and in the evening they’d gone over to Alejandro’s and Rosita’s for supper, where they’d played with the kids and Harry had met Alejandro’s mother at last. They’d returned home, and fallen into bed. In the morning, he’d slipped off to shower, and when he’d returned, Severus and Kingsley had been moving slowly together, coiled in a sixty-nine.

He’d watched, enthralled. It was nothing like anything he’d witnessed in the cellars. Well, there was the bed, for a start. More to the pint, it was slow, and sensuous. Kingsley had got ahead of Severus, but Severus had just pulled his cock out of Kingsley’s mouth, so Kingsley could concentrate all his attention on his own orgasm. Harry had come in his pants watching Snape’s throat swallowing as Kingsley arched, guttural sounds of pleasure coming from his mouth. The soft words uttered afterwards, Snape’s patience, whilst Kingsley came down from the experience, were all astonishing. Harry wanted to slip onto the bed and take Severus in his mouth himself, to allow Kingsley to luxuriate in the after-moments, to feel his body touching Kingsley whilst his mouth provoked Snape.
He could see that it would work.

Later, after breakfast, he’d gone to his workshop for a bit, relaxed and comfortable. His magic flowed into the small chest he was making, creating space and security.

After a leisurely lunch, they’d gone for a swim in the river, the water cool and refreshing, before stretching out on the rocks.

Harry turned his head at the soft sounds beside him, to see Snape kneeling over Kingsley, riding him slowly.

His small gasp drew their attention. Snape smiled at him.

Kingsley’s hand reached out.

Harry touched it briefly, but pulled away. Both men looked at him in concern.

“I want to touch too much,” he said.

“You can,” Kingsley groaned, his hips undulating.

Severus shook his head, even as he continued moving up and down. “No, you’re right, Harry,” he said breathlessly. “I don’t want you to regret anything. I want you to watch us and want to be part of this. I want you to think about sliding into Kingsley whilst I suck his cock – “

Kingsley groaned. “You’re killing me, Severus!”

“Me too,” Harry whispered, pressing his hand against himself.

“A compromise,” Kingsley gasped.

“Hmmm?” Severus breathed, leaning back, changing his angle.

“If you want,” Kingsley said, looking at Harry as he shifted his legs, heels against the stone for greater leverage, “you could sort yourself out. Watching us. Us watching you. Ungh, Merlin, that sounds hot!”

“Really?” Harry felt heat pouring through him at the thought.

“Pyrrhic,” Snape said, bending forward, his eyes on Harry, his tongue and teeth teasing at Kingsley’s nipple.

“See? You’ve made him all wordy,” Kingsley’s hands moved to grasps Snape’s hips. “That means he’s staving off being all hot and flustered.”

“If you think I’m not all hot and flustered with your cock up my arse – “ Snape slammed down hard.

Things developed pretty rapidly after that.

And Harry knew that this was what he wanted, where he wanted to be.
Later that evening, he was preparing reluctantly to take his leave.

“Have you enjoyed the weekend?” Kingsley asked, as they stood around the floo.

“You know I have,” Harry said, smiling. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for being brave enough to consider it,” Snape said. “I know it can’t have been easy.”

“I – it was,” Harry contradicted. “I – well, I know I’ve been aroused half the weekend – “

“Only half?” Snape murmured.

Harry grinned. “I’m glad that it wasn’t every single minute,” he said honestly. He shrugged. “I can’t believe it, but I’ve felt really relaxed. I didn’t expect that.”

“Even after staying with us before?” Kingsley asked.

“Yeah, I expect that helped, but I was all wound up about the sex thing ever since you suggested it. It was good to have the ordinary bits.”

“And do you still feel wound up about the ‘sex thing’?” Snape asked.

Harry looked at them both. “Only in as much as I – well, I’m a bit terrified about it, to be honest, because – well, you know, I’ve never had sex with a man. Not,” he went red and patted his arse, making Kingsley grin. “But – I know you won’t – hurt me – “

“Of course we won’t,” Kingsley’s expression changed, and he stepped forward to stroke Harry’s arm.

“It – this idea – to watch you – I mean, it was a good idea,” Harry said. “I don’t feel that sex is about – about force, and…and domination, and stuff, as I did before. I know you’ll let me be a wimp.”

Kingsley laughed.

“So what happens now?” Harry asked. “I know this sounds like an excuse, but Lily is home from school next weekend for the rest of the holidays. Bad timing, eh?”

“We can be patient,” Snape said.

“Speak for yourself,” Kingsley made Harry laugh again.

“This isn’t just a weekend thing,” Snape said, “you know we want you here anytime. So, if Lily has something else on, come to us.”

“He’s got a week before she’s home,” Kingsley said.

“I was going to suggest he have a week to think about this,” Snape said. “At least.”

“I know what I want,” Harry said.

“Yes?” Kingsley’s hands were thrust into his pockets, and Harry’s eyes followed down his thighs and up again as Kingsley rocked on his heels.

He looked at Snape, who returned his gaze, eyes dark.
“Two days, then,” Snape said. “Tell us on Tuesday. Forty-eight hours to be sure.”

“God, you have the patience of a saint,” Kingsley groaned.

Harry laughed, light-hearted and joyous.

“Do I get a kiss before I go?”

He did.

On Monday evening, Snape’s head appeared in the floo.

“Severus?” Albus smiled, as he strolled into the room to see who was there. “Hi! Are you coming through?”

“I’m afraid not. Is Harry in?”

“He’s gone to the grandparents. Want me to give him a message?”

“Thank you,” Snape said after a moment. “Can you tell him that I’ve been called away? I’ll be in Australia for the next few days: they have a case that requires the use of Veritaserox.”

“You want me to tell him you’ll be missing the meeting tomorrow, then?”

“Yes, but if you could give him the whole message – I will owl, if you prefer – “

“No, no problem.” There was a brief pause. “Dad looked well after the weekend,” he ventured.

“I’m pleased to hear it.”

Albus grinned. “Alright, don’t say anything! Dad hasn’t, apart from that he’d had a good time.”

“I expect you wouldn’t wish me to enquire about the intimate details of your weekend either,” Snape returned.

“True,” Albus nodded. A smile of reminiscence played around his mouth. “It was good.”

“One child less for your father to be worrying about, then,” Snape said. “Have you seen James? Has your father?”

“Neither of us, as far as I know,” Albus said, frowning.

“You might want to let James know that I won’t be there,” Snape said. “It might make it easier for him to come home.”

“He’s a pillock – “

“Your father loves him, as he loves you. Anything we can do to make either of them happier, is something that we must – try to work with.”

Albus nodded. “I’ll let them both know. Kingsley’ll be coming, though?”
“I believe so. Thank you, Albus,” Snape said, and his head withdrew.

Harry did his best to hide his disappointment. James just nodded when Albus floo-ed him.

“Alright. I was coming anyway. What’s this about a girlfriend? Been keeping that quiet.”

“How did you even know?” Albus asked.

“Dad told me. I thought about ‘dropping in’ on Sunday, just to see whether it was a fairy tale.”

Albus stiffened. “What made you hold back from alienating even more of your family?” he snapped. “Though you’re still doing a good job of going about it.”

“Hey!” James said, “Touchy, or what?”

“You’re a shit, James,” Albus said, and cut the connection, and then cursed that right after approving of Snape’s words, he’d done exactly the opposite.

“I’d like to see Mrs Atkins, of the MLE, please.”

“You have an appointment?” the receptionist asked, flicking the pages of a large diary.

“No, but if you send up my card, I believe she’ll see me.”

“That’s what you think,” the wizard said, giving the man an amused look.

“Please be kind enough to forward it.” The card was placed on the desk between them.

The receptionist picked it up and looked at it. “You’d better take a seat, then, Mr Duncan. It might be a while.”

As he supposed, it did not take Dorothy Atkins long to respond.

He watched her nod to the receptionist, and stood as she came towards him.

“Mr Duncan. This is a surprise.”

“Is it?”

She paused. “Perhaps you would care to join me for lunch?”

“What an excellent idea.”

They left the building. Once outside, they walked some distance, before she said, “You’ve got a nerve, Malfoy.”

“You think so?”
She was silent. Lucius was in no hurry to direct her thoughts, and stayed silent too.

“What do you want?” she demanded.

“I thought you’d offered me lunch?”

“I will not play games with you – “

“Really? I thought we were all pawns in your game. Or perhaps I’m your rook –“

“Don’t come the innocent with me – “

“I’ve no intention of it. I came to warn you.”

“Warn me?” she snapped. “Of what?”

“I just thought it would be – honest of me – to advise you, that should I meet the same fate as Benôit, I have left information that will point the finger straight in your direction.”

“I have no idea what you mean,” she said, her face straight ahead as she walked.

“Really? Mud sticks. I believe we could have a profitable – arrangement, but I don’t wish to spend all my time looking behind me, or checking my meals to see whether you’ve arranged to poison me.”

Several moments of silence ensued, broken only by the sound of her heels. Interesting that she wore that sort of shoe, Lucius thought.

“Of course,” he commented, “you may well have several other men – or women - to hand, willing to follow your every whim without comment, but if you’re serious about changing our world, about bringing back the old values, you need strong people at your side, not toadies. Which is, by the way, how Laval described Benôit, and why, I presume, you decided he had to go.”

They continued walking. Lucius enjoyed the freedom from the constant ache he usually felt in his hip. There were advantages to being in another’s body.

“What do you propose?” she asked.

“Next week, Lucius Malfoy will invite you to dinner. You will accept.”

She laughed. “In your dreams.”

“My dreams do not include you, and food,” he said. “You will accept. We will dine in Longborns,” he said, naming a discrete but popular restaurant just off Diagon Alley.

“In public? Are you crazy?”

“Not at all. You cannot hope to garner enough support without gathering the approval of the old families. Many of them lost members with the troubles. You need to show that you’re willing to engage us, and help us back into society.”

“That will go down very well as regards my credibility at the Ministry.”

“You brave it out, and it will. I have served my sentence, and lived an exemplary life since. You need to show that the Ministry is willing to move on, and to embrace all members of society.”
“And I’ll show that by having dinner with you?”

“We are about to fuel some speculation of a romantic entanglement between us.”

“You’re completely out of your mind, aren’t you?”

He turned to look at her, his eyes running over her with the hauteur with which the Malfoy name had been synonymous for generations. He wondered how it translated into this different face. “Let me assure you,” he looked down his nose, “that I have no interest in you whatsoever.”

He was pleased to see the look of outrage that she quickly masked.

“However, it will be a good start to introducing our – alliance. Later, people will come to realise that our relationship is based entirely on our political interest in restoring Wizarding Society. You’ve been working behind the scenes for your objective for years, it seems, and I can applaud your discretion and commitment. But if you don’t make a stand now, perhaps people who support our cause will not realise the role you have played in it. You may find yourself sidelined.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Just pointing out potential outcomes for your actions. I’m keen to move forward, and this seems the natural way to achieve that. Or perhaps you have other ideas?”

“I do have other ideas,” she said, firmly. “But I am not accustomed to sharing them.”

“You’re a one-woman organisation?” Lucius said. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Because a witch cannot achieve what a wizard can?” she bristled.

“On the contrary, I have the greatest respect for witches,” he said. “But it is essential to have someone to discuss ideas and plans with, don’t you think? Surely you must have other contacts in England? Laval and his cronies have no real interest in what we wish to achieve here, after all.”

“You’re fishing,” she said.

“Of course I am,” Lucius agreed. “There’s a lot to be achieved if there are only two of us. My intentions were to work in France, where there’s already a network of people in place, including in the Ministry. It seems unbelievable to me that you would have achieved less within our own country. Perhaps we can discuss that over our dinner, when you have decided whether you’re going to trust me or not.”

They had walked some considerable distance from the Ministry, and were standing at a crossroads. The moment was fast approaching when the Polyjuice would wear off, and Lucius preferred to keep the two remaining doses for future use.

“I’ll bid you good-day,” he said, and ignoring her gobsmacked face, turned and walked off to the left.

Lucius had spotted a pub just along the street, and shot into it, straight into the gents. He noticed a couple of men using the facilities, but he could feel the change already coming over him, and dived into a cubicle, slamming the door behind him. Through the agony he could hear laughter, and then the sound of the outer door opening and closing.

His head hit the door as he doubled over.
There was a gentle knock against it.

“Are you alright?” a voice said.

A few moments passed, and the knock, and question, slightly more urgent in tone, came again.

Lucius straightened, cast a quick spell to readjust his clothes, and flung open the door.

A wand was pointed directly at him. He paused.

“Grandfather!” The arm faltered. “I felt the magic – “

“I was resizing my clothes.”

“You were Polyjuiced.”

Lucius inclined his head.

“Someone’s hurt you,” Scorpius said, lowering his wand and stepping closer to look at Lucius’ face. “Are you alright?”

Lucius felt their history like a blow to the gut.

This young man – his grandson – had offered help to a stranger. Had had the skill to realise magic was being used and to have his wand at the ready. He had still offered his concern, even once he knew whom he was facing.

“I’m fine,” he said briskly.

“Hmm,” Scorpius said. He stepped back. “Okay.”

There was an awkward moment or two as they sized each other up, wondering what to do next.

“Would you care for a drink?”

Lucius, to his surprise, found that he wanted to say yes. The fact that his ideas had changed so much shocked him a little, but it seemed that he had spent time with Artur, who was a horrible example of humanity, and yet had refused to spend time with his own grandson, purely on the grounds that he had the same predilections. He wanted to get to know his grandson, because the impression that he had garnered, from the little that he knew of the young man, was that he was a very different kettle of fish entirely. And Potter had spoken of him with respect.

But he had a role to play. It was more than likely that Atkins had arranged for them to be followed before she left the building with him. To be seen with him would make Scorpius a subject of investigation, and put him at risk. He could not allow that to happen. It was possible that they were already being monitored. This coincidental meeting could put Scorpius in harm’s way.

He pulled his hauteur around him.

“With you? I would not,” he sneered.

Only years of experience allowed him to keep his face impassive as the hurt registered on Scorpius’ face.

“My apologies,” Scorpius said, and with a slight bow, stepped back, wrenched open the door, and was gone.
Lucius waited several moments, before exiting himself, and ignoring the landlord’s look of annoyance at him using the facilities without purchasing a drink, he walked straight out of the pub.

The Tuesday meeting was faster than usual. After some quick floo calls, they’d decided to just have the training part: there wasn’t any news since the Friday, and a number of people, as well as Snape, couldn’t make the evening: Teddy was working, so was Hermione, and Scorpius had other commitments.

The practice session was useful, though. Harry was glad James had come, and Victoire seemed to enjoy sparring with him. Andy paired up with Albus. Roxanne and Fred had come, and Rose. He enjoyed teaching, and Ron and George had shown up to help, though the other adults had had a night off, with the cancellation of the second part. At the end, the youngsters all decided to go out for a drink together, whilst the older generation had a beer or two in the kitchen.

Harry and James hadn’t had any ‘talks’, but James’ presence was a start, Harry hoped.

The following Saturday morning, Andy and Scorpius were breakfasting early. They were members of a friendly quidditch league, and their team had drawn the early slot for a practice session.

Scorpius was reading the sports section of The Prophet as he munched through a piece of toast. “Dad won’t be pleased with this,” he tapped an article with a buttery finger, making the smear worse as he tried to wipe it away. The player in the picture glared at him.

“Drusilla Dench has a serious spinal injury after yesterday’s practice. The Harpies coach reports that she’ll be off the team for at least three weeks whilst St Mungo’s top Healer, Jason Flanyard, fixes and realigns the vertebrae.”

He took a mouthful of coffee to wash down the toast. “I wonder who’ll be keeper in her place today? The Magpies are gonna be thrilled, aren’t they? Shall we go to the match?”

Scorpius and Andy had open tickets to all Harpies’ matches.

“Hey,” Andy didn’t answer, “listen to this!”

Scorpius glanced over at his tone. Andy was reading the entertainment and social pages.

“Angel and Demon find mutual ground?” Andy read, then glanced at Scorpius.

“Is love on the cards? Guess who our intrepid society reporter, Phyllida Frank, saw dining à deux at Longborns? None other than Head of the MLE, Dorothy Atkins, looking romantic in a ruby robe, in the company of bad boy Lucius Malfoy.”

Scorpius stiffened, and grabbed the paper, reading the rest of the article alongside Andy.

Is romance in the air? Our reporter certainly thinks so! Phyllida tells us that Mrs Atkins, who was widowed some years ago, seemed lost for words in the presence of the elegant Mr Malfoy, a widower who was previously married to the renowned beauty Narcissa Black.
Is it right that someone in Mrs Atkins’ position should be seen with a convicted criminal? No doubt Mrs Atkins, who had a formidable reputation in court, would argue that Mr Malfoy has paid his dues, and is entitled to a fresh start. What do our readers think? Owl us at Gossip! The Prophet, Diagon Alley. Readers’ comments will be published in Monday’s edition.

“Bloody hell! Grandfather is involved with that…cow?” He stared at Andy in horror. “What if he’s involved with what she’s up to?”

“It says romantic – “

“Too convenient,” Scorpius said, “isn’t it? Especially after Tuesday.”

It had taken Scorpius twenty-four hours to tell Andy that he’d seen his grandfather Tuesday lunchtime. He’d been unable to face going to the Tuesday session, torn by uncertainty and loyalty to his family.

Andy had suggested that his grandfather might have had any number of reasons for using Polyjuice, and that he ought to discuss it with his father first. But his father hadn’t been at home on the two occasions when he’d floo-called, and it wasn’t something he wanted to discuss with his father in the offices of The Prophet.

“Right, I’m going to go and see if he’s home right now,” Scorpius said, getting up. “He must know about this – they must have run the story by him before publishing.”

“It’s a bit early, isn’t it?” Andy asked, looking at the clock.

“Hopefully I’ll catch him before he goes out,” Scorpius said. He kissed Andy quickly. “I’ll meet you at practice? Tell them I won’t be long, if I’m a bit late. Frank’ll be glad to have the chance to take my place if I’m longer than I expect.”

“I’ll take your kit for you,” Andy said.

“Thanks,” Scorpius grinned, moving back to give him a rather lengthier kiss, before striding to the floo.

He threw in the powder and walked straight through into his father’s London home. Dolly, his father’s house elf, appeared at once.

“Morning, Dolly. Is Dad in?”

“Master Draco is still being in bed, Master Scorpius,” the elf said, bowing.

“Okay, thanks.”

“Can Dolly be getting Master Scorpius anything? Some breakfast?”

“No, I’m fine. Do you have a couple of cups of coffee? I just wanted a word with Dad.”

The elf nodded, and disappeared, returning with a small tray.

Scorpius took it and made his way to his father’s room, balancing the tray on his hip as he knocking quietly on the door, before opening it and walking in.

“Holy shit!”

He dropped the tray.
“Scorpius!”

He backed out, hands over his eyes. The shattered crockery blocked the door as he tried to shut it. He whipped his wand out, banishing it, whilst shielding his eyes with his other hand.

There was a huge puddle of coffee and another of cream soaking into the rich carpet.

“I’m so sorry!”

“Wait – “

“I’ll – I’ll be downstairs. My apologies,” he bowed his head again, without looking towards the bed, and shut the door firmly behind him.

He took a deep breath.

An hysterical desire to laugh was building.

He ran down to the kitchen.

“Dolly!”

“Master is wanting something else?” Dolly appeared instantly.

“Why didn’t you tell me Father had company?”

The elf looked puzzled. “But Master is asking for two cups of coffee.”

“For me and Dad!”

“But Master Scorpius is saying he is fine. Dolly is thinking that Master must want the coffee for Master Draco and his guest.” Her lip wobbled. “Dolly is being very sorry – “

“No, no, it’s not your fault at all,” he said, patting her shoulder. “I think we need some more coffee, though, and – er – I spilt the last lot on the carpet. When – they’re – dressed, and out of there, perhaps you could do something to stop it staining?”

“Dolly is doing that,” the elf nodded happily. “And Master’s robes?”

Scorpius looked down and realised the coffee had splashed up the bottom of his robe.

“Please.”

With a few motions of her fingertips, it was clean again.

“Thanks,” he smiled.

“And now I is getting you some fresh coffee. Master Scorpius is needing some too now?”

“Yes, you’re spot on there,” Scorpius agreed.

Soon, he was sitting at the kitchen table, cradling the cup in his hands. He would have preferred, by far, to have gone back to Andy, and to have fallen into his arms, to share his embarrassment and the unbelievableness of what he had just seen.

But he really did need to talk to his father, and he rather suspected his father might want to have a word with him.
“I’m sorry to have embarrassed you,” his father said, walking into the room, looking completely immaculate, and not as if his son had just caught him *in flagrante delicto*.

Scorpius stood up. “I beg your pardon, Father, for walking in like that. If I’d had any idea – “

“I suspect it was something of a shock,” Draco said, running his hand over his hair in an unconscious gesture that revealed his awkwardness to his son.

“I – it’s none of my business.”

“No, it isn’t,” Draco said.

Scorpius bit his lip.

“You came to see me for a reason?” Draco had reached for the coffee pot, and was pouring himself a cup.

“Dolly says she’ll be able to clear up the mess I made,” he apologised, prompted by the sight of the coffee.

“I’m sure she will. It was a kind thought. What was so urgent that you came to see me so early?”

“The article about Grandfather in the paper.”

“Ah.”

“You knew he was seeing her?”

“N- no,” Draco said.

“But – you’ve spoken to him? Before you published that?”

“No,” Draco said.

“But Father –“

“Let it go,” Draco sighed.

“She’s the possible woman behind killing your fiancée – or have you forgotten all about that? Now you’ve filled the gap in your bed?”

“You will not take that tone with me!” Draco snapped.

Scorpius bowed his head. “Sorry, Dad. It’s just – I saw Grandfather on Tuesday.”

Draco sat down. “You did? Where?”

In a pub not too far from the Ministry. I was in the loo. This odd man dashed in and I thought he was unwell – he thumped against the cubicle. So I knocked and asked if he was alright. When the door opened, it was Grandfather.”

“And it was definitely not Grandfather who went in?”
“Well, I was peeing at the time, but I saw him out of the corner of my eye. Grandfather is hard to miss: it wasn’t him. Also, the body he was in, he was all clutched up. I’m presuming, in retrospect, that the Polyjuice was wearing off.”

“Makes sense. So what did he say?” Draco asked, taking a sip.

“He agreed he’d used Polyjuice.”

“He did?”

“What other explanation was there?” Scorpius said.

“Hmm. Good point. So what else did he say?”

“Not much. I invited him for a drink. He reacted as if I was a stranger trying to pick him up in a pub toilet.”

“Oh, Scorpius. I’m so sorry.”

Scorpius shrugged. “I should have known better than to ask.”

“Have you told Potter?”

Scorpius shook his head.

“Why not?”

“I – I couldn’t bring myself to go to the training on Tuesday. I knew if I saw Harry, I’d say something. I – I’ve tried to contact you a couple of times – you’ve not been home.” He paused for a moment. “You’ve been with her?” he nodded his head vaguely in the direction of upstairs.

“Probably.” Draco said, rubbing his hands down his legs. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there. I’m surprised you didn’t tell Potter though.”

Scorpius shrugged again. “He – he’s family, isn’t he? Grandfather. I needed to talk to you first. And Dad – he was injured. I mean, it had been healed, but you could see. On his face.”

Draco got up, came round the table, and hugged his son.

“We need to talk to Potter. I’ll go floo call him.”

Draco strode away.

Scorpius poured himself another cup of coffee.

There was a sound at the kitchen door.

“Is there any more of that? I’m parched.”

Scorpius went bright red at the thought that he wasn’t the slightest bit surprised, given the last thing he’d witnessed.

He stood up, and made a slight bow. “Good morning, Gloria. Black, or white?”

She strolled over, and picked up the pot. “This morning, definitely white, don’t you think?” And she gave him a punch on the arm, and burst into laughter.
In the doorway, he saw his father, pink-cheeked but rolling his eyes, and next to him, Harry, who, much to Scorpius’ relief, looked every bit as gobsmacked as he felt himself.
Harry lay in his bed on Monday night, unable to sleep and out of sorts.

It was wonderful, of course, to have Lily home again. She and Albus had both been enjoying a lie-in when Draco had called him from the floo on Saturday morning, and he’d returned before they were awake.

She and Albus had soon settled in to their normal routine of arguing and teasing each other. Harry had been determined that Lily shouldn’t feel that she had to be the ‘woman of the house’. He thanked Merlin that Mitty, Dinky and the baby were back: it meant that she didn’t feel that he was doing all the work, and she was thrilled to see Allie, although having her there made it quite clear that the elfling had already formed a strong bond with Albus.

Allie’s eyes followed him the minute he came into the room, and his long fingers grasped at Albus’ hands or ears or hair.

Luckily, Lily seemed to find this really funny.

Lily had come home with so many plans for seeing friends and family that Harry had no worries about how she’d occupy her time, and what exactly his role was supposed to be. Everything had fallen into place quite naturally.

As far as it could, without Gin there.

And without James.

Lily had commented on the Friday night that James had owled her about going out to a pub with him on Saturday night, as he couldn’t make family dinner on Sunday.

The news was a bit of a blow to the gut to Harry, to know that, despite his sister being home, James was not intending coming to the house, apart from to the Tuesday evening sessions.

He was cutting his links to Harry.

Albus had tried to tell him that James would come round, but the conversation had been interrupted, and it wasn’t one that Harry had wanted to restart.

He lay in bed, wondering if he was in the wrong. Was he a bad father to want to pursue a relationship with Severus and Kingsley, if it meant that his son was going to turn his back on him?

Not that he’d had the opportunity to take things any further with the two men. He’d had a floo call with Kingsley, after the meeting with Draco, Gloria and Scorpius, but that had left him feeling wrong-footed too. He hadn’t mentioned Gloria’s involvement with Draco to Kingsley – after all, what business was it of either of them? – but still, it felt bad to be keeping a secret from him.

And Draco’s relationship with Gloria had disturbed him.

Not that it was Gloria, which he had to admit, had shocked him, but that Draco too seemed to have abandoned Ginny.

There he was, her husband, already anticipating a new relationship, and her lover, the man she’d wanted to marry, had moved on too.
Ridiculous as it was, he felt they were both letting her down.

He wasn’t used to discussing things with anyone, but even if he’d wanted to, who could he have discussed it with? Not with Severus or Kingsley, because of Gloria, and not with Ron and Hermione, because it would put Ron’s back right up.

And he’d listened to what Scorpius had had to say, and not explained to him that his grandfather was a spy. He knew Draco had wanted him to, but the more people knew, the more Lucius was at risk. He wasn’t prepared to allow that. It felt mean, but they had been estranged a long time. When this was over, he hoped they would be able to mend fences – if indeed, Lucius wanted to mend them. It sounded as if he was continuing to regard Scorpius with disdain.

He shifted on the sheets. A summer storm was rolling in, and a cool breeze was blowing through the window.

He needed to go and see Ron. He wanted to go into the Ministry. If Atkins was at the heart of everything, the Ministry had to be important. He didn’t know what he wanted to do there, exactly, he just had the urge to wander the halls, to feel it. He didn’t know if Ron could take him in, but even if they found some excuse, like a visit to the Muggle Liaison Office to discuss some gadget, he needed to get into the building.

His curtains were open, and the first flash of lightning lit his room for a brief second; he waited, counting, as he had done as a child, for the rumble of the thunder. It wasn’t a rumble though, but a tremendous crack. He got up, and went to watch. He’d always loved storms, the raw energy of them, the feel of the pent-up power whispering over his skin.

He watched a huge bolt of lightning splitting and diving down. The thunder brushed through him, thrilling.

He turned, and ran down the stairs, grabbing his broom from the rack, and threw open the back door. The rain hadn’t started yet, though he knew it would come any moment. He was wearing a tee-shirt and boxers. With a shrug and a grin, he mounted his broom, and zoomed up into the storm.

Nanette had returned to Paris after a week spent with her aunt.

The day after her party, she’d tried to tell her father that she meant it, about marrying Artur, but he seemed even more inclined, the next day, to think that Artur had not been so unreasonable after all.

“I agree he was rash, but it gives me hope that he cares for you, that he should have been enraged to see you in another man’s arms,” he’d said. “You’ll see, Nanette; this may work out very well.”

Nanette’s aunt, who had come to stay for the weekend of the party, had seen the tension, and had persuaded Henri to allow her to take Nanette back to Reims with her. The excuse of ‘womanly discussions before her marriage’ had been more than enough to garner his consent.

Unfortunately, Tante Sabine agreed with her father. When Nanette tried to explain that Artur had not the slightest interest in her, her aunt took that as a challenge to help Nanette learn everything she needed to ‘please her man’, as she termed it, and to ‘inspire his interest’.

Nanette might have enjoyed the discussions, if her aunt hadn’t used the name ‘Artur’ every time
she referred to ‘the man’: ‘Artur will like it if you…’, ‘and then you take Artur’s manhood into…’.

The very thought of touching Artur intimately made her feel physically sick.

She arrived back determined to put her foot down and tell her father that she would not marry him, and that she would rather spend her life as a single woman, but her feet were swept out from underneath her when she arrived back to find that her father had arranged a dinner party with Artur and his parents for that evening, ‘to finalize the wedding plans’.

“Father,” she said firmly, “I truly do not wish to marry Artur.”

“Things are happening, Nanette. It is only pre-wedding nerves: everyone gets them, I’m told. All will be well, I assure you. You know I only have your interests at heart.”

“I had thought that was true,” she said. She took his hands. “Father, I cannot be happy if I am married to Artur.”

“You are young, you do not see the world as adults see it – “

She sat up straight. “I am an adult now, Papa, and I am telling you: I will not marry him.”

To her horror, her father pulled his hands away, and stood up. He walked to the window, and with his back to her, said, “I do not know what has come over you. You have always sought to please me, and I have sought to do the best for you. Have I ever failed you before?”

A tiny voice in the back of Nanette’s mind whispered that she had not liked leaving school, and her friends, and having a tutor, and that if things had been done differently, she might not have ended up infertile. Then, she hated herself for laying that at his feet: she had had the accident: she had been too embarrassed to speak about the changes that had resulted from it.

“No, Father,” she said, “but – “

“They are due to arrive in two hours,” Henri said. “You will not be mistress of this house for much longer. Go and see to your duties, that all is well.”

Nanette stood up slowly. “Are you saying that either way, I will no longer be mistress here? That I will either marry Artur, and leave this house, or that you wish me to leave it if I do not marry him?”

“You will be most welcome to visit with your husband,” he said, his back still to her. “But if you are not willing to take my advice, it is hard to see that we could continue to live happily under this roof.”

Her hands were shaking. She didn’t know whether it was shock or anger. “I am sorry to have offended you, Papa,” she got out, and hurried from the room.

Her aunt had returned to Paris with her, and it was she who engaged Madame Brouchard in various conversations over the meal. Sensing her mood, her aunt asked her only the sort of questions that appeared to be neutral, but were, in fact, not. Nanette agreed that she liked peonies, but that it was a little late for them; that yellow roses were pretty; that a home in the west of the wizarding district was very desirable.

When the meal was over, Madame Brouchard said, “Artur, why not take Nanette for a turn in the garden whilst coffee is served? I’m sure Henri will be happy to instruct his elves to bring yours into the gazebo: you and Nanette must have much to catch up on.”
Her aunt had said that it was an excellent idea, Henri had agreed, and Nanette found herself heading out into the garden with a smirking Artur.

“I must say, Nanette,” he said, as they strolled down the path to the wooden structure at one side of the garden, “I underestimated you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“I had no idea you were going for the big prize.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she said haughtily.

“Lucius Malfoy,” he commented.


“Come, come, you have no need to be shy with me. I appreciate a ruthless streak. It makes you – less boring – than I had thought.”

“Thank you,” she said sarcastically.

“Well, that goody-two-shoes act – it’s sickening.”

“You’re obviously full of compliments tonight.”

He laughed. “You see? I had no idea you had such a sharp tongue on you.”

Nanette had no desire to be in the dark confines of the gazebo with him for any longer than necessary, so she took a side path, through the knot garden. The scent of the roses, encased in beds hedged with lavender, was heady.

“Of course, your aim was bound to fail,” he smirked.

“And what aim would that be?”

“Lucius Malfoy, of course. You thought to trade me in for a more useful model, didn’t you? A man who already has a child – even a grandson – is unlikely, I expect you thought, to object to your - lack of womanly qualities.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” she demanded.

“Oh, come on! Sucking up to him at every turn, simpering little slut that you are, and then kissing him in public – “

She slapped him.

“Ow! Bitch!” His hand was at his cheek, and his eyes were flashing with fury.

“Monsieur Malfoy has treated me with perfect propriety,” she said.

“Well, it’s not his morals that I’m commenting on, is it? He’s already staking his claim elsewhere, and right at the top of the ladder too.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ooh, poor Nanette, did you hope he’d want you? Sorry, babe, he’s gone for someone with a lot
more to offer. Looks, power – fertile too, I expect.” He looked at her, and his eyes narrowed. “You really don’t have any idea, do you? You really ought to keep up with the papers.”

“What gossip are you referring to now?”

“Mr Smooth and Snooty is dating the Head of British Law Enforcement.”

“What?” Nanette could not make sense of what he was saying.

“Dorothy Atkins,” he leant in, whispering in her ear. “A mature widow, elegant and attractive. And also, the witch who’s going to help Lucius become the British Minister for Magic.”

“Then – that’s a very good thing,” she retorted.

She did not feel hurt. She did not. Of course Lucius would be interested in such a woman.

“How do you know all this?” she asked. “That last bit can’t be in the papers.”

“No, of course it isn’t, you stupid fat cow!” He leant forward again, even as she recoiled. “She’s one of us.”

“I’ve never even heard of her before!”

“What about Duncan?”

“Mr Duncan? He’s been to dinner chez nous, but what is he to anything?”

“Duncan is Atkins under Polyjuice. Réné told us. Malfoy worked it out. We just put Duncan’s oddness down to his being English, but Malfoy realised at once that there was something fishy about him. And now he’s dating her. So you can forget riding off into the sunset with him. I’m not losing out on my position after all this time, so you will marry me, you little cunt, and if you want to flirt with Malfoy, if he’s interested in fucking your stupid brains out, then I don’t mind. The closer we get to him the better – “

“You expect me to – to – prostitute myself – “

“Oh, please. Don’t tell me he doesn’t get you all hot and damp down there?” Artur said, his hand grasping her crotch.

She gasped –

“Sorry to disturb you,” Madame Brouchard said, “but your father and I are heading home, Artur. We’ll see you later, no doubt.” Her eyes slid over Nanette. “Goodnight, Nanette. I am glad to see you and Artur – getting on so well,” and she turned and disappeared along the path to the terrace.

Nanette had moved away, horrified at having been touched so intimately and spoken to so crudely by Artur, and even more shocked that his mother had witnessed it, and not rebuked her son, or regarded what was going on as inappropriate.

She turned back to Artur. “You are a disgusting piece of filth!” she hissed. “I will never marry you!”

Artur grabbed her by the throat, walking her backwards. Her feet barely touched the ground and she felt absolutely terrified. The back of her head hit the woodwork of the gazebo. “You will,” he sneered into her face. “You will marry me, and you’ll smile, and you’ll do exactly what I say, you little trollop, or else you’ll find that your father has suddenly suffered the most unexpected
accident.”

Her chin was forced up, and she could barely breath. “How dare you threaten me!” she bit out.

“How’s to stop me?” he laughed, spittle hitting her in the face, before he dropped her and walked away.

The next day, she walked to the wizarding library, ostensibly to look at some books on wedding arrangements, so that she would know what would be the best ones to buy. The task found a great deal of favour with her aunt, although she averred that Amélie LaBonne’s text was the best available, even if it was written in 1887. Once at the library, Nanette studied every copy of the English wizarding newspapers available.

Artur was right.

She went to bed that night feeling hurt and trapped. She knew she was foolish. She knew that Lucius thought of her as a child. She was hurt, surely, that he hadn’t mentioned Dorothy Atkins to her.

But why should he?

She was not his confidante, though she had treated him as hers.

He had been kind, that was all.

She felt utterly disgusted with the suggestions that Artur had made: how could any man suggest that his wife deliberately sleep with another? It made her friendship with Monsieur Malfoy – Lucius – feel degraded, and dirty. How could she ever face him, and react normally?

But in the night, she woke, hot and sweaty, her dreams still clinging to her, as her breath returned to normal.

Dreams of Lucius, of being in his arms, dancing, of the gentle pressure of his hand on her back, the fine bones of his face so close to hers, the faint scent he exuded, the touch of his hands on hers, all mixed with the explicit advice that her aunt had given her.

One hand slipped up to touch her ear, and the ear-ring that Lucius had placed there; she shivered, and buried her flushed face in her pillow.

On Monday, Harry went along to The Leaky. Albus had said Ron would be working, though he wasn’t sure of his shifts for the rest of the week. Lily had plans to go and meet up with some friends from Hogwarts in Diagon Alley for a day of shopping and catching up.

Ron was pleased to see him, and curious when Harry told him he wanted to get into the Ministry
for a bit of exploring, but couldn’t really explain why.

“If I was you,” Ron said, wiping down the bar as he spoke, in a manner that looked at if he’d been doing it for years, “I wouldn’t bother finding someone to go in with. That’ll make you stand out more than ever. Anyone can try and get into the Visitors’ Gallery when a trial’s on - and there usually is one for something or other: why not go in there with the crowd, then put on your cloak - or do your invisibility thing - and bugger off for a look round?”

“You don’t think they’ll be able to detect me?”

“Well, if you’d come in invisible, or cloaked, you’d have set the wards off, but as far as I know, which is not as much as I’d like to, these days, once you’re in, you should be able to move around without setting anything off. And if you do, you can just say you got lost looking for the loo or something, yeah? They’re miles away from the courts, actually, two floors up for the public bogs, so it’s not such a bad line. You wouldn’t be the first; came across a wizard doing it in one of the umbrella stands once, got so desperate.”

“Nice image, thanks,” Harry grimaced.

“Yeah, can you imagine shaking off your brolly thinking it was still wet with rain and – “

That’s really gross,” Harry snorted.

“I know,” Ron grinned.

“I take it you didn’t tell anyone?”

“The umbrella stand was outside Daltry’s office. Right prick, he is. Course I didn’t.”

Harry shook his head, chuckling. “Sure you don’t miss the job?”

“Some bits, but I like it here.” He leant forward, and whispered, as if they hadn’t already been having the sort of conversation that didn’t do to be overheard, “Hannah’s agreed to sell the place to us.”

“Really? You’ve decided? Wow.”

Ron nodded. “Hermione’s parents have lent us a bit of cash. We had some, you know, but there were other bidders. I had to be fair to Hannah on the price.”

“Yeah, definitely.”

“Anyway, they really like The Leaky, first wizarding place they’d ever seen, and of course, they can get in from the Muggle side, so they’re really pleased. Like ‘the ambience’ apparently, and what with Hermione being their only daughter, they’re pleased to help out. Glad that I’m not going to be off leaving her on dangerous missions, and all that.”

“Hermione didn’t mind you being an Auror, though, did she?” Harry asked in surprise.

“No, but – oh, yeah, sure Mate, two butterbeers coming up,” Ron said, as an impatient customer interrupted the conversation.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Harry said, with a grin. “See you tomorrow night?”

“Yup,” Ron nodded, expertly pouring the famous drink into two glasses. “See ya, Harry.”
Harry did exactly as Ron suggested. A couple of hours later he found himself wandering around the Ministry, riding the lifts and exploring each floor. He didn’t want to return to the cells, especially the ones that damped his magic – he’d become visible, for a start, and wouldn’t that raise suspicion! But in the lift, he saw Stephen Walsingham, one of the warders who’d replaced Peters, and had treated him properly.

An idea occurred to him. He nipped out when the lift stopped to let an officious-looking witch out, saw there was no-one around, dropped the invisibility and stepped back in.

“Mr Walsingham!” he exclaimed. “I was just coming to see you.”

“Mr Potter!” The man looked flustered. “This is unexpected. Is there something you’ve left behind?” His brows drew together.

Harry held out his hand. “I left my manners behind,” he smiled. “I’ve been meaning to come back and thank you for treating me so well.”

“Not at all, not at all,” Walsingham said, shaking his hand without any hesitation. “I’m sorry that other members didn’t live up to the ethics of our profession.”

The lift doors clanged open. It was an awkward moment. “Would it be alright if I came and took a look at my cell?” Harry asked. “I was rather ill most of the time, and it might help me to see it from the outside, so’s-to-speak.”

“Well there isn’t anyone on that floor,” Walsingham said. He looked at his watch. “I can’t see there being any problem with that, though I’d need to accompany you, of course. I’ve got ten minutes before I need to be on shift, if that would do you - ?”

“Thank you,” Harry said. “You’re very understanding.”

He didn’t like to appear a wimp, but god knows, he’d had enough nightmares in the past to know that people were tormented by all sorts of things.

“We need to transfer to a different lift,” Walsingham said.

A couple of minutes later, they were standing in the corridor outside the cell.

“I don’t know how you can stand working here,” Harry said, “the magical dampening – it’s sort of exhausting, isn’t it?”

The oppressive feel of the spellwork was horrible.

“To be honest, you’re the only prisoner I’ve ever known to be put on this floor,” Walsingham said. “The smell is what puts most people off.”

“Yeah, it’s pretty rank, isn’t it?”

Had they not cleaned it since he’d been here?

“I think the stink must come up from the sewers,” Walsingham’s eyes darted away, as if shying away from any explicit reference to the ordeal that Harry had suffered.

Harry shut his eyes, grasping the bars as if in deep thought. He was actually feeling out. Everything was dull and muted by the web of the spells, but behind it, he could feel the pulse of the earth, and
the thrum of water, and the Ministry, cocooned, safe within.

Walsingham gave a slight cough. He looked at his watch apologetically as Harry looked up.

“I’m sorry; thanks, Mr Walsingham,” Harry said politely.

They got back into the lifts, and Walsingham got off, leaving Harry to ride up. He went into the toilets Ron had mentioned, and donned his invisibility before wandering along to stand outside the plain black door of the Department of Mysteries.

The magic there thrummed heavily.

It was the one job in the Ministry that appealed to Harry, and more so as he had worked with space and natural materials. Not that he wanted to be some boffin, but it was obvious that there was so much about magic that he didn’t know, that would be interesting to explore.

He liked what he did though. It was just one of those things that could be interesting. He didn’t know anyone that worked there, and that seemed rather odd in itself.

A little more exploring, and he headed back.

He didn’t know what he’d learnt, really, but he felt satisfied that he’d been.

“Well, I’ve some interesting news,” Kingsley said, as they gathered round the table for the Tuesday meeting.

Everyone looked at him with interest.

“Hogwarts pupils are all back home now, and so we’ve been able to approach the three students from Donnelly’s group.”

“And?” Harry said, leaning forward. “Did they tell you what was going on?”

“They were all immensely loyal to each other, and didn’t say a word. Luckily, my operative in Hogwarts had won their confidence a little, persuaded them to meet us all together, and the truth came out.”

“And what is the truth?” Draco asked. He glanced across at Harry, and looked away again quickly.

Harry tried to be mature and not feel awkward too.

Gloria, sitting half-way down the table, did not seem to be bothered in the least.

“Donnelly singled out those students that shared her views pretty quickly after her arrival. She set up the club, and using Polyjuice and trying to be undetected was one of their regular activities.”

“They made their own Polyjuice? Isn’t that rather difficult?” Scorpius asked.

“It is time-consuming and complex -” Snape began.

“- but perfectly possible,” Hermione finished.
“Not always entirely successfully,” Snape looked at her.

So did everyone else.

“Hey! The potion was perfect! Just because I put a cat hair in it by mistake – “

“Yeah, mine and Harry’s was fine – that is – Mione made it, of course,” Ron said. “Don’t know how they could take that often though,” he shuddered. “Makes you want to vomit.”

“You made Polyjuice at Hogwarts?” Draco asked. “Severus let you brew in the classroom?”


“How old were you?” Bill asked.

“Second year,” Hermione said.

“What? No way,” Draco snorted, a bit of the old rivalry coming out.

“Hah! Shows what you know,” Ron said. “You showed us an article about my Dad being fined for the flying car. Your Dad was the prick calling for his resignation in it.”

“You – you impersonated Greg and Vince?” Draco’s eyes were bugging out.

“Too right, we did, great hulking morons – “

“He’s dead! Vince is dead. Have you no respect?” Draco snarled.

Ron opened his mouth, and shut it again. Crabbe had practically killed them into the bargain. He didn’t feel any respect at all -

“Children, children,” Gloria said, shaking her head. “Shall we get back to business?”

There was a further moment of silence, one or two snorts, and a general feeling of relief.

“Thank you, Mother,” Kingsley said. He looked at everyone. “It’s been quite astonishing how well everyone has worked together, given the different views and standpoints represented here,” he glanced briefly at James, before continuing, “and I’m very grateful for it. If we can hold it together, and continue with the mutual respect, we can achieve our objectives, to bring Ginny’s killers to justice, and to prevent people of dubious beliefs and methods from gaining a foothold in their attempts to destroy our society.”

It wasn’t often that Kingsley took that sort of tone. A man that could speak like that, off the cuff, was just the sort of person to be Minister for Magic, Harry thought. What a loss to the country...

“Well said,” Bill nodded. “Okay, what were the kids up to?”

“One of them was asked to use Polyjuice and give Sam Donnelly’s lessons on the afternoon of March 2nd,” he said.

Harry half stood up. “You – you’re saying that Samantha Donnelly – that she could have been one of the ones who killed Ginny?”

“I’m saying that her alibi, that she was teaching with a classroom of pupils to prove it, has been shot to pieces.”
“And that, if the kid is honest, Donnelly was lying,” Teddy said.

Kingsley nodded.

“And they didn’t say anything?” James asked.

“I don’t think, at the time, they connected what had happened with Ginny to Donnelly,” Kingsley said. “They had no reason to think that she would go and kill a famous Quidditch player, who was the mother of one of their fellow pupils,” he looked to Lily.

“So what made them want to get out? They looked pretty terrified when I saw them,” Harry said. “And why didn’t they?”

“They became increasingly concerned about her views and the level of – sadism – that she exhibited, both in their cover scenario – the friendly, mixed-House quidditch group – and in their practice sessions.”

“What, they hadn’t picked up that she was a nutter at the start?” Teddy scoffed.

“She could seem quite nice,” Hugo said. “She was funny sometimes.”

“They said she made them feel special,” Rose commented. She’d been involved in talking to the youngsters. “At the start. Given special privileges, special outfits, a bit of insider information….”

“It sounds pretty much like grooming,” Hermione said.

They looked at her.

“Paedophiles and sexual abusers often groom their intended victims, making them feel special. In Muggles, it can be someone in authority doing this – priests, teachers in boarding schools, or strangers - on the – using computers” she said. The concept of the internet was not something that wizards had much idea of.

“That’s sick,” Scorpius said.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. It makes it much more difficult for the victim to say no, or to feel that they haven’t colluded in their own abuse. The adult tries to convince them that it isn’t abuse, but special treatment, because they’re special people.”

“My brain is feeling grossed out just thinking about that,” Ron said. “So, what about what happened to Neville and Hugo? Were they involved in that, then?”

“That was the straw that broke the camel’s back. A different one of the three was asked to Polyjuice up and take Donnelly’s quidditch lesson. Later they heard what had happened to Hugo and Professor Longbottom, and put two and two together.”

“So why didn’t they say anything?” Andy asked.

“Because they were fearful for their own lives, and because they had no real evidence, only their word. And they didn’t know who to talk to.”

“But the Aurors were doing interviews in the school!” Ron exclaimed.

“Yes, but they’d realised that Donnelly had asked them to cover for her on the day of Mrs Potter’s death, which meant that, if Donnelly had done it, then you, Harry, had been wrongly arrested and accused. Which meant that they couldn’t trust the Aurors. Also, they were following the trial. You
mentioned Stubbins as one of Ginny’s lovers. Suddenly things began to tie up. What had begun as an interest in political change had suddenly turned into them being involved in a murder. Two murders. They hadn’t read the reports of the first day of the trial till the evening of the second day – after Hugo was used as bait and Neville was dead. And they realised that their actions put them right at the heart of it, and that it would be their words against hers that they had no idea why they’d been standing in for her. I’ll take your word for it, Hugo, that she seemed quite nice normally – that’ll stand in her favour.”

“She was incredibly boring giving the History of Magic lesson I watched,” Harry said. “Completely different from the vicious bitch I saw teaching her group.”

“If she can pull off the switch in court…” Hermione began.

“Exactly. And although this information is very helpful, it’s circumstantial. She could argue that she got them to stand in for her because she had an appointment to have her feet seen to, or some other excuse. We have nothing to place her at the scene of Ginny’s murder, or in the greenhouse with Hugo.”

“You had no idea it was her?” Scorpius asked Hugo.

He shook his head. “It was a man. I didn’t have any reason to think it wasn’t. Sorry.”

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for,” Snape said. “Polyjuice does not instantly spring to mind when confronted with a stranger intent on causing harm. You did an exceptional job of remaining calm in order to preserve your life, which was admirable.”

Hugo went beetroot red. Rose brushed an affectionate hand over the top of his head, grinning at him.

“So,” Harry said, and he felt something quaking in his stomach. “We’re looking at Poulter and Donnelly as major suspects, but Poulter is a wreck anyway and will never come to court, and we have no evidence about Donnelly. Not anything that will stand against a good defence. And we don’t know if Peter Stubbins was the third person or if it was the man in the moon. And behind it all, Atkins, the bloody Head of the MLE, is pulling everyone’s strings, so there’s not a chance in hell we’re going to get anywhere?” His voice had started rising as he spoke.

His magic too.

“Dad,” Lily said, touching his arm, and then wrenching it away as sparks arced between them.

“Oh god, I’m sorry,” he gasped, reining it in, a hand extending in apology and quickly withdrawn. “Excuse me,” he was already on his feet; he didn’t even know when he’d stood up, but he dashed out of the room.

“Lordy, I’ve never seen anything like that in my life!” Gloria exclaimed. “I did just see sparks fly off his skin, didn’t I?”

Hermione stood up.

Ron pulled her down. “I’ll go,” he said with a fierce look.

“Has this happened before?” Snape asked sharply, looking at Ron and then at the Potter children.

They all shook their heads. “He’s powerful,” Ron said.

“Carry on without us,” Ron said, and was out of the door.

He came back five minutes later. “He’s gone out on his broom. I’d no chance of finding him. That’ll do him good, though. He was right, wasn’t he? We’re still miles from having a case?”

“Yes,” Kingsley said, “but we know where to look, which is half the battle. More than that. I have the suspects under observation now,” he added.

“I should mention that Mrs Atkins and my father have been seen together,” Draco said quietly. “In case anyone didn’t see the item we ran in The Prophet. Kingsley knows, of course.”

There was another awkward silence in the room.

“If anyone feels we shouldn’t be here - ” Draco began.

“You aren’t your father, Draco,” Hermione said. “We’re all responsible for our own views only.”

“Well, that’s partly true,” Bill said. “But we can’t deny that we have family, or care for them. That’s why we’re all here, at the start, anyway. There’s nothing wrong with acknowledging that we care about a family member, even if what they’re doing seems wrong, or we disagree with it. As long as we don’t let trying to protect them stop us from doing the right thing.”

Eyes in the room were darting firstly at the Malfoy men, and then towards Percy, and quickly away.

“I – I’ve always been – grateful isn’t a big enough word,” Percy said, swallowing hard, “that my family were able to forgive me. You never know, he might – “ he shrugged. “I know it seems a long shot, but he might turn away from it.”

No one said anything.

“We have all the players under watch,” Kingsley said. “Thank you for bringing that up, Draco.”

“You’re just going to leave it like that?” James said, brows drawing together. “For all we know, they could be feeding him information about what we talk about here! I’m sorry,” he said, holding up his hands at the outraged cries from around the table, “but let’s be real about this.”

“Alright,” Scorpius said. “I don’t like to air family laundry in public, and Merlin knows, despite the comments Percy was just brave enough to make, I can’t see Grandfather ever wanting anything to do with us. Because he didn’t before. You and my grandfather, James, have one thing in common,” he said, looking across the table at him.

“Yes?”

“You’d both rather have no family than a queer one.”

It seemed it was to be an evening of awkward silences.

“I saw my Grandfather at Dad’s trial, but we didn’t speak. He won’t lower himself to talk to a pouf. And Dad has been estranged because, luckily, I have a father who just wants me to be happy, even if it means cutting off relations with his own father. Which is what he did. So if you’re thinking we’re running around handing information to him, you can think again. We share the same name, but we don’t share the same views, or anything else, much, frankly.” He looked around. “These
meetings – we all came together to help. We all want your Mum’s murderers caught. And we’ve all been learning about people that want to take our society somewhere very unpleasant by very unpleasant means.” He rested his hands on the table, fingers linked. “We’re trying to stop them, which means we must want something different. It’s quite clear that we don’t all want the same things, but what I’m hoping we can have is a bit more – compromise. A bit more understanding. Which is what Kingsley was saying earlier, so I’ll shut up now.”

He slumped back in his chair, going red.

James was white.

Lily clapped.

“Amen to that,” Gloria said. “We all need a little difference. And a pinch of salt. And if these meetings are going to get all embarrassing like this every time, Kingsley, I think most people would rather stay home and take up knitting.”

There were snorts of laughter.

“To be fair,” Snape said, “I think they become emotional because we’re getting to know each other better, which allows us to disengage our normal reserve, and because everyone cares very much about what is going on.”

“I’d agree with that,” Hermione said, nodding. “I’m not loving the confrontation, though,” she looked at James.

“No? Hell, girl, I love it!” Gloria said. “Personally, I’d rather watch this than be doing knit one purl one, but I thought I’d better mention it ‘cos I sure as hell know not everyone feels the same way.”

“Well,” George said, “coming from a large family, we tend to have thick skins and argue all the time. But I agree, we’re not here to see anyone hurt or offended. I, for one, am grateful for everyone’s help in getting the bastards – and bitches, from the sound of it – who did this to my sister. Thanks, everyone.”

It was simple and blunt and George, and it diffused the situation.

The meeting began to break up.

“What about Dad?” Lily said to Hermione. “Do you think he’s alright?”

“I’ll wait with you,” Ron said, coming up behind them and putting an arm on each of their shoulders.

“Do you have any ideas, Severus?” Albus asked quietly. “Something’s happening with Dad’s magic, isn’t it?”

“I have some theories,” Snape nodded. “I’d like the chance to discuss them with Harry. But I don’t think you need to have any worries about him.”

“You think he has it under control?” Ron asked, frowning. “We all saw the sparks – “

“Yes, but did they hurt you, Lily?” Snape asked.

“No, just a tingle. It didn’t hurt or anything - quite nice, really. It felt really Dad.”
“I think you ought to take him home with you and discuss it,” Albus said to Snape and Kingsley. “If he wants to. If you’re free, that is.”

“Are you suggesting - ?” James looked outraged.

Albus put his hands on his hips. “I’m suggesting that Severus and Kingsley know more about magic than most, and might have some ideas - ”

“I’ve got my own ideas,” Harry said, stepping into the room. “Are you alright, Lils?”

She turned and ran towards him, then hesitated a moment. Harry beckoned her on. She flung herself into his arms.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, as George went to put the kettle on. “I went flying in the thunderstorm last night.”

Ron’s eyes widened. “You got hit?”

“Well, sort off. I think I absorbed some more power. Like at The Causeway.”

“You’ve become some sort of power magnet?” George grinned.

“Why would that happen?” James asked.

“I read about this,” Hermione said. “It does happen sometimes with very powerful wizards who have an affinity with the natural world.”

“What affinity with the natural world?” James queried.

“Your father works with natural materials all the time,” Snape said.

“And manipulates space, which is pretty much about combining the essences of the natural and magical worlds, isn’t it?” Kingsley added.

“I suspect, after what happened with the sea at The Giant’s Causeway, you’re sort of drawing power from it, or gaining power,” Hermione said. “And rain and a storm – all part of the watery world, aren’t they?”

“But working with wood is what I normally do,” Harry said.

“All living things are, like 90% water or something, aren’t they?” Lily said. “I mean, I know the wood has dried out, but maybe that has something to do with it? Or maybe the world just likes you,” she grinned.

“’I don’t really understand it,” Harry said. “I mean, I didn’t do any spells, or anything. I just…” he thought about it.

They waited.

“At The Giant’s Causeway, it was just so magnificent, and I was free, and it was brilliant. And – well, I suppose I felt the same way about the storm. But other people must feel like that too, so why would anything happen to me?”

“How are you feeling now?” Snape asked.

“Itchy again, I suppose. As soon as I started getting mad, I could feel the power rising, but I hadn’t
been that aware of it before. I knew I needed to get out and burn off some energy.”

“Have you been doing much? To burn it off?” Snape asked.

“I suppose not enough,” Harry said. “I thought I ought to concentrate on sorting this all out, rather than working on my projects.”

“Well, Harry,” George said, “I find I often have my best ideas when I’m tinkering with something basic. It sounds as if you need to keep that basic stuff in your life – like needing to work out, which from the look of you you’re finding time for, where did those muscles come from, eh? – and you’re just going to have to build it in, and maybe you’ll find when you’re doing it that you can think about the other stuff too. I know it’s frustrating, but I think we’re actually getting somewhere: I can see an end to it: but you might need to be in top shape, magically as well as physically, so if you can just get it under control, it’s got to be an advantage, hasn’t it?”

“That’s very good advice,” Kingsley said.

“I’ll do some research,” Hermione chipped in. “The book I read didn’t have a lot, but I’ll check out what else is there. St. Mungo’s might have some stuff.”

“Won’t that draw attention to what’s going on?” Albus asked.

“Does that matter? People are already a bit scared of you,” Hermione said.

“Thanks for that,” Harry raised his eyebrow at his friend.

“I don’t mean it like that,” she swatted his arm. “When they know you didn’t murder Gin or use your magic for any bad end, they’ll come round. Everyone likes to have someone they’re a bit in awe of, as long as they don’t misuse it.”

“Hmm, I don’t know if I agree with you there,” Ron dropped a kiss on the top of Hermione’s head to soften the criticism.

“Everyone adored Dumbledore.”

“Yeah. They shouldn’t have,” Harry said, somewhat sharply.

“Well, the negatives weren’t about his use of magic, but his ethics, I’d say,” Hermione argued.

“Maybe McGonagall would have some ideas?” George suggested. “She’s the oldest of us, and clever: she’s likely to know of other wizards with your capabilities, if anyone does.”

“I suspect that’s rather the issue,” Snape said. “I think what is happening to Harry is rather rare.”

There was a silence.

“Everyone knows you’re powerful anyway,” James put in. “I mean, you defeated Voldemort.”

“Not by any great feat of power,” Harry shook his head.

“That is an interesting point,” Snape said. When they looked at him, he continued, “Albus – Dumbledore,” he corrected, nodding at the younger Albus, “always said you were a powerful wizard. I wondered what he based that on. It’s interesting that he could tell.”

“Can I make a suggestion?” Kingsley said, “For burning off a bit of that power?”
James went bright red.

“For Merlin’s sake,” Albus said, “grow up, James!”

“I was merely going to say that several of the neighbours have asked Alejandro and Rosita who was able to overcome the spellwork on their house,” Kingsley went on, lips twitching. “I know it’s another thing that takes you away from what you want to be doing, but we know it burns off the energy, and it helps people.”

“I could do that; that would be good,” Harry nodded. “Yeah.”

Lily was looking from one person to the other.

“Well, this tension is like treacle,” she said. “What’ve I been missing? Or am I going to have to work on you all separately to ferret it out?”

“Things you don’t need to know about,” James said.

“Actually, she does,” Harry contradicted him, “but that’s a conversation we’ll have between us, Lils, if that’s alright?” Harry said, smiling at her.

“If you’re going to tell her, let’s get this in the open,” James said aggressively. “Dad’s letting Snape and Kingsley fuck him, and he’s so starved for affection he thinks it’s love.”

The silence was so painful that it felt endless.
Harry was crackling.

“Dad –” James put out an arm, face white.

Harry stepped back. His eyes dragged from James to the sparks twitching over his body. “Excuse me,” he said, glancing quickly round the room, and darted out of the door.

“I’m ashamed of you,” Albus said, curtly, looking at his brother. “My apologies,” he said, to Kingsley and Severus. “Let me see you to the floo.”

“You have no reason to apologise,” Kingsley smiled at him, a quick hand to his shoulder. “We have thick skins.”

“You may not be family yet, but you’re guests in this house, my house,” Albus contradicted, “and I’m very sorry that you should be abused within its walls.”

“Just because I’m telling the truth!” James snapped out of his shock.

“On what basis are you making that statement?” Kingsley asked, for the first time addressing James.

“What?”

“Where are your manners?” Ron said sharply. “Speak politely to Kingsley.”

James was looking mulish. “I’m sorry,” he bit out. “Pardon?”

“I’m just asking on what basis you feel entitled to make the statement that you did,” Kingsley said, and his voice had taken on the tone that he had used addressing foolhardy Aurors many years ago, when he was the Head of the Auror Department. “I ask, because your father has not discussed his emotions with us, which means that if he has spoken of them with you, he did so in confidence, which you’ve just broken. And as for the physical aspect of our relationship – I don’t believe your father would have lied to you, in which case, I resent you making suppositions about a matter which is not your business, but is your father’s, Severus’ and mine alone.”

James opened and shut his mouth, as he tried to take in what Kingsley was saying.

Kingsley ignored him, and looked to his sister. “My apologies, Lily. You’ve been forced to face matters that I’m sure your Dad would’ve wished to broach differently. If you’d like to talk to us, or have any questions, I am at your service,” he gave her a slight bow. Then he looked across to Albus. “Are you two alright if we head home, or would you prefer us to stay? At least until your father returns?”

“We’ll stay,” Ron said.

“Yeah, and I’ll see James home,” George said.

“I can see myself home! Or stay here – it’s none of your business - “

“Actually,” George said, “we care about your father, so it is our business.”

“And hard as it may seem to believe,” Hermione added, “we care about you too, James. Now, do
you want to stay and apologise, or go home with George?”

“I’m not five years old!”

“No, you’re not, are you?” Ron said dangerously. “And if you speak to Hermione again in that tone, I’ll flatten you!”

“I – I’m sorry, Mione,” James said, swallowing. “I’ll go. I can manage on my own,” he said bitterly, to George, and strode out of the room.

“We’ll be off,” Kingsley said, into the vacuum. He glanced briefly at Snape, but said nothing.

Albus too must have noticed how quiet Snape had been.

He walked them to the floo; Kingsley went first. As Snape reached out to take a pinch of floo powder, Albus put a hand on his arm.

Snape looked up.

“Don’t give up on Dad because of James,” Albus said.

Snape looked at him, blinked as his only acknowledgement, and stepped into the flames.

Kingsley was pouring them both a glass of red as Snape exited the floo.

“Albus say something?” he asked perspicaciously.

“He said not to give up on Harry.”

Kingsley smiled, and handed Snape his glass. “And were you thinking of doing so? You were very quiet.”

Snape threw himself into one of the kitchen chairs, then got up again. “Let’s take this to bed: I’ve had enough of uncomfortable chairs for the night.”

“Want to bring it on a quick stroll? I need a breath of fresh air after London.”

“Turning down taking me to bed?” Snape quirked a brow over his glass.

“You’ll regret that comment later,” Kingsley said, stepping up to Snape, and then bending forward to kiss him thoroughly.

Snape loved the wine-flavoured taste, the scent of Kingsley so close, the heat just emanating from his body, not quite touching his.

Kingsley pulled away, smiling, and raised his glass in salute, before downing another mouthful.

Snape’s lips twitched, and together, they stepped out of the back door. They abandoned their glasses on the wall at the end of the terrace, walking along the track between the vines. It was a warm night, although the breezes played pleasantly over the skin.

Kingsley inhaled, then let out the breath. “I love it here. Don’t let me forget it.”
“When they ask you to become Minister again?”

“Merlin, I hope they don’t!”

“You’d be tempted?”

Kingsley was thoughtful. “There’s so much that I could do.”

Snape said nothing.

“I’d have to give up too much to do it.”

“Don’t count me as something you’d have to give up: I’ll always be here, as long as you want me.”

“Till we’re old and cranky and our bellies are as saggy and wrinkly as our balls, then,” Kingsley bumped shoulders with him. “Will you still want me then?”

“You do paint a delightful picture,” Snape said. “I wonder if I could create a potion that would return us to a more youthful state? Just for an hour or two?”

“If we go at it like forty year olds when we’re a hundred and fifty, we’ll probably die of heart attacks when we transform back,” Kingsley grinned.

“Can’t think of a better way to go,” Snape said. “Whether we’re temporarily rejuvenated or not, I can’t imagine not wanting to fuck your brains out.”

Kingsley turned and stood in front of Snape. He leant forward, and kissed him lightly.

“Can’t imagine not wanting it,” he said, voice heavy with sudden desire.

His hand moved forward, gliding over Severus’ cock, which stirred and rose as if obeying an unspoken command.

Snape pressed into the delightful pressure.

Within moments, they’d shed their clothes. Snape’s robe was underneath them, over the baked earth. He pulled his wand out of his pocket, and summoned the lube from their bedroom.

“Good thing the window was open,” Kingsley laughed under him, breathless and impatient.

“Don’t give a shit if it wasn’t,” Snape said, and trailed his nails up the side of Kingsley’s thighs, up over his hips and along his ribs.

Kingsley stretched into it, undulating underneath Severus. Their cocks rubbed together, and he hissed.

Snape bent down, teeth finding a path from Kingsley’s neck, over his shoulders and along his bicep. A hand reached out without looking, and the pot slapped into it.

“Can’t wait,” Severus said, unscrewing the lid and looking to Kingsley for permission.


The preparation was quick, and then Severus eased himself home, nudging gently in.

“Fucking hell,” Kingsley moaned.
Severus began to move.

“That’s so amazing,” Harry said, from above, hovering on his broom.

“Jesus, Harry,” Kingsley said.

Snape looked over his shoulder.

“Get down here,” he growled.

Harry landed, and stepped towards them.

“You’re in the vineyard,” Harry said, dropping to his knees beside them.

“Didn’t expect many fliers with voyeuristic tendencies to be passing,” Kingsley grunted, smiling away the sting, as he continued to move in response to Severus’ thrusts.

Snape bent forward and kissed Kingsley, then looked him in the eye. Something passed between them. Kingsley nodded.

“You’re talking. Is that with Legilimency?” Harry said, stretching out close by.

“No, we just know each other well,” Severus answered, thrusting a little harder, and making Kingsley moan. “Just checking with him. Want to take over?”

“Wha – what?” Harry’s voice squeaked.

“Want to trade places with Severus?” Kingsley confirmed. He held out an arm. “Slide that lovely cock of yours into me?”

“Oh my god,” Harry said.

Snape thrust again.

“I – you – that’s – I can?”

“Get your clothes off,” Snape said. “I want to watch you. See the moonlight on your skin.”

“Oh, god, I’ll come in, like, two seconds,” Harry said, scrabbling out of his clothes, forgetting he could do it instantly with magic.

“Then I’ll take over again,” Severus said easily.

Two minutes later, Harry was between Kingsley’s thighs.

“He’s already stretched, so you can go straight in,” Severus said. “Normally, you’d need to take it a bit slow at first.”

Harry looked at his cock, and then at the shadows between Kingsley’s thighs. “Oh god,” he said again.

“Oh fucking MERLIN!” he yelled, as Snape reached forward, slicked his lubed hand over Harry’s cock, and lined him up.

“And in,” Snape said, directing operations, and Harry thrust his hips, and the next moment, he was gasping, his arms shaking, as he popped through the muscles and slid in. He panted, overwhelmed.
“Take your time, get used to the feeling, there’s no hurry,” Snape said, and bent forward to kiss Kingsley, slowly and thoroughly.

Harry was glad of the pause. He didn’t know it was possible to feel so close without coming, to feel….he shut his eyes from the incredible sight in front of him. His heart began to slow a fraction, and he opened his eyes again, to see both of them watching him.

He moved, pulling out a little, and then sliding back in again slowly. “It – it feels – it’s incredible,” he breathed.

“Kingsley is incredible,” Snape said, a hand sliding down Kingsley’s chest. “Now, see if you can find his prostate. Keep moving, change your angle a bit.”

Harry was glad of the instruction to save him from himself. He shifted, moved.

Kingsley did too.

“Wait a sec,” Kingsley said, sliding a hand around the small of Harry’s back to keep him in place as he turned on his side.

“Did I do something wrong?”

“Na,” the hand dropped away, and scrabbled round. “There’s a fucking stone digging into my arse, is all. Can you reach it, Severus? It’s under your robe.”

Severus leant across.

It was all so ungainly and down-to-earth that Harry just wanted to snigger. It made him feel a lot more relaxed.

“Better?” he asked, as Kingsley settled back, thighs gripping his sides.

Kingsley undulated under him, as if testing the ground. “Much.” He looked at Severus. “I’d like to see you two kiss.”

“Easily accommodated,” Snape said. “Alright with you, Harry?”

Harry nodded. It was like he’d fallen into the best dream of his life. Their mouths met. Everything felt wonderful.

Snape pulled back, trailing a kiss over his chest as he went. He licked his nipples, then moved away. The cool air on his wet skin was delicious. He began to move again.

“Gnnnh!” Kingsley thrust up.

“I think you’ve hit the jackpot,” Snape grinned at Harry, a hand ghosting over Kingsley’s arm. “Try and keep sliding over it.”

“Fast? Slow?”

“Whatever you feel like doing, it feels bloody fantastic,” Kingsley hissed.

Knowing that he didn’t have to worry about holding out, that Snape could always take over, seemed to give Harry the confidence to just go for it. He began to move, thrusting harder and faster. His hands slid under Kingsley’s buttocks, lifting him a little. The noises Kingsley made were brilliant.
Made him feel brilliant.

“Oh, yes! Fuck! So close! So - Severus!”

Harry thought for a minute that Kingsley had forgotten who was in him, but Snape smiled a conspiratorial smile at him, and said, “Here. This what you want?”

And then Snape’s hand was around Kingsley’s cock, timing his strokes to Harry’s thrusts, and …

“That’s …oh, fuck…” Harry gasped, “so…fucking amazing,”

“Yes. You look incredible, Kingsley,” Severus said, “and in a second you’re going to come all over my hand, all over….yes, just like that, yes, that’s beautiful…”

And Harry was coming too, the world was spinning, and it was the best thing Harry had ever experienced in his entire life.

The world slowly began to come back into focus.

“Hold tight,” Snape said, and the next moment they were on the bed in their bedroom.

“You apparated us with my cock in Kingsley,” Harry gasped, and laughed, staring down at where they were still joined. He pulled back a little, and his cock popped out. Even that felt strange.

He looked at Snape, grinning, then down at Snape’s erection. His mouth watered. “Can I?” he gestured at it. “I’m not any good – “

“Get to work,” Kingsley said, a languid hand taking hold of Severus’ cock and pointing it towards Harry.

He laughed again. He’d never felt so comfortable, so relaxed. He shifted so that he was between Severus’ legs. Kingsley hauled Severus up the bed so that he was in the angle between his arm and body, and Harry scrambled up, following. Kingsley started kissing Severus, and he settled in, feeling less conspicuous, to explore.

Harry woke up suddenly disorientated. He relaxed as he felt the hand on his hip, and realised that it was Severus’. Kingsley had rolled himself into a ball just across the bed and was snoring softly. He smiled.

And then sat up with a jerk.

“What is it?” Snape was awake at once.

“I need to go home! I don’t want to, but –“

“You haven’t been back?”

Harry nodded.

“Yes, you must go. Ron and Hermione were waiting – “

“Oh, bugger – “
“It’s only just after midnight,” Kingsley said, looking at his watch as he turned over.

“I’m sorry to go,” Harry said, clambering over Severus. “You know – “

“Come back. When you can,” Kingsley said.

Harry nodded again, and looked round, confused, then flung out his hand. Moments later, all their clothes came flapping in through the window. He bit his lip as he fought his legs into his trousers. “You – you didn’t mind? What James said?”

“That you care for us?” Snape had stood up too, and was standing there, naked.

Kingsley was stretched out, dark against the white sheets.

Harry nodded, then bent over to do up his shoes, avoiding their gaze.

“I’m glad,” Kingsley said. “We’re not very demonstrative, but that doesn’t mean we don’t care.”

Harry grinned. “I’d say you were both very demonstrative. I’ve learnt a bit from your – demonstrations – haven’t I?”

Kingsley laughed. “Definitely a fast learner,” he agreed. “And delicious it all was too. Come again soon, hmm?”

“If – if you still want me to. You might want to talk it over, or something,” he suggested, looking from one to the other.

“Thank you, Harry, that’s a very sensible idea,” Snape said.

There was a moment of silence.

“That was not a rejection,” Snape sighed. “Your son’s comments were most – unexpected.”

“I – I don’t expect anything – “

“I know you don’t.” Severus said. “Perhaps you should.”

Harry wasn’t sure what to say.

Snape stepped over to him. “I think your idea to think about it is more important for you than for us,” he said. “You have children, and we do not, but we do know how much they mean to you, and how much you mean to them. But at least now,” he added, “you’ve had a little taste of what things could be here, to weigh in the balance.”

Harry opened his mouth, but Snape lay a finger across it.

“Go home and talk to Lily: she might still be up waiting for you. And then perhaps we can discuss James tomorrow, if you wish to. And now I’m going to kiss you, hmm?”

It was light and sensual and Snape was naked, and just feeling that he was getting aroused from kissing Harry was, in itself, hot. That they should desire him, be aroused by this simple thing…he wanted to tell them what that felt like, but at least Snape had taken away his sudden anxiety that maybe they didn’t want this to go anywhere after all.

He didn’t know how he would cope with that.
Severus pulled away, and Harry looked over at Kingsley, then went over, knelt on the bed and gave him a quick kiss too.

“Thank you both.”

“I don’t think thanks are relevant,” Snape said, sitting back down on the bed.

Kingsley’s hand came out and curved around his hip.

“For being understanding,” Harry said. “About everything – the kids, and me not knowing anything, and –”

Kingsley grinned. “We’ll, at least one of those is easily fixed, and I hope you’ll give us the opportunity to help with that. Now, go, before we pull you back into bed. You look far too tempting.”

Harry smiled, stood up, and apparated.

He appeared in the parlour in Grimmauld Place, and headed into the corridor. A light was on in the sitting room, and Albus appeared at the door as he headed in.

“You’re still up?” Harry said. “I’m really sorry – “

“No worries, Dad, Lils and I are just talking,” he said, stepping back so that Harry could come into the room. “Ron and Mione are still here – they insisted on staying, but Mione was tired, so they’ve gone to bed.”

Harry heard footsteps, and looked up to see Ron peering over the banisters, naked from the waist up.

He gave him a thumbs up, to show he was okay, and Ron grinned, and disappeared.

Harry followed Albus into the room. “Sorry, Lils,” he said, bending over to kiss her on the cheek.

“Ugh! Stubble,” she grimaced, softening it with a smile as he straightened.

Kingsley and Snape hadn’t minded, Harry thought, and then pushed that inappropriate comparison away.

“Sorry,” he said again.

“You feeling a bit better?” she asked.

Harry tried not to blush as he nodded. He flung himself down in his chair.

“So,” Lily said, “you’re in love with Kingsley and Severus?”

“No beating about the bush with you, is there?” Harry grinned.

“Well, it’s nothing to hide away, is it?” she said easily.

“I hadn’t even discussed it with them,” Harry said.
“Or me,” Albus noted.

Harry looked at him. “Yeah, and you’ve been absolutely brilliant, Albus. And it’s not that I was keeping it from you – it was just while I was trying to explain to James after the last meeting, that I realised – I realised – “

“That was how you felt?” Lily asked.

Harry nodded.

“That was really shitty of him to say that, then, in front of them. Or did he think they knew?”

Harry shook his head. “No. It was a bit of a ‘wishing the floor would open up and swallow me’ moment,” he said, sheepishly. “Especially with the crude stuff as well.”

“So, what do they think now?” Albus said. “Is that where you’ve been? You said you ‘hadn’t’ discussed it with them – past tense…”

Harry tried to stem the wash of red sweeping up his face. “Yeah. They – they don’t seem too offended.”

“Well, why should they be?” Lily leapt to his defence. “It’s a compliment, isn’t it, if someone loves you?”

“Sometimes people feel forced to return your feelings, or something,” Harry said.

“Well,” she said, curling her feet under her, “I can’t see Severus or Kingsley feeling forced to do anything.”

Harry laughed. “You’re right,” he said, tension leaving him a bit.

“So, what do we do about James?” Albus asked.

“You and Lils haven’t been hatching plans for the last couple of hours?” Harry grinned. They had often done so as kids.

“We’re stumped,” Albus said. “He’s so bloody stubborn.”

“You’re alright with this, Lily? Really?”

“Dad, I’m going back to France soon, and then uni there, I hope. I’ve really sort of left home, haven’t I? And James already has, and Albus will have to as well if he gets a trainee post in Mediwizardry, so really, what do our views matter? We’re all grown up.”

“They matter to me,” Harry shrugged. “You’ll always be my children, and I don’t want you to feel you can’t come home, or don’t want to see me. I mean, I’m not planning on selling up or anything, but, you know.”

“For my part, I like what I’ve seen of Kingsley and Severus, so I’m really happy you’ll be with them. To be honest, I probably would’ve found it harder if you’d met another woman. Even though I want you to be happy. She’d seem more like in Mum’s place, and I - well, that’s – it would be more obvious that it wasn’t Mum, I suppose. Severus and Kingsley won’t be trying to be something they’re not, and they’re yours. Sounds good to me.”

Harry grinned. “Thanks.” He looked at them both. “You’re really not bothered about the gay thing? Having a gay Dad? I mean, it freaked me out.”
Lily looked down.

“What?” Harry said. “You can be honest – I know it’s not acceptable in our society, or – “

“That wasn’t what I was thinking,” Lily said. “I – this sounds horrid – “

“Alright. I can take it,” Harry said, sitting up straight.

“It’s not about you. I – I’d rather they were talking about you, than the things they say about Mum.”

“Oh, Lily.”

She shrugged. “It – it’s hard to defend her behaviour,” she whispered, and looked up at him. “Isn’t it?”

Harry fought for something to say.

“Don’t try,” Albus said. “I just blank them. If they really push it, I ask them if they have any idea what their parents get up to, which tends to shut them up.”

“I’m so sorry that you’ve been put into this shitty situation,” Harry said.

“Well, we just have to deal with it,” Lily said, pragmatically, “and to be honest, I know it feels like I’ve copped out a bit, but it’s been a lot easier in France. They know what happened, of course, but they don’t say anything, and there isn’t that feeling of people talking behind your back. I think they’re more laissez-faire about people having affairs, and what they get up to in bed anyway.”

“Oh god,” Harry said, “this is not the sort of conversation I expected to have with my daughter.”

“But Dad, now I haven’t got a mother, you have to take over that sort of little chat,” she teased.

“You had conversations about sex with your mother?” he said, and then held up his hands in apology. “Of course you did: I’m an idiot. Contraception, and all that, I hope. Oh god, you did, didn’t you? I don’t need to have that conversation, do I?”

“Actually, it’s a bit late for that,” Lily said. “I’d been hoping to find the right moment to tell you – “

“What?” Harry leapt up. “You’re not pregnant, are you? Oh god. I should have talked to you about it before you went to France! Don’t worry, everything will be alright, I can help you look after the baby – “

“Dad,” Lily was laughing, “calm down. I was only teasing! I’m not pregnant, silly. Do I look it?”

She ran a hand down her slim stomach.

“Oh Merlin, don’t do that,” Harry sat down again, burying his face in his hands as they both laughed. “You – you are being careful?” he asked, as they quietened down.

“Dad, sad to say, not a man in sight in my life.”

“Oh. Oh, phew! Sorry –” he gave her a boyish grin.

“Apart from Hugo, and you needn’t worry, I’m not lusting after my cousin.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” Harry said.
“No women either, I take it?” Albus said, leaning forward.

“Wha – what?” Harry’s head whipped from one to the other.

“If you can fancy blokes, Dad, no reason why Lily couldn’t fancy a nice sophisticated French girl.”

Lily threw a cushion at him. “Sorry to disappoint you, but I like guys – just nothing happening there.”

“Oh ho! There’s someone she fancies – “

The conversation spun off into normal teasing territory.

Harry smiled, and leant back in his chair.

Snape climbed back into bed, and lay facing Kingsley. “I – was it alright?” he asked.

“Harry fucking me?” Kingsley grinned.

“Well, that, and the fact that I sort of invited him to,” Snape said.

“We’d agreed before we wanted to go there. I thought you took control of the situation masterfully,” Kingsley said. “I was expecting the first time – if it happened at all – to be awkward, and maybe painful, and having to soothe his fears throughout. It was good, though, wasn’t it? Relaxed.”

“I thought so,” Snape said. “You sure it was alright?”


Snape turned as he went, so he was in his favourite, back-to-Kingsley position in the circle of his arm.

“It was – odd – having someone else inside me after all these years,” Kingsley continued.

Something settled in Snape. He’d always been faithful to Kingsley; the supposition was that Kingsley had always been too, but Kingsley was away a lot, and Snape couldn’t doubt that he must have had opportunity to dally. He had decided years ago that he would never ask: Kingsley came home to him at night; he knew Kingsley loved him: that was more than he had ever expected in life. Learning that Kingsley had always been his, and his alone, was wonderful.

“It felt good, though?”

“Yes. You found it alright? Seeing him with me? Seeing me enjoying it?”

Snape nodded against his arm. “Harry isn’t a threat to either of us: to what we have. You looked incredible.” He paused, and added, as he realised the truth of it, “I liked watching you.”

“Voyeur,” Kingsley teased, his hand trailing down Snape’s side.

“It was interesting to get a different perspective,” Snape admitted.
“And he seemed pretty interested in getting all sorts of perspectives. Despite what he’d said about his previous experience, he seemed to rather like your cock,” Kingsley’s arm slid down, and round, fondling said organ. “It is rather delicious.”

“I hadn’t expected him to be able to think of anything else after that,” Snape admitted, enjoying the petting. “To find that he appears to be a generous lover is – rather good news.”

Kingsley chuckled, and slid his hand away, shifting again as he settled towards sleep. “It might take some time. He might give up because of his son. You were very quiet tonight.”

“I was watching.”

“And?”

“He’s perfectly entitled to hate homosexuals, I know – “

“I’d dispute that.”

“Well, you know what I mean. If he believes it’s wrong, nothing we can say is going to make a knut’s worth of difference. But – it’s the sudden anger that is surprising. Harry told us last weekend that James’d said that he was going to write a letter of apology, but he didn’t, and he was angry all over again. I wondered if he was using drugs, and if so, which.”

“Shit. I never even thought of that.”

“Well, as I say, he’s entitled to his opinions, but he just seems much more – volcanic, and angry. He worked beside me to help with Hugo, knowing I was gay, without this big trauma.”

“He didn’t think you were fucking his Daddy, as he so nicely put it, at the time.” Kingsley paused. “Or that his father cared for us. Maybe he’s jealous.”

“He won’t lose his father because of us – only through his own actions.”

They were silent for a bit. Kingsley had woken up a little.

“You know if we have Harry, we’ll be gaining a family as well,” Kingsley said. “Even if he agrees to come without James being happy about it, his family is always going to be a huge part of his life. And that will mean part of ours.”

“Does that bother you?” Snape asked.

“Don’t think so. I’ve always had different step-fathers and various step-siblings coming and going. People are interesting. What about you?”

“Albus is obviously easy company. I don’t know Lily much, but I liked her grandmother, so who can say? And despite the fact that he’s hurting his father, James is not without his merits. Slytherin was full of difficult children.”

“You feel he’s worth it?” Kingsley asked, his nose rubbing against Snape’s back.

“Harry? Yes.”

Kingsley hugged him tighter. “Good.”
Lucius stroked the feathered end of the quill across his lips, wondering how best to respond to the embossed invitation in front of him.

He had no desire to watch Nannette marry Artur. In fact, he was surprised to have received the invitation at all. When he last saw her, Nanette had told Artur the wedding was off, and although she had spoken in the heat of the moment, he had hoped that the courage which had enabled her to say so at last would hold. What had led her to acquiesce once again? He could not believe that she had changed her opinion of Artur.

Was she being coerced?

He decided to pay a visit, but found when he did so that Nanette was chaperoned the whole time by her aunt. Sabine LeClerc was no push-over. Nanette made polite but monosyllabic responses to his enquiries, and kept her eyes downcast throughout.

The only comfort Lucius found was that she was wearing the earrings that he had given her.

He returned to London that evening for a date with Dorothy Atkins.

“You’re going to the Brouchard wedding, of course,” she said, as she expertly attacked her sole.

“I’ve been invited, certainly,” he said.

She glanced up at him. “You have doubts about going? I understand that anyone who is anyone will be there.”

“There is that,” he inclined his head. “You’ve been invited?”

“That idiot Odont addressed the invitation to me personally.”

“Ah. No doubt he wasn’t sure what to do.”

“I think the best thing would be for me to go as your companion,” she said, sliding a neatly laden fork into her mouth.

“Indeed?”

“It would be entirely peculiar for me to go under my own steam,” she said. “But as your companion, I can maintain all the contacts we need.”

“Without putting yourself at any risk of people finding your – acquaintanceship – in France at all surprising,” Lucius deduced.

“Quite,” she said, without any sense of shame.

“Perhaps I already had someone else in mind?”

“Surely you’re not two-timing me?” she batted her lashes.

Lucius’ stomach recoiled when she was flirtatious rather than businesslike. “I was thinking of declining. It’s bound to be tedious.”
“Ah. You are jealous. My spies were right.”

Lucius carefully picked up his wine glass and looked at her. “Indeed? What do they tell you? That having had Potter for my lover, I had my eyes set on the svelte form of Artur?”

Her eyes went hard. “It’s a good thing that I know how much you despise that sort of perversion.”

“Indeed,” he shrugged. “And that being the case, why would I wish to attend Artur’s wedding? You do know that…his interests…are unnatural?” Lucius had no qualms about making trouble for Artur.

“I’m told that young men often go through such a phase,” she shrugged. “As distasteful as it is, I am sure that that pretty young girl will be able to return his attention to normal …channels.” She smirked a little at the dubious pun.

Lucius forced his fists not to clench. He was disgusted with her word-play, but more so at the thought of Nanette attempting to… He thought of Scorpius; he had thought much the same thing, hadn’t he? That the right witch would sort out his grandson’s ‘problem’? Now, for the first time, he felt – a sense of – respect – that Scorpius made no attempt to hide or to change who he was, made no assault on the dignity of a young woman… “Discussion of such matters does not improve the appetite,” he said. “What do you think of the fish? The flavours are delicate, are they not?”

“Your sensibilities might be delicate, Lucius, but I would nevertheless like you to attend the wedding.”

Lucius ate a french bean, taking his time.

“Well?”

He dabbed his napkin to his lips. “Whatever gave you the impression that I had any inclination to accept orders from you, Dorothy?” he raised a haughty eyebrow, and was pleased to see the tightening of her mouth.

“Perhaps I phrased things poorly,” she said, after a moment. “I know that you’re committed to our cause. I believe it would serve that cause to…mingle…with the people who will be at the wedding. It gives us both a relaxed arena in which to converse with others of like mind, and perhaps to make those in positions of influence aware of our - potential, shall we say. It’s an opportunity that we’d be foolish to overlook, and I know that you’re not a fool.”

“I’m not,” Lucius said softly, “so I’ll tell you this frankly: I do not like to be manipulated, and I do not like to be spied upon.”

She sat still. “You’d think me an idiot if I hadn’t done so.”

“You think so?” he said. “I’ve made myself available to you. If there’s something you wish to know about me, why don’t you just ask me?”

She finished the last morsel on her plate and looked up at him. “I’m not used to trusting people.”

“I understand that, and yet I have taken an oath of your making. Does it count for so little in your eyes?”

She picked up her glass, her fingers smoothing down the stem. “There are always ways of getting round oaths.”
“Like killing those who have taken them?”

Her eyes flashed up to his.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“No? Benoît appears to be missing.”

“Is that so?”

“Do you deny having anything to do with it?”

“Why should you care? He was an inconsequential little toad.”

“Certainly,” Lucius nodded, “but I’m afraid it does not provoke confidence in you, if you simply do away with anyone whom you dislike.”

“What makes you think he’s dead?”

“Artur Brouchard accused me of killing him.”

Her eyes flashed again. “Why would he do that?”

“He doesn’t like the fact that I’m seeing you. And he has the sight. A convenient version: he says he saw Benoît dead in a stream, and because he dislikes me, he decided that I was the murderer.”

“Such a charge could have you returned to Azkaban,” she took a sip from her glass.

“Were I to risk that, I assure you, I would not waste it on the murder of such a pipsqueak.”

She laughed. “Who would you consider worthy of murder, dear Lucius?”

He looked at her coolly. “We would have to know each other considerably better than we do now, Madam Head of MLE, before I would be likely to disclose such a secret.”

She raised her glass to him. “To – a more intimate knowledge of each other, then,” she said, in a sultry voice.

Lucius steeled himself, and raised his glass.

She blew her nose as she sat on the lid of the toilet. She’d already stared in the mirror, prodded and poked her swollen cheek, applied a wet flannel to take the heat out of it, and scrubbed the hot tears from her eyes several times.

She felt a bit sick and her hands were shaking.

She didn’t know what to do.

He’d never hit her before.

It wasn’t that it had seriously injured her, or that she wouldn’t be able to hide it with a healing spell and maybe a glamour.
It was that he’d done it.

It was such a shock!

What was she supposed to do?

There had to be something wrong with him. There *had* to be.

She knew she could never tell her father.

He’d be absolutely devastated.

But that meant she needed to do something. To stop it happening again. To protect all of them.

To help him.

She jumped as a hand crashed against the door.

“I’m sorry! Please! I – I don’t know what came over me!”

She couldn’t pretend she wasn’t there. He’d obviously followed her.

She couldn’t deal with this on her own – that had been her mistake.

But his reaction had been so unexpected.

Or had he been like this while she was away?

“Lily! Please! I’m so sorry!”

She pulled open the door, and watched him flinch as he saw what he’d done.

“Are you? Are you really sorry, James?”

He stood back, hands at his sides. “I don’t know what came over me. I – I get so angry – “

She snorted.

He looked at her. “I – what can I do to make it better?”

“Depends if you mean that.” She shoved her hands in her pockets.

He nodded. “I mean it.”

“Come and have a cup of tea and let’s discuss it,” she said.

“Can – can I heal that for you?” he asked.

She looked at him. “So you can pretend you didn’t do it? I think we’ll leave it there whilst we have this discussion, don’t you?”

He hung his head, and followed her down the stairs.
Severus was in his lab when Dion knocked, and informed him that Señorita Lily Potter was at the floo.

About to say that she would have to wait, he paused, then doused the flame under the potion he was making, and headed to the kitchen.

“I’m sorry to disturb you –“

“Do you wish to come through, or should I come to you?” Severus asked.

She hesitated, then said, “May I come through? With James?”

Severus hid his surprise, and stepped back.

A moment later, Lily stood there, and then, a sulky-looking James stepped through behind her.

“What can I - you’re hurt,” he said, noticing her reddened cheek.

“Yes,” she said, honestly, and turned to James, waiting.

“I hit her,” he said. He seemed to steel himself. “I – could someone be – poisoning me, or something? Because I’ve never done it before!”

Severus looked at Lily, and realised that she was a witch to be contended with.

“Why don’t you both sit down, and tell me what happened?”

“I just need to know – “ James began angrily.

“Sit,” Lily demanded, looking at her brother. She turned to Severus. “Will you promise not to tell Dad?”

Severus folded his arms. “What is it that you want me not to tell?”

“Don’t tell him that James hit me.”

“I can’t promise that.”

James stood up.

“Tell me if I’m wrong, but you’ve become increasingly more aggressive in the last few weeks,” Severus said, setting the kettle to boil. “Are you using drugs?”

“What?” James halted.

“Are you using drugs?” Severus repeated. “Certain drugs could affect you in – “

“No way!”

“You’ve got to be honest, James,” Lily said, crossing her arms. “I won’t tell Dad anything you say, okay?”

“I can assure you I will not tell your father anything you may answer to my questions,” Snape said. “But if I remained concerned about your sister’s wellbeing at the end of this discussion, I reserve the right to discuss it with Harry. If you sincerely wish to avoid hurting her again, you won’t find that a problem.”
James looked at them both, and then nodded.

“I’ll be back in a moment,” Snape said, and disappeared from the room.

Five minutes later he placed a pot on the table with two cups, and handed Lily a separate mug.

“What is she having something different?” James asked suspiciously.

“It’s a healing infusion,” Snape said to Lily. “It should prevent the bruise forming. I take it you decided not to use a healing spell so that James was faced with what he’d done?”

“Exactly,” Lily nodded, looking at her brother.

“But you won’t wish to suffer any longer than necessary, or for anyone else to notice,” he said. “In which case – “ he indicated the cup.

Lily smiled, picked it up, and sipped. She pulled a face.

“My apologies. Blame the further suffering on James. It’s not possible to remove the bitterness without affecting the potency.”

Severus poured the tea and turned his attention to James, the image of withdrawal on the other side of the table.

“So you’re not taking any drugs? Smoking anything?”

“Nothing. I never have,” James said.

“You drink?”

“Yes, but not much. Well, only occasionally I might get smashed, if I’m out with the guys after a match.”

“You don’t drink apart from that?”

“Well, obviously sometimes I have a pint or two after work – and I don’t mean ten – that’s nothing, is it? Occasionally a bottle of beer with – with Dad.”

“All right. Would you agree with my estimate of the period in which your anger has become – noticeable?”

“I suppose,” James nodded. “It’s not like I haven’t had real things to be angry about – “

“You hit me because I called you selfish,” Lily interrupted.

“Just because – “

“James, I must have called you that a hundred times before: you’ve never hit me,” she said, keeping her voice calm. “Even when we were kids.”

James bit back the temper that was even now trying to rise.

“I’ll need to ask you about your medical history,” Snape said.

Lily stood up, cradling her cup. “Should I go?”

“I would prefer it if James would permit you to stay,” Snape said. “Alternatively, we can find
another person to sit in.”

“You need a chaperone?” James sneered.

“Yes,” Snape said bluntly. “My reputation is important to me, and I do not wish to be open to allegations of improper conduct at a later date.”

“I wouldn’t – “ James began.

“Before today, I would’ve said that you’d never hit me,” Lily inserted.

Three quarters of an hour later, James was staring at Snape and Lily.

“My hayfever tea?” he said, again.

“This is from a recipe found in the Andes, during your travels in Bolivia and Peru a year ago, yes?”

“I don’t know about the recipe, I just go and collect a bag of tea leaves when I run out,” James said.

“And you began taking it when?”

“This year, about two months ago, when I first started getting hay fever. It really sorts it out. And I used it when I was travelling last year, and had no problems.”

“Which makes it likely that it’s interacting with something in the diet you eat at home, as opposed to when you were travelling. Could you get me a sample of the tea, please, James, and draw me up a list of everything you’ve eaten and drunk over the last seven days.”

“Shouldn’t I just stop taking it?”

“We don’t know for sure that it’s responsible. Also, sudden withdrawal might be unwise. If you would get me the sample, I can analyse it.”

“Now?”

Snape nodded. “Are you willing to allow me to perform a scan of your body? It is possible that it may have caused organ damage. It will not be as thorough as a Mediwizard could do, but it might give us information.”

James stood up.

“If you would stand in the clear – “

Snape came round the table and performed the spell.

“Well?” James demanded.

“There is a build up of toxins in your liver.” He tapped the wand against his leg, as both young people stared at him in shock. “It would be better if you didn’t travel anywhere until we knew exactly what was wrong. Will you permit our elf to enter your flat and collect the leaves?”
“What? I’m not staying here – this is – “

“James,” Lily said.

He turned to her, opening his mouth.

“Shut up,” she said first. “I’m sure Mr Snape wants you around an awful lot less than you want to be here. Why don’t I go and get the tea?”

“Because I have no intention of laying myself open to the sort of accusation that is on the tip of your brother’s tongue,” Snape said.

“And you think having your elf in my flat is – “

“James. I said shut up, and I meant it,” Lily snapped. “I’ll get Mitty to fetch it – does that satisfy you?”

He nodded reluctantly, and turned his head away.

Snape left them to go to his lab, suggesting that they go and make themselves comfortable outside, if they wished. “Dion will bring you a quill and parchment,” he said to James. “If you’d like something to read when you’re done, help yourself from the bookcase in the sitting room.”

“Will this take long?” James demanded.

Lily rolled her eyes.

“Long enough that the potion I was working on when you arrived will be completely destroyed,” Snape said evenly.

“Oh! I’m so sorry,” Lily looked mortified. “We could come back – “

“I think you both fail to understand that I am now seriously concerned about your health,” Snape said to James. “You will need to see a Mediwizard shortly, but if I can confirm the cause of your problem, then it will aid them in both diagnosis and treatment.”

“You really think there’s something wrong with me?” James asked.

“Your liver tells me so,” Snape said. “Whether that can account for your foul temper and violent behaviour towards your sister is another matter, but either way, it’s going to need treatment. Now, if you’ll excuse me, Dion will get you anything you need. I will go and ready my lab.”

James and Lily sat in the garden, a jug of cool juice on the table beside them.

“It’s beautiful here,” Lily said.

James did not look up from his book.

“Are you angry with me?” she demanded. “James!” she prompted, when he failed to answer.

He looked up.
“Of course not,” he said, after looking at her for a moment or two. Something seemed to collapse in him. “I can’t believe I hit you,” he said quietly. “I’m so sorry.”

“I know,” she said. “I was scared of you,” she added quietly.

He flinched.

“What if – what if there isn’t something wrong with me? I mean, causing it? What if this is me?” he asked quietly.

“Then you’re going to have to work much harder at getting it under control,” she said. “No easy medicine. You can’t allow your temper to dictate who you are.” She paused. “Not unless you like being angry, that is,” she added, a question in her voice.

He went red, and then white, wiping a hand over his face.

“James? Did you like hitting me?”

“No!” he looked up quickly, and then away again.

“What, then?”

“Sometimes - when I’m angry – it – it feels good. To let it all go,” he whispered quietly.

“To hurt people?” she asked. “Do you like that too?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. Sometimes.”

“Dad?”

He shrugged again.

“I’ve always thought he was such a brilliant Dad,” she said, her tone relaxed, easy. Lacking condemnation. “I quite like seeing that he’s human after all.”

He looked up, startled. “What?”

“Well, he always loved us so much. He always put us first. I took it for granted, I suppose, till I was about – fourteen? I went to stay with Joanna Bowdell in the Spring holidays.”

“I remember her. Looked like a rabbit, somehow.”

She laughed. “She did! Anyway, it was a bit of a revelation. Her parents seemed really nice – I mean, I’d met them at Platform 9¾ before, of course. It took me about three days to realise that the whole family did absolutely everything their father said, when he said it, no questions asked. If they did that, he was as nice as pie. If anyone went against him – if something happened even accidentally – he flew into the most appalling rage. I had to fake a migraine to come home the next day.”

“All parents are different, I suppose.”

“Yes, of course. But I realised that despite seeming normal on the outside, his whole family lived in fear. And it also made me realise that in our house, it was the other way round. I mean, I know Dad was firm about manners and being nice to people, and politeness, but for himself – he always did what suited us: he fitted his life to ours, rather than the other way round.”
“So what’re you saying now?”

She shrugged. “Well, I want to have kids someday, and it made me feel – I don’t know – that maybe I could never be as selfless as Dad, so maybe I’d be a rubbish parent.”

“Mum did what she wanted.”

“Yeah, she could because Dad slotted himself around her plans. But what if I married a man who wasn’t prepared to give things up to suit me and the kids?”

“Compromise?”

“Yeah, exactly. That’s what Dad’s doing now – finding a compromise, between making us happy and making himself happy. It’s such a relief.”

An elf popped up beside them. “Dion is sorry for interrupting, but Mitty is asking if Master James has a message for his work.”

“Oh, shit! I - how did I not even think about work?”

“Is Mitty here?” Lily swung her legs over the side of the lounger.

Dion nodded.

“Could we see her, please?”

Two seconds later, Mitty was with them. Allie blinked at the bright sunlight, and retreated into the folds of the pillowcase.

“Mitty! Did work floo-call looking for me?” James asked.

“Yes, Master James, and Mitty is not knowing what to say, except that you is not in the house!”

“Would you floo them for me and tell them that I’m feeling a little unwell, and won’t be in for the rest of the afternoon?”

“Umm, and Mitty,” Lily said. “I’ve no idea how long we’ll be, but if Dad is looking for me, can you tell him I called in and am still out with my friends? I’ll explain to him later.”

Mitty nodded, looking at both of them anxiously; after studying Lily, she swung back to James. “Is Master James feeling poorly? Can Mitty be helping?”

“You’re very kind,” James said. “But I’ll be fine.”

“Master Snape is just checking the tea that you fetched to see whether something in it is affecting James,” Lily explained. “That’s why we’re sitting here quietly waiting.”

Mitty nodded happily. “Then you is in good hands.” And she popped away.

“Do you think she apparated this far, or just back to the floo?” Lily asked.

“Who cares?” James said, and to Lily’s surprise, not long after, was asleep.
She blew her nose as she sat on the side of the bed, and scrubbed the hot tears from her eyes several times.

She felt a bit sick and her hands were shaking.

She didn’t know what to do.

Ever since the night in the garden, Artur had taken to – to - being disgusting.

The days when he didn’t call were such a relief, although she had no certainty at any time that he wouldn’t arrive.

Whether it was ten in the morning or at night, her aunt would welcome him, and he would lay on the charm.

His aunt had no idea what a foul thing he was.

Artur would deliberately humiliate her should her aunt appear – a hand up under her robe, or a savage bite to her neck.

The only comment her aunt had made was to tell Artur he was a naughty boy for marring her skin, when the wedding was coming up, and to heal it at once, which of course, Artur had done with a cheeky grin to Tante Sabine, and a vicious pinch to her behind.

She knew he was not interested in her in that way – he only did these things when he knew someone was coming, to taunt her.

But how far would he be prepared to go to humiliate her?

What was she supposed to do?

Her father had refused to listen when she’d told him she did not wish to marry Artur.

That in itself had hurt unbearably, but now, after the threat to her father’s life, there was no way that she could ask again for the engagement to be called off.

She’d geared herself up to marry Artur, but she didn’t think she could do it if he was going to treat her like dirt all the time.

She touched her earlobe and the earrings from Lucius. How she wanted to just say the word and disappear to safety!

But her father’s life was at stake.

She had been so pleased to see Lucius when he’d called! And then she had just had to act like a simpering idiot, with her aunt there.

She could visit him – ask him for his help – but she would never forgive herself if her father came to harm.

She needed to do something to protect him. And herself.

And she would have to deal with this on her own.
Harry had started trailing Atkins. He followed her in the Ministry, and he followed her home. He had no compunction about invading her privacy at all.

Half way through the second day, he exited the Ministry and apparated over to see Kingsley in Dublin.

“Harry! Good to see you. I take it this is business?”

Harry hadn’t been able to go over to Spain again, not wanting to abandon Lily at home. He nodded. “Just wanted to check: is Filius Stubbington working for you?”

Kingsley sat down and gestured for Harry to do the same in the visitor’s chair on the other side of his desk.

“Yes. What are you up to?”

“I’ve been trailing Atkins – “

“In the Ministry?”

“Yes, and I saw Stubbington sneaking in and going through her private owl messages. Thought he was a good chap, so just wanted to check.”

“I don’t want you putting him at any risk – “ Kingsley said.

“I won’t,” Harry interrupted. He paused. “I’m not going to sit around doing nothing, Kingsley. We know she’s important, and I’ve got a useful skill. I need to find out what she’s up to. Talking of which, she’s going with Lucius to this wedding in France?”

“Yes. That should prove extremely useful, in terms of seeing who’s there, and the potential for information. I’d be interested to know if any of our British suspects are invited, and Lucius will be monitoring any interaction. I’ve organised several spies to attend, as waiting staff and the like.”

“But I thought the girl didn’t want to marry the boy? He’s gay, isn’t he?”

Kingsley shrugged his shoulders. “Lots of gay men marry,” he said, looking pointedly at Harry.

“I’m bisexual, and I had no idea I was interested in men back then. Any sort of sex was pretty amazing when I first discovered it.”

Kingsley grinned. “I’d like for you to have the opportunity to discover a bit more: when can you next come over?”

Harry blushed. “You know I’d like to – but I’ve hardly seen Lily since her Mum died, so – “

“Fair enough,” Kingsley said. “She needs you. We just want you.”

Harry gulped.

“And not just sexually, before you think that’s all we’re after,” Kingsley added.

Harry nodded. “If – if she goes to stay with friends, or anything, I’ll come - “

“You will,” Kingsley said, voice deep.
Harry groaned, shifting in his seat.

Kingsley laughed. “Come and see us just for an hour, if you have one spare. Not for sex; you know, just for a walk around the vines, or a glass of wine. Whatever. Anytime.”

“The last time you were in the vines, there wasn’t much walking going on,” Harry waggled his eyebrows.

“True,” Kingsley laughed. “But I mean it: we like your company.”

“Thanks,” Harry nodded. He leant forward, frowning. “So, has Lucius said that the girl is happy about the wedding now?”

“He hasn’t mentioned it.”

Harry chewed his lip.

Kingsley sat up. “This is a really important opportunity - “

“For us?” Harry demanded.

“For getting information, yes.”

The man she’s marrying tortured Pierre Balcon.”

“That’s her choice.”

“Is it?”

“Harry – “

“She said quite openly that she didn’t want to marry him. I heard her.”

“And she’s what, eighteen? Girls that age change their minds – “

“If Lily had told me that she didn’t want to marry her fiancé, I wouldn’t be organising a big affair a month later, even if she had said she’d changed her mind back. And that’s assuming that I hadn’t coerced Lily into an arranged marriage with a right bastard in the first place.”

“Harry, what are you doing? You don’t know this girl. And even if you did, you can’t save the world one person at a time.”

Harry went very still. “Hold on right there, Kingsley. Are you suggesting that she doesn’t matter? That what we could find out is more important than her happiness?”

The atmosphere in the room had changed.

Kingsley narrowed his eyes. “I have to take tough decisions in this job. Did you think I just sat here looking pretty?”

“I know that,” Harry said, “and you’re avoiding the question.”

“No. We haven’t done anything here. We haven’t organised the wedding, forced her response, arranged the flowers – “

“I think you said once that this business is all about information – “
“It is.”

“Well, we have information. Clear, incontrovertible information that she does not want to marry this guy.”

“You know that’s hardly relevant to the situation. Our job isn’t to sort out people’s marriages.”

Harry sat looking at Kingsley for a moment, before getting to his feet. “Of course. That isn’t your job. My apologies.”

Kingsley stood up too. “You’re planning something.”

“I’m a private citizen. As such, I’m entitled to feel concern about my friends and acquaintances.”

“Are you going to tell me what you’re going to do?”

“Well, all I’m planning to do at the moment is to see Malfoy. He certainly cares what happens to her, so it may be that if he’s not raised an objection, all is well.”

“And if it isn’t?”

“If it isn’t, then I’ll decide what to do.”

“You’re going to try and save her.”

Harry held the door knob. “If she needs it, yes.”

“You’ll blow Malfoy’s cover – “

“No, I won’t. Do you really think me such an idiot?”

Kingsley stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I think you’re being foolish to put so much at risk – “

“Well,” Harry interrupted, “that’s where we differ, then. I’m not going to let a girl start a life of misery which I could have prevented, just because it helped me.”

“It’s not just you; we’re not just talking about Ginny’s killers – “

“I know that,” Harry said.

“I don’t think you understand – “

“I didn’t know you had such a low opinion of me.”

Kingsley walked over to him, and slid a hand down his arm. “Of course I don’t have a low opinion of you. You know that.”

Kingsley’s arm fell away as Harry remained stiff.

“I appreciate that you’re buried in all this nastiness all the time, and want to see an end to it,” Harry said, “and I’m sure some of it is very complicated. But what I’m looking at is very simple.”

“Yes?”

“I was willing to give my own life to save our world, but I’ll be damned if I’ll sacrifice someone else’s.” And with that, he wrenched open the door, and slammed it behind him.
Wrong Feet And Right Steps

Harry strode out of Kingsley’s office building. It was raining in Dublin, a soft grey mizzle.

He hunched his shoulders as he walked along, and then slowly relaxed, letting the droplets coast down his nose.

He was glad of the charm on his glasses.

He was upset.

He couldn’t let that stand in the way of what he felt was right, though.

He understood that Kingsley had a job to do, but…

He didn’t like disagreeing with him.

He supposed that was stupid.

They were bound to disagree on things.

But …this seemed so…fundamental.

And he didn’t like thinking that Kingsley thought he was an idiot.

An interfering idiot.

Was he?

He kept walking, trying to think rationally. He knew he was inclined to act on his intuition, his gut feeling on things.

It wasn’t always right.

He sighed, trying to make himself calm down. It was almost tea time. He’d head home, have a bit of normal life, and think it over.

He apparated back into the parlour, and headed into the kitchen. Mitty was at the stove, stirring something. Dinky was polishing the brass door fittings.

“Afternoon,” Harry greeted them both. “That smells good,” Harry smiled at Mitty, and came to stroke Allie’s ears, which the little elfling seemed to love.

“Mitty is making chicken curry,” the elf said happily.

“Great.” Harry put the kettle on. “Lily and Albus around?”

The elf looked intently into the pot. “Miss Lily is still shopping with her friends.”

“No she isn’t,” Albus said, coming into the kitchen and brushing himself off. “I’ve just had a coffee with Abby and Dave in Fortesque’s. Lily left Abby before lunch.”

“She hasn’t been home?” Harry turned to Mitty.
“Miss Lily isn’t being home,” she said, her ears waggling as she stirred furiously.

Harry had got used to elf evasion tactics.

“Mitty,” he said. “Look at me.”

The elf turned, spoon in hand, looking fearful.

“What’s going on? Where’s Lily?”

“Lily is saying to tell Master she is still shopping – “

“She did, did she?”

The elf nodded vigorously.

“But she isn’t, is she?”

Mitty’s eyes grew bigger and bigger. Allie could feel the tension and started to cry. Dinky came over, and took the baby from Mitty, slipping off into their room with him.

“I’m not cross with you. I’m sure Lily had a reason to tell you to lie to me, but I need to know she’s safe.”

Mitty slumped in relief. “Miss Lily is being very safe. She is being with Master James, and…and she is being very safe indeed.”

“Is she at James’ flat?”

Mitty shook her head.

“You’re sure about that?”

“Yes, because Mitty is going there, and then Mitty – Mitty is seeing them.”

Harry sighed. He could command Mitty to tell him, as Master of the house, but the conflict of interest would drive her into fits of remorse for hours.

“So, you know where she is, and she’s fine, yes?”

Mitty nodded. “She is being fine, but Mitty is making a compress for her cheek,” the elf said, pointing proudly to a pan full of various herbs, and the cloths sitting beside the cooker.

“What’s wrong with her cheek?” Harry asked, at once anxious again.

“It is being swollen,” MItty said, looking from Harry to Albus, who had just come over.

“Someone hurt her?”

“Mitty is not knowing. Miss Lily is smiling.”

“I think you’d better tell me where she is,” Harry said.

Mitty looked at him anxiously.

“Why don’t you go and tell her that Dad is worried and needs to know where she is?” Albus suggested, looking from one to the other. “That would do, wouldn’t it, Dad?”
Harry sighed, and nodded. “Yes. Do that, Mitty, please.”

“Mitty is going right now!” the elf said, and scuttled out of the room.

“She didn’t apparate?” Albus questioned.

They both ran after her, and saw Mitty throwing floo powder into the flames. “Villa Olorosa!”

Harry’s face clenched.

Albus grabbed his arm. “Don’t go. She could be there for all sorts of reasons – “

“Like what?”

“She might need some girlie potions from Severus or something – you know, women’s stuff, “

Albus invented.

“Except James is there too, and he should be at work.”

“Well, maybe he’s gone to apologise, Dad. About time, eh?”

Harry looked at his son, and forced a smile. “Tea? I left the kettle on.”

“Sure. And we better stir the curry.”

But back in the kitchen, Dinky had everything in hand.

Harry gulped down the tea. He felt even more – irritable, though he knew he didn’t yet have cause. Albus could be absolutely right, though he’d be cross with Lily if she’d forced James to go and apologise. But then, why would she have a bruised cheek? Where did that fit into the picture?

In a moment, Mitty was back. “Miss Lily is asking Master to come through to Master Severus’.”

“Alright if I don’t come, Dad? I’ve got to be at work in half an hour and I need to eat first.”

“No problem,” Harry just laid a hand briefly on Albus’ shoulder as he went past. “Have a good evening.”

“Yeah, you too. You could stay over there, you know. MItty’s curry will last till tomorrow, won’t it, Mitty?”

“We’ll see,” Harry said, looking at them both, “but I expect Lily and I’ll be back shortly. Why don’t you eat, Mitty? Don’t wait for us.” And he apparated to burn off a bit of energy.

He landed outside; within a moment, he had an armful of Lily.

“Just perfect timing, Dad. We need to take James to St. Mungo’s. We don’t have a particular family Mediwizard, do we? We’ve always been healthy – “

“Hold on, slow down,” Harry said, holding her away from him. His hand came up and studied her cheek. It appeared to be fine.

“I thought you had an injured cheek; what’s this about James?”

“How did you know that? Did Mr Snape call you?”

“I did not,” Snape said, coming out of the house.
“No, you didn’t, did you?” Harry said. He slung his arm over Lily’s shoulders. “What’s going on?”

Snape looked at him, taking in the attitude, the stance.

“Perhaps you’d allow James to explain,” he said mildly, and stood back from the door.

James was standing in the kitchen, looking belligerent. “Dad. I’m sorry Lily got you: I’m perfectly capable of going to St. Mungo’s on my own.”

Harry took stock. “Of course you are,” he agreed. “I know you went on your own when you damaged your shoulder in that quidditch game last year. But sometimes it helps to have back-up. Someone to fetch your toothbrush and pyjamas.”

“I could always transfigure those,” James said, relaxing a little.

“Yeah, but they have funny spells there. You might find yourself walking across the ward in your stripy best and the next minute, the hankie you transfigured them from drops to the floor and you’re stark-boll – er, naked. Sorry, Lils,” Harry said, flushing.

She rolled her eyes and patted his arm. “No one wants to see James’ scrawny arse, that’s for sure.”

There was a sudden deathly silence.

“I have no interest in it whatsoever,” Snape said, “before any further comments are made. James, tell your father the situation, if you’re going to. Before you know it, the night shift will be on, and they won’t bother doing anything till the morning.”

“Then I could go home – “

“Yes, that would be very wise,” Snape said sarcastically.

“What’s up?” Harry asked.

“According to Severus, I’ve had an allergic reaction,” James said.

“What to?” Harry looked at his son for spots and rashes.

“Well, the tea I’ve been taking for my hayfever.”

Harry’s brows drew together.

“I got it when I went travelling with the company last year. It works really well.”

“So why is there a problem now?”

“Severus thinks it might be interacting with the ingredients in beer, which is why my liver is up the creek.”

“What?”

“This should be perfectly treatable – “ Snape began.

Harry held up his hands. “Hold on, can we back up a step? If there’s something wrong with your liver, why are you here and not at St. Mungo’s?”

Harry watched the look being exchanged between Lily and James. And waited.
“We came because James wondered if he was being poisoned,” she began.

Harry turned to his son. “Are you in pain?” he asked, reaching out a hand. “The explanation can wait. Come on, let’s get you to a Mediwizard.”

“Nothing hurts,” James said. “Finding out about the liver thing was sort of coincidental.”

“Coincidental to what? I don’t understand.”

“It was just a hunch,” Lily said, after a moment. “You know, that something was wrong.”

Harry stood up straight. “Alright. You don’t want to tell me. Fair enough. But I’m disappointed in you, Snape, that you didn’t call me, knowing that James was ill.”

“Your son is a man,” Snape said coolly. “It is not for me to inform you of anything.”

Harry bit his tongue against the rising hurt and frustration. Snape was right, but still…

“Well, let’s get you to St. Mungo’s,” Harry said. “If I’m allowed to accompany you?”

“I need your help, actually,” James said, just as stiffly. “If you’re willing to give it.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped. “I don’t know what I’ve done to piss everyone off today, but you know I’d do anything for you. What is it?”

“So I could just apparate you there?”

“That won’t be a problem?” Snape asked.

“Why should it be?” Harry frowned.

“It’s quite some distance. Most wizards could not apparate anywhere near that far alone.”

Harry pulled himself up. “Maybe it’s time people realised that I’m not some stupid idiotic weakling who doesn’t even know his own strength,” he snapped. “Come here,” he said to James. “Who should I take him to?” He looked at Snape.

Snape carefully handed James a parchment. “I have no idea. But here are the results of my tests, the analysis of the leaves, and my recommendations for potions’ treatments, assuming that there are no further complications of which I am unaware. The Potions’ Masters at St. Mungo’s should not have any difficulty brewing them, but of course, you may wish to seek advice from other sources. Now, I have seven hours of potions brewing to catch up with,” and he turned and walked out of the kitchen.

“You two are both right bastards,” Lily said. “After all his help – you didn’t even thank him, James!”

“Fuck off nagging, Lils,” James said. “You’re not my mother.”

“No, Mum would be very ashamed of you. I’m just disgusted.” And she stalked off after Snape.

“Ready?” Harry said, and apparated them both.
Lily knocked on the door of the room.
She waited, and knocked again.
She heard the sigh, and then, “Come in.”

“I’m really sorry,” she said, looking at the severe man, now with a large white pinny tied round his waist.

“You have nothing whatsoever to blame yourself for, and you cannot take on the guilt of others,” Snape said, selecting several jars from a shelf.

“They’re my family: I do feel responsible for them. I don’t really understand what that was all about. I thought you and Dad were friends?”

“Yes. I take it he was worried about James.”

“I’ve never seen him so rude,” Lily said, edging into the room.

“Shut the door behind you if you’re coming in,” Snape said wearily. “I have an extraction system for fumes that won’t work properly with the door open.”

“Oh! Sorry,” she shut it quickly, and took that as encouragement to come across and take the single stool that stood opposite the workbench.

“Has James been really bad, then, lately? While I was away?”

“I hardly have a long history with him to compare his behaviour to,” Snape said.

“No, I suppose.” She rested her elbows on the bench and cupped her face, wincing just a little.

“He’s always been prickly, but I’d never seen him violent before.”

“I’m surprised he consented to coming here,” Snape said. “He has entrenched views on homosexuality.”

“Well, I forced him to, after he hit me. He was gutted. I’m sorry, I hadn’t really understood… I put you in a difficult position.”

“I’ve been in worse,” Snape said, selecting a cauldron from a dozen that were hanging from hooks in the ceiling.

“With Dad too. I should have left a message about where we were.”

“Albus and your father already keep a record in the house noting where they are, to be checked should an emergency arise. It would be sensible to do the same.”

“Yes, I should have thought of that. I sort of got out of things, being away.”

“How are you liking your studies in France?” Snape changed the subject.

“Yes, good. I’m glad Hugo’s there – I mean, I would have felt lonely without him, although it was good to escape all the scandal and gossip. I suppose that’s cowardly of me?”
“No, I don’t think so. Had you had to stay, you would have braved it out, wouldn’t you?”

“Yeah, I’d have had to.”

“Yes. But circumstances were different. There is no point looking back; just make the best of the new.”

“Yes.” She was silent for a moment. “Were there things in England you missed? You know, when you came to live here?”

Snape glanced up at her, surprised by the perspicacious question. “Not a lot. And I had a very big positive in my life to make here attractive,” he said, a slight curve to his lips.

“Kingsley. He is hot, isn’t he?”

Snape laughed. “Indeed. And luckily for me, not interested in young girls. Or any girls, for that matter.”

She grinned. “So. You and Kingsley and Dad.”

“Judging from your father’s reaction a moment ago, I would not worry that things will continue for too long.”

“Well, there’s a number of responses to that,” she said, sitting up. “Firstly, I’m not worried if you’re all together. I told Dad that the other night. Secondly, are you going to give up on him so easily?”

“I rather think he might be the one – “

“Don’t be daft,” she cut across him, making him raise an eyebrow as he assembled a host of ingredients in neat rows in front of him.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to be rude. You must think we all have such bad manners. I’m really sorry.”

“Forgiven. Go on.”

She smiled easily.

Snape found the rapport unexpected, and rather charming.

“Look, he thinks you were in the wrong. You weren’t. He’ll realise that, and want to apologise. But even if you were in the wrong…”

“Hmm?”

“He put up with Mum’s shit for years. Do you really think he’d give up so easily?”

“You are an interesting young lady. Tell me what subjects you’re studying.”

“What? Oh, well, Defence, Potions - “

“Excellent. Just the response I was hoping for. Are you any good?”

“Er, well, I think so – “

“Your grandmother was. Put on an apron and chop these shrivelfigs, then, if you’d be so kind.”
“Really? I can help?” She was down from her chair and reaching for an apron.

“If you can cut finely and precisely, yes. Otherwise, you can scrub out my ruined cauldron.”

She laughed, and peered into it. “Is this really wasted? It looks alright to me. What is it?”

“An experimental potion. It hasn’t congealed?”

“No, it looks clear and – viscous,” she said, choosing her word carefully. “You knew my grandmother?”

“Before we even went to Hogwarts together. She lived a few streets from me as a child,” he said, coming over to look in the cauldron. “Now, that is interesting.”

“You could still do something with that?” she said, watching as Snape scooped a small amount into a ladle and decanted it into a clear flask.

“Very possibly,” he said, distracted.

“Maybe today hasn’t been so disastrous for you after all,” she said. “You know, despite having to deal with us ungrateful twits. So, how big do you want these shrivelfigs? Standard 1/7th cut?”

“Precisely.”

“Okay.” She set to work. “So: did you go up to Hogwarts on the train together the first year? I can’t think how nerve-wracking that first time must be. I was used to watching James and Albus going off, and I sooo wanted to go, but I was still scared the first time. I don’t even know what town Grandma came from! That’s ridiculous! Where was it, then?”

Lily and Severus passed two companionable hours, until rumbling stomachs and a window in the brewing schedule drove them back to the kitchen.

Kingsley was sitting at the table drinking a glass of wine when they exited.

He stood up, on seeing Lily. “Hello! This is a surprise!”

“Yes, hi Kingsley. We’ve been ruining Severus’ day, but he’s let me help him in the lab to catch up.” She turned to Snape. “Thank you for everything. I must go. Will James be kept in St. Mungo’s, do you think?”

Snape met Kingsley’s surprised eyes over her head. “I would think so. They should do all the testing and get him stabilised before releasing him.”

She nodded. “Thank you. I’m really grateful. Even though he’s a stupid idiot.”

“I expect he needs your support, even though at the moment he doesn’t deserve it.”

She nodded. “He’s my brother. I’ll make him pay for this later,” she said, rubbing her cheek. “You – will it make it worse for you not to tell him? Dad?”

“I’ll survive,” Snape said.
“Good, but I want Dad to too.”

“You can only do what you think is right. Sometimes, competing loyalties test us.”

She nodded, and then, to everyone’s surprise, reached up and pecked him on the cheek. “You don’t mind me doing that?”

“You’re brave to try,” his lips twitched. “Not many would have the nerve.”

“Well. Got Dad’s impulsiveness, I guess, but I won’t do it again if it offends you. I don’t want to be like one of those aunts you have to avoid.”

Snape laughed, put a hand on her back and turned her towards the floo. He grinned over at an astonished Kingsley.

“I’ll be more worried if you start doing it to Kingsley. Him being ‘hot’, and all.”

“Oh! You mean sod!” she said, glancing round as colour swamped her face.

Kingsley was laughing. “You didn’t think he was nice all the time, did you? I’ll take that as a compliment. Take care, now.”

And Lily was gone through the floo.

Later, Harry arrived home.

“How is he?” Lily said, dashing straight into the parlour.

“Settled in for the night. Is there any of Mitty’s curry left? I haven’t eaten and I’m absolutely starving.”

They moved into the kitchen.

Mitty fussed over him as he ate, trying to make up for her earlier behaviour, until Harry laid a hand on her arm and said, “I’m not cross with you, Mitty, alright? I know you try and do the best for all of us.”

The elf burst into sobbing.

Harry felt exhausted, and really didn’t feel like dealing with it, but he patted her on the back and tried not to recoil when he saw the trail of snot she was leaving on his knee.

“That was a lovely dinner, Mitty, thank you,” he said. “And I’m rather tired tonight, so would you mind washing up?”

Harry more often than not did his own, so the elf leapt at the chance of the extra work.

Harry headed into the sitting room with Lily. It was already after ten, and he slumped down onto the sofa and put the Muggle news on.

Not much was happening, but it was soothing, somehow, to see that other people had problems too.
Lily sat in an armchair watching.

“I need to go and apologise to Severus,” he said at last.

She turned to him. “You do.”

He sighed, and laid his head back on the sofa cushions. “It was just that I’d already fallen out with Kingsley, and somehow my back was up at being kept out of the loop and treated like an idiot.”

“That wasn’t Severus’ fault. It was mine.”

“You were protecting James,” Harry said, turning his head to look at her. “He told me he hit you.”

“Did he? I thought he probably would.”

“Are you alright?”

“Severus gave me some herbal tea to reduce the swelling, and Mitty a compress. I’ve been well looked after.”

“Lils –”

“Alright,” she admitted. “I cried. I apparated back home and cried in the bathroom. I think he terrified himself, though. That’s why he agreed to come to Severus. That, and I suppose he thought Severus hated him anyway, so it was easier to see him than to tell a stranger that he was a shit.”

“Welcome home,” Harry murmured.

She laughed. “We fought a lot when we were kids. You forget how much it all hurts as you grow up.”

“They say the temper could be part of it. That the medicine - tea, whatever - was supposed to help calm an over-reaction to the pollen, but actually sort of lowered his inhibitions as well, and at the same time his adrenalin system seems to have gone up the creek, so that he was on edge and tense, and it was close to inducing some sort of paranoia. And if Snape hadn’t realised what was going on with his liver, and the interaction, he might have ended up doing something really, really stupid. So I owe you both.”

She came and sat next to him. “Glad we caught it, Dad.” She butted her head against his shoulder.

“I should have seen it.”

“Why? It didn’t make him homophobic, and I suppose he still will be afterwards. How were you to know that he wasn’t just extremely angry about that? It was only him going berserk after a pretty ordinary bit of teasing on my part – the sort of stuff we usually banter about – that I realised that something was really wrong.”

Harry nodded. “He’s not going to be able to drink beer for at least a year: he won’t like that.”

She laughed.

They sat side by side for a bit, just watching the images on the telly. The weather forecast.

“I never understand why they show it after the main news, and then again straight after the local news,” she said. “I mean they’re talking about the weather in Italy or something – it’s not as if the local thing is just forecasting for the patch over our heads.”
Harry grinned and slung an arm along the back of the sofa, giving her a hug.

“Kingsley and Severus are going to get some rain, from the look of it.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“No idea. I suppose the vines and olive trees need watering as much as everything else. Saves doing it manually.”

“How come you’d fallen out with Kingsley? Or is it personal?”

Harry sighed. “Not at all. I – “ he looked at her.

“You don’t have to tell me.”

“Well, I kept thinking of you and that’s what made me cross about it. There’s a wedding coming up. We should learn a lot of information from it – all the main players in France that we know of will be going, and some Brits, and we might find who else is involved, and also, who knows what will be discussed when they’ve all got the chance to be there without anyone thinking it’s odd? I mean, a wedding is a wedding, perfect cover, isn’t it?”

“I can see that. It sounds like it could be really helpful. So what’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I heard the girl saying that she didn’t want to marry the guy, that she felt pressured by her father. Add to that, the guy is not only gay and just marrying her for cover, but he’s a sadistic bastard.”

“Oh my god.” She sat back, her hands over her face. “So – so what are you doing about it?”

“Kingsley thinks it ought to go ahead for the information.”

“But – but why is she still marrying him if she said she didn’t want to? Have you asked her? I mean, is she being coerced, or Imperiused, or something? Why would she? Are they rich and she’s after their money? Maybe she’s willing to put up with it for that, or something.”

Harry held out his hands. “Hold on, hold on!”

She grinned.

“Okay, the complications are, she’s never met me – “

“But you said – “

“I was eavesdropping on a conversation she had with our spy.”

“Hmm. Tricky. Has he, or she, asked her?”

“I don’t know. I need to check that out.”

“Absolutely. Are they friends? How old is she?”

“She’s your age, and I’d say they were friends, yes.”

“Ooh, so our spy is some handsome young hunk, is he?” She waggled her eyebrows.

Harry laughed. “The fewer people who know who he is, the more he’s protected.”
She nodded. “It must be quite exciting: spying. You know, tricking people….”

“Lily Potter! I’m surprised at you!”

“Just saying. Severus was a spy, wasn’t he?”

“Yes, and he suffered hell, which is what I want to avoid for our current one.”

“OK. So, he needs to find out before this goes any further. Or someone needs to find out. I suppose it doesn’t have to be him.”

Harry looked at her with interest. “And what do you think we should do if she says she doesn’t want to marry him? That she’s being forced?”

“Well, if it was me – “

“Yes?”

“To be honest, I can’t imagine anyone forcing me to do anything I didn’t want, or if they tried, me not telling them where to get off.”

Harry laughed again. “That’s my girl,” he said, rumpling her hair. “The thing is, some wizarding families are much more – forceful than ours. You know, you do what your parents tell you and all that.”

“Yeah, I know,” she nodded seriously. “I’m so glad you and Mum weren’t like that.”

“Got something right, at least, then.”

“Lots,” she said, giving him a quick hug before sitting away in the corner of the sofa. “But if she’s being forced, you know, and really doesn’t want to do it, and we know – I mean, especially if he’s a violent git,” and she touched her cheek unconsciously, “we can’t just leave it, leave her, can we? I mean, we’d have it on our consciences.”

“Even if it means it delays catching Mum’s killers?”

“Well, I don’t think Mum would have been impressed if we’d allowed some girl to suffer on her behalf. It’s too late to stop what happened to Mum, isn’t it?”

They sat and watched a news quiz programme. Harry felt exhausted, and could feel himself dropping off.

“You’re going to snore in a minute: why don’t you go to bed?”

Harry leant forward and rubbed his eyes. “You’re right.” He stood up, and stretched. “I think I’ll just nip over to St. Mungo’s to check James.”

“Will they let you visit at this time of night?”

Harry looked at the clock. “Good point.”

“They’ll contact us if there’s a problem, won’t they?”
Harry nodded.

“Well then, get some sleep, Dad. Lots to do tomorrow – “

Lily was interrupted by the sound of the floo flaring.

They both dashed into the parlour, but rather than a Mediwizard, which they had feared, Kingsley’s face was in the flames.

“I know it’s late, but may we come through? Just for five minutes.”

“Sure,” Harry said, swallowing.

Lily waited until they were standing in the parlour. They were both in shirt-sleeves. “So, you boys going to play nicely, or do you need me to referee?” she asked.

“You can go to bed, cheeky,” Harry said.

“Sure?”

“Absolutely,” Kingsley nodded.

Snape gave her a small smile.

“Alright. Night, night, all,” and she blew them a kiss before heading up the stairs.

“How’s James?” Kingsley asked.

“Yeah, doing okay, I think. They’ve kept him in, but you were right, Severus. I owe you thanks and an apology.”

Snape nodded, and Harry felt relief wash through him that Snape hadn’t just brushed it off.

“I’m sorry; I had no right to speak as I did. I was so – taken aback, and worried, and I know that’s no excuse – “

“Mad with me too,” Kingsley added.

Harry nodded, shoving his hands in his pockets. “You – it was good of you to – to keep their confidence. I’m sorry – James told me what had happened.”

“Ah. Good.”

Kingsley looked at him. “I haven’t come to apologise,” he said.

Harry swallowed, and nodded. “I’m still going to try and find out what she wants. Nanette Odont.”

“Well, we know where we stand. That’s good,” Kinglsey said.

“I – why did you come?” Harry asked. “I mean, I was going to come and see you tomorrow, Severus, but – “

“We were in bed, actually,” Kingsley said, and as Harry’s eyes widened, added, “talking.”

“About me? I understand that you don’t want to see me – not like that – “

“No, that’s not it at all,” Kingsley said, stepping closer, as if Harry was a horse that might spook at
any moment. “Severus and I have a rule.”

“Yes?” He looked from one to the other.

“We never go to sleep with the heat of an argument lying between us. And we thought, if you’re going to be one of us, the same applies. So we got dressed and here we are.”

“You – you got out of bed to come and see me?”

“To kiss and make up, as the Muggles say,” Snape said, with a twist of his lips.

“You – I don’t understand. I was horrible to you, Snape. And I slammed your door –“ he looked at Kingsley.

“Yes, and you don’t think that Severus and I don’t have some humdingers of arguments?”

“I – so – what happens? I – I’m not giving in about this girl – “

“No. Good. We don’t expect you to be a pushover.”

“We don’t want you to be a pushover,” Snape said. “That’s not what attracted us to you at all.” He stepped up and took Harry’s face in his hand, a long finger stroking down his cheek. “This is what happens, as you put it.”

Harry shivered.

“We agree to differ,” he said. “We agree that we’re mad with each other. We know that we’ll pick the issue up again in the morning. I can tell you, from long experience, that it always looks different after you’ve spent a night having your brains blown out by Kingsley’s tongue in your arse,” he nipped a bite at Harry’s ear, “even if the problem is still there, a solution will have occurred to you. Or several. This,” he stroked his tongue along the seam of Harry’s lips, slipping in as Harry panted ragged breaths, “is a fact.”

And then he was kissing Harry, slowly, methodically, and Harry found himself so lost in it that when Snape pulled away he realised that he was rutting against him.

“Oh god,” he said.

“You have no idea how hot you both look,” Kingsley said. He was standing a little back. “I’d love to drop your trousers, spread your thighs, and do exactly what Severus said, right now, while he’s kissing you.”

Harry’s head fell on to Snape’s chest, as he groaned, trying to hold on to some semblance of reality.

“Given that we’re in your parlour, though, and your daughter is watching us from the stairs, I’d settle for a kiss, if you’re willing to give me one,” he said, tentatively.

Harry lifted his head and looked directly at Lily, thanking Merlin that they’d been talking in such quiet tones.

Instead of blushing, she gave him a grin and a thumbs up, and then turned and ran up the rest of the stairs.

Harry was just leaning towards Kingsley when she called out, “You could all stay the night here, you know. You know, if you need to be here in case St. Mungo’s calls, Dad.”
“Go to bed,” Harry yelled, adjusting himself in his trousers, and cutting off the moan the action provoked.

“Just saying,” she laughed, and was gone.

“Not tonight, I think,” Snape said.

“Not tonight,” Harry agreed. He turned to Kingsley, leaning back deliberately on Snape so that Kingsley had to take a step forward.

“You are wicked,” Kingsley said. “You can feel Severus’ cock against your arse, can’t you?” And he pushed his own against Harry, so that Harry was aware of both of them, hard and wanting him.

“You’re going to go home and f-fuck,” he stuttered, as Kingsley rubbed his face against the stubble on his jaw, his lips tracking towards his.

“And you’re going to go upstairs and wank thinking about us,” Kingsley said.

Harry moaned, pressing back against Snape.

“Thinking about what it would be like if we were all standing here naked,” Snape whispered in his ear, “with Kingsley taking hold of both your cocks together in that large hand of his, and me sliding my cock just along under your balls, back and forward, back and forward…”

“Oh fucking Merlin,” Harry gasped. Kingsley’s lips finally reached his mouth, and then, after the gentlest brush, he pulled away.

“No,” Harry objected, “you’re going now?”

“Mmmn,” Snape said, stepping away too and taking a pinch of floo powder, “think of us.’’

Harry bent over, a hand pressed over his cock, groaning.

Kingsley slid a hand down his back, pausing infinitesimally before continuing, firmly, over the curve of a buttock.

“Lovely,” he said.

He too stood at the grate. “I’ll be by tomorrow: let’s discuss things, yeah? We’ll work something out,” and he was gone.

Harry was just straightening up when the fire flared again. Hope sprang, and then Albus stepped through.

“Someone been visiting? I tried twice. Lily and James OK?”

Harry was very glad that his lovers had left after all: he’d been very close to begging Kingsley to follow through on his suggestion. After saying that his family didn’t need to expect to see him having sex over the kitchen table, he began to realise how very much he’d like to indulge in – anything – with them – anywhere.
Lovers. His lovers. He smiled.

“Dad? You okay?”

“James is in St. Mungo’s, but he’s going to be alright.”

“What?”

Harry nodded, and headed to the kitchen.

“He isn’t hurt?” Albus asked, loping down the stairs after him.

“No, an allergy.”

“Blimey. You must’ve been worried sick. Tell all. You seem calm. You’re okay, really?”

Harry turned round and grinned at his son. “Actually, Albus, I really am.”
Harry was just eating a bowl of cornflakes when the floo flared. He listened to the sound of Kingsley’s footsteps on the stairs, and smiled as the man came into the kitchen.

“I wasn’t sure if you’d still be in bed,” Kingsley said. “Got time for a chat?”

“Had some ideas?” Harry said, and then blushed, thinking about Snape’s comments about what gave him new ideas after a night with Kingsley.

Kingsley laughed as he took a seat.

Harry shook his head, and got up to put his bowl in the sink.

Kingsley reached out and touched his arm as he walked past. “We missed you,” he said quietly.

Harry bent over Kingsley’s shoulder and kissed him.

“Mmm,” Kingsley said, “I wasn’t expecting that.” He swung his legs round, and pulled Harry to stand between them. His hands slid up the back of Harry’s thighs, drawing him closer. “You’re distracting me from my good intentions.”

“You’re distracting me from my breakfast,” Lily said from the doorway. “Did you stay overnight, then?”

“Nope, went home, and just arrived.”

Harry stepped away.

Kingsley looked at him, a hand stroking his arm in reassurance.

Kingsley really was a very tactile person, Harry thought. He liked it a lot.

“Coffee? Tea?” Lily offered.

Mitty had appeared and was standing by the stove, looking hopeful.

Lily went and made peek-a-boo faces at Allie.

“Coffee would be good. Is there somewhere we can go and talk?” Kingsley asked Harry. “No offence, Lily: I don’t want to get in your way.”

“Are you talking about hot-man-stuff or about that girl? Because I’ve had an idea.”

Harry had moved away and was washing his bowl, but looked across at Kingsley. “I told Lily what I was upset about. I didn’t mention names.”

“It’s the Odont girl, isn’t it?”

They both looked at her.

“Firstly, I was eavesdropping last night, before you got all steamy, and then I owled a friend when I went upstairs to send me a couple of French gossip magazines: she knows I’m trying to improve
my French, and I got a bundle of her recent ones this morning. They list a huge wedding coming up between Nanette Odont and Artur Brouchard. That’s the pig, is it?”

Kingsley nodded. “Spot on. You interested in detection work? I might have a job for you when you’re ready.”

“Hey!” Harry said.

“Hey yourself,” Lily said, throwing herself into a chair. “I don’t think it’s my cup of tea, thanks. What I was thinking was that I could pretend to be one of her old school friends, go and visit, and get her to tell me if she’s being forced into it.”

“Just like that?” Harry said.

“I can be persuasive. Why? Have you got a better idea?” she said, pulling the cornflake packet towards her.

Albus appeared, hair mussed, rubbing his stomach, grunted at everyone, and sat down.

Kingsley grinned at Harry, who rolled his eyes.

“The problem with that thought,” Harry said, “is that she’s been home-schooled. Well, she has a tutor.”

“Really? Wow. That’s boring. What about friends?”

“That’s the problem. For that strategy. Maybe she doesn’t need people,” Harry shrugged.

“Everyone needs friends,” Lily said. “It sounds miserable to me.”

“What’s going on?” Albus asked, gulping down the tea that Mitty handed him, smiling his thanks at the elf.

Harry gave a brief explanation.

“Well, what about….?”

And a plan was hatched.

Which was how Lucius found himself putting a floo call through to Odont’s house. He couldn’t quite identify the feelings that had settled in his chest when Potter had come calling, asking what the situation was with Nanette. He’d spent several evenings, dashing back from entertaining Atkins, to take coffee at Chez Albert, but although he had seen Artur twice, with others from his group, Nanette had not been present.

He had called at the club where he knew Henri was an occasional attendee, and had shared a brandy with him, but Henri had steered the conversation repeatedly away from the forthcoming nuptials, and had nothing to say but that Nanette would be a lovely bride, and what a relief it was that his sister was taking charge of all the arrangements.

Said sister was in front of him now, at the other side of the floo.
“Madame,” he bowed, “I wonder if it is possible to have a brief word with Nanette? I’m sorry to trouble you when I know you must be so busy – “

“Indeed, she is rather occupied, I am afraid, Monsieur,” Madame LeClerc said firmly.

“Then perhaps you could help me? I’m all adrift on this one.”

“Moi? What is the problem, Monsieur?”

“A colleague from England is visiting me with his daughter. Of course, she wants to see all the best shops. France is famed, as you know, for couture, but she wants to go to all the trinket shops, and she wants a hat – is Degas’ still the best place, do you know, for hats? My wife used to buy hers there - ”

“Monsieur Malfoy!” Nanette dropped down beside her aunt. “Forgive me, but I was passing the door and I heard what you were saying. Of course, Degas’ is still popular, but – the clientele is – more mature, shall I say. How old is your friend’s daughter?”

“Good morning to you, Nanette. She is seventeen or eighteen, I believe. I am delighted to see you looking so well, and more grateful than I can say for your advice, for I really do not know where to send her.”

“Oh, but there are many wonderful places! She has a friend with her, perhaps, to explore together?”

“No, just her Papa, of course, but he knows even less than I of what shops might interest a young person in Paris.”

“Aunt! Oh, why do I not show this girl?”

“You have much to do – “

“Yes, and you said just yesterday that I needed to buy a sun-hat for my honeymoon, and – and other items! This could be just perfect! Do you think she would mind company, Monsieur?” she turned back to ask Lucius.

“I imagine she would be delighted. She speaks a little French, but I am sure will be very relieved if she has someone to help her. But perhaps your aunt is far too busy, and I am afraid that her Papa and I have a meeting with other colleagues today, and I cannot offer my assistance to you.”

The aunt, who had been instructed to prevent Lucius Malfoy from being alone with Nanette, breathed a sigh of relief, took one look at the excitement on her niece’s face, and cursed her brother for having withdrawn her from school. No wonder the child was so reluctant to be in the company of her young man! A day giggling with another young girl might well lift her from the doldrums in which she was wallowing.

“Unless you have any objections, Monsieur Malfoy, I cannot see why two girls cannot look after each other for a couple of hours in Paris, do you?”

“You’re both very kind,” Lucius said. “Perhaps you will allow me to treat the girls to lunch at Laurent’s?” he said, naming one of the most expensive restaurants in the capital. “If you do not object to the two dining alone?”

“That would be delightful, I am sure, if they can tear themselves away from their shopping,” Tante Sabine said.
“And Nanette -” Lucius went on.

“Yes, Monsieur? Merci, Monsieur -”

“I was going to say, Lila seems nice enough, but if you do not enjoy her company, do not force yourself to entertain her. I had no intention of imposing -”

“Oh! It is not an imposition at all! And of course I would not abandon her – what must you think of me?”

“I think you are far too kind. Where shall I tell her to meet you? Outside Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes? She can watch for you from the window.”

“Oh yes! That would be perfect! Then we can go to Château Borbonne, and – at what time?”

“When is convenient to you? Her father and I will be going out in ten minutes, so whatever time suits you.”

“I’m sure Nanette can be there in twenty minutes,” Tante Sabine said, mindful to make sure Lucius was out of the way, but not wanting the young girl to be alone too long.

“Perfect. My thanks again, Madame, Mademoiselle,” Lucius said.

He closed the floo, and turned back to the room.

“It is done,” he said, to Harry and Lily Potter, who were sitting out of view.

Lily had been trailing round with Nanette for forty five minutes. She was very conscious of the listening device she was wearing, and how inconsequential their conversation must sound. Of the pressure to find something out.

The excitement she’d felt had been rather overtaken by nerves. She kept being surprised by her reflection, finding that hats or jewelry that she would usually choose looked completely wrong when her hair and eyebrows were glamoured blonde.

“Lila, what do you think of this one?” Nanette asked.

Lily had given the name that James had used to call her sometimes when she was little – a combination of her two names, Lily Luna.

“Hmm, not quite right,” she said, tipping her head sideways as she looked at the hat.

“I saw Mrs Atkins – that’s the lady Monsieur Malfoy is seeing – wearing something like this in Witch Weekly.”

“You get Witch Weekly here? In French?”

“No, in English, of course. My tutor likes me to read in English, so I persuaded Papa that it would be good to read some magazines for current idioms.”

“Good one,” Lily agreed, returning Nanette’s naughty smile.
She backtracked a little. It must have been about the tenth time that Nanette had mentioned Lucius Malfoy. She’d asked what Lily thought of him: much to Lily’s relief she’d been able to say that she’d only just met him, through coming to visit with her father. It had become quite clear, though, that Nanette had something of a crush on him, and she just hoped that Lucius wasn’t also listening in on the other end of the device.

Her father, she knew, was somewhere, invisible, watching over them.

She knew she had to do something, to move things along.

“I think that style would be a little old for you, but do you think Artur would like it? Is he quite conservative?”

Once again, she saw Nanette’s eyes dart away at the mention of her fiancé. She sidled closer, standing next to Nanette, handling a feathery hat next to her. “Nanette?” she whispered, “Can we talk honestly? Mr Malfoy is worried about you.”

“Lucius?” Nanette turned and stared at her.

Lily nodded. “He doesn’t understand why you still want to marry Artur, when you said you didn’t. Have you really changed your mind?”

A sound something like a sob escaped Nanette.

“Don’t cry,” Lily said quickly, “I’m here to help.”

“There’s nothing you can do.” She put the hat down and blew her nose.

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” Lily said. “You might be surprised.”

But Nanette seemed to get hold of herself, and shook her head. “How about this one?”

Lily tried for another twenty minutes, without success. She sighed, embarrassed at her failure. “Shall we go to lunch?” she said. “Is it a nice restaurant? Do you know where it is?”

“Oh yes! It’s one of the best in Paris,” Nanette said. “I have no idea how Monsieur Malfoy could get us a table at such short notice.”

They arrived at the restaurant ten minutes later.

The maitre d’ seemed to know at once who they were. “Ah yes. Bienvenue! Follow me, s’il vous plaît,” he bowed.

They made their way through the restaurant. A genteel hush seemed to pervade the atmosphere, although almost every table was occupied. Lily wondered if there were muting and privacy spells on each one.

“Your private dining room, Mesdemoiselles,” the maitre d’ said, opening the door for them. “Your waiter will be with you shortly,” and he shut the door behind them.

“Oh. We can’t watch the other diners,” Nanette said, in disappointment, then jumped as Lucius Malfoy pulled the invisibility cloak from himself.

“I do apologise for that, and for this subterfuge,” he said, standing up. He came forward, taking Nanette’s hand and bowing over it as he kissed it.
It should have been formal, but Lily could only think how intimate it was. No-one had ever done such a thing to her, but Nanette seemed to accept it without finding it odd at all.

“Monsieur!” She turned to Lily. “Did you plan this? My aunt – “

“And your father have done everything to prevent me asking after you, or seeing you unchaperoned,” Lucius said, “and I will quite understand if you wish me to go away. You have only to say the word.”

Nanette’s hand was still in his. Lily could see that she was shaking slightly.

“Oh, you shouldn’t have done this! How – how can I – “

“Do not distress yourself,” Lucius said gently. “You have only to tell me that you are truly well, and that you have fallen in love with Artur, and I will go away at once, and leave you to your meal, and to your future happiness.”

Lily was uncertain what to do. She might have been a statue for all the attention that they paid her.

“I – you know I cannot say that – “ Nanette’s head was down, almost leaning into Mr Malfoy’s chest.

It was astonishing, Lily thought. Five minutes ago, Nanette was bright and breezy and obviously determined not to say a word.

That she trusted Mr Malfoy was undeniable.

And more…Lily thought, watching them.

Malfoy turned and pinned her with his gaze, then turned his head back to Nanette.

“We are embarrassing Miss – Lila,” Malfoy said. “Would you prefer it if she stayed to keep you company? I can go - “

“No,” Nanette said quickly, and Lily observed how her hands tightened on his, before she dropped them and turned to Lily.

“I am so grateful for your company this morning, and for bringing Lucius to me,” she said, coming forward. “I – will you think it very improper of me to speak to him alone?”

“Not at all,” Lily said, reaching out and hugging her. She looked at Lucius over her shoulder. Nanette was tiny. “I’m sure Mr Malfoy will take good care of you,” she added firmly.

Lucius nodded at her, his face serious.

“I hope we’ll see each other again soon,” Lily said, and found that she meant it. She walked to the door, feeling her father just touching her arm as she pulled it open. She left it wide enough for them both to exit.

"Me too. À bientôt," Nanette said, smiling.

“Go to the Ladies,” her father whispered in her ear.

The private room was at the back of the restaurant, and discreet, so she did not have to walk back through the tables. As soon as she entered the rather sumptuous powder room, she felt the pull of apparition, and they were in the parlour at home.
“Will she be alright? She’s scared,” she said. “How awful! To be approaching your wedding and to be full of fear rather than excitement! I’m sorry that I wasn’t able to get her to say anything much – “

“You did very well,” Harry said, giving her a hug. “And if Lucius can’t get the rest out of her, then I don’t think anyone can.”

Lily headed down to the kitchen and started looking in the cool cupboard. “I’m starving: I thought I was going to get dinner.”

Harry laughed. “Me too: get out some ham and cheese, Lils. Let’s have a sandwich. That do you?”

“Suits me.” She pulled out some cheddar and ham, and then rooted around and produced tomatoes and lettuce. “You are eating enough veg, aren’t you, Dad?”

He grinned. “With Kingsley and Severus’ influence, most definitely. Salad with everything, olive oil, dressings, herbs – all yum.”

“Well, they say a Mediterranean diet is best for you,” she nodded. “The food is really good at school.”

“Yes?”

“Amazing.” She cocked her head as she sliced a couple of tomatoes. “Well, I suppose I miss spotted dick from Hogwarts, and pumpkin juice, and actually, toast was fantastic at Hogwarts, but there aren’t any overcooked veg or anything. I like it.”

“Good,” Harry said, pleased to hear a bit about his daughter’s experiences. They had exchanged letters regularly, but it was nice to hear the small things.

They were eating their sandwiches when Lily asked, “So: Lucius Malfoy. I thought he was the big bad wolf?”

Harry choked on his mouthful, spluttering crumbs across the table.

“Eww! Dad!”

“Sorry,” Harry said, cleaning up with a spell when he’d got his breath back. He gave her a serious look. “He is. Don’t ever doubt it.”

“But you trust him with Nanette.”

Harry nodded slowly. “Yes. I don’t really understand it – but I think she brings out the best in him.”

“He’s miles older than her.”

“Yes.”

“Do – Dad, I – she has feelings for him.”

“I know,” Harry nodded, “but from what I’ve seen, he treats her like – like a special granddaughter, or something. Indulgent, but quite firm. He obviously cares for her: I can’t see that that’s a bad thing.”

Lily pulled a face. “He might think that, but she likes him. I mean, what if she gets hurt?”
“I can’t see that anything would be worse than Artur,” Harry said.

“Point,” Lily agreed, around a mouthful.

Harry shrugged. “I’m worried too, but not as worried as common sense tells me I ought to be. I’ve got a gut feeling that he won’t hurt her. And from other things he’s said, he’s looking to her finding a happier future with another young man.”

“There’s stuff you aren’t telling me.”

Harry nodded. “Yes. I know that probably seems mean, when you’ve been helping – “

“No,” she said. “Just being with her and talking whilst I’d got the button on, with people listening in, made me realise that there are always things we don’t tell other people. Personal things.”

Harry nodded. “Thanks for being understanding.”

“I just hope we can help her.”

But it seemed as if it wouldn’t be so easy.

Malfoy reported back to Harry and Kingsley that although Nanette admitted that Artur had threatened to hurt her father if she didn’t go through with the wedding, she steadfastly refused to cancel it: she refused to risk her father being injured, or worse.

“So, we need to do something to protect him, to save her,” Harry said.

“He’s a member of what could be called a terrorist organisation, Harry,” Kingsley said. “He hasn’t earned any favours in my book.”

Harry felt a lot more confident about disagreeing with Kingsley, knowing that it wasn’t going to be held against him in their personal relationship. Not that it would have stopped him, but it made him feel…easier.

“Are they, though?” Harry asked.

“What d’you mean?”


“Do I really need to remind you that Pierre Balcon was tortured in front of a group of them because of who he was? What do you call that?”

“Yes, I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking about that,” Harry said. He looked across at Kingsley, sitting once again in Malfoy’s salon in Paris. He leaned forward, elbows on his thighs. “I’m just thinking about the fact that they have three Ministers who they already count as standing for them. If those men came by their positions honestly – by being selected, voted for, whatever – well, I suppose we have to accept that that’s democracy at work. On the other hand, if they got there by – cheating, or killing off their predecessors, or something – then that’s a different matter.”

“We have been looking into the composition of the French Government,” Kingsley said, “and I’m afraid it’s quite obvious that there was foul play.”
“I would concur,” Lucius agreed. “Daveneaux was supposed to have committed suicide. It was - what? - three or four months after the death of his wife. A tragic act of grief, the papers said.”

“That’s not impossible, surely?” Harry queried. “If he loved her…”

“Daveneaux’s wife was ill for years. More to the point, he had a mistress for over twenty of them. His wife’s fortune was legendary, and he had no intention of divorcing her. I saw him in London not long after her funeral rites, with his mistress. I can assure you, he looked extremely content.”

Kingsley nodded. “Without going into details, we agree with your assessment. Which is why I’m reluctant to cut any slack for any of the members of this little group.”

“Who inherited?” Harry said, suddenly.

“What do you mean?” Lucius asked.

“You said she was rich: the husband inherited, and then died unexpectedly. Someone must have inherited from him.”

“You think that will give us any information?”

“I’m thinking that Henri Odont is a very rich man. If he dies, it goes to Nanette, I assume?”

“You cannot think – “ Lucius’ face was suddenly sharp.

“I don’t know,” Harry shrugged. “What’s to stop Artur?”

“Killing his father-in-law and then his wife? France is not a lawless society.”

“So how come Daveneaux, or whatever his name is, has been killed without any comeback?”

There was silence.

Lucius stood up and strode to his place at the window, his back to them.

“It was just a thought,” Harry said.

“It was – I should have thought of that myself,” Lucius said. He turned round, glancing at Harry. “I’m surprised that you even entertain such a jaded view of humanity.”

“You’re not harping back to that old Gryffindor sort of thing?”

“It would have been thought to have been a very Slytherin way of thinking.”

“They don’t even have those sort of houses here, do they?”

Lucius looked at him. “No, they do not.”

“It was a good question, Harry,” Kingsley said. He sighed. “And it does put the matter into a different light.”

“He needs to disinherit her,” Lucius said.

“What?” Harry frowned.

“If her father disinherits her, it will keep them both safe. If she insists on going ahead with this marriage,” he swallowed. “Artur would still have got the dowry, but that is nothing compared to
the inheritance.”

“That sounds a very interesting idea,” Kingsley said. “But how can we make that happen? If her father doesn’t see that the marriage is a bad thing, he’s not going to believe suggestions that Artur might want to kill them both off. And it’s only speculation, anyway.”

The thought stayed with Harry over the next few days, as the wedding drew closer, despite all the other matters after his attention.

Visiting James in hospital.

Spending time with his daughter.

Following Atkins.

Exploring the Ministry.

Severus and Kingsley.

It seemed that James would be in St Mungo’s for at least a week. They wanted to monitor his response to treatment, just to be on the safe side. His case was unusual, and had also attracted visits from several mediwizards, including two from South America.

After the first day, when everything had seemed something of a panic, Harry wasn’t sure if his son would still want him to visit.

He went along the next day.

“I suppose you’re expecting me to thank Severus,” James snapped.

“Is that your normal personality or the allergy talking?” Harry asked mildly, biting down his own irritation.

James looked away.

“I would expect you to thank someone who’s saved you from a miserable death from liver failure, yes,” Harry said. “Not to mention, perhaps saved your last few relationships from destruction.”

James glanced a look and away again.

Harry remained standing by the door, hands in his pockets.

“I’m still not going to like homosexuals,” James said belligerently.

“‘’Well, there’s where I think you’re stupid, then,” Harry said frankly.

James’ head whipped round.

“I understand that you don’t like the idea of homosexual acts, but it seems silly not to be able to dissociate that from your general opinion of a person. For example, I rather thought you found Kingsley admirable, before you knew that he was in a relationship with Severus.”
James swallowed.

Harry sat down.

“This is something that applies to more than homosexuality, you know. It’s about judging people as a complete individual.”

“What, like I should like Mum’s murderer because she’s good at quidditch?”

“James!” Harry said sharply, looking around. “Lower your voice! We can’t yet prove – “

James hunched his legs up in the bed. “Yeah, alright, that was out of order.”

“It was. You have no idea what monitoring is going on in here, or who might have heard that and passed it on.”

“I did an assessment, I’m not stupid.”

“You did? When?”

“Last night, once I was on my own. There’re monitoring spells, but they only record physical changes in my body.”

“Well done for making sure they’re in place.”

“I’m not a complete idiot.”

“I know that.” Harry rubbed a hand round the back of his neck. “Look,” he said, “I didn’t like the things Mum got up to, but I still loved her.” He leant forward. “I certainly don’t like some of the things that,” he lowered his voice, “a man for whom I’m now responsible did in the past, but I have to admire his current behaviour.” He leant back again. “I – well, I suppose that’s pretty true about Severus too. I hated him as a kid.”

“You did?”

“Absolutely. When I grew up and understood what was going on – well. He’d still acted shittily, but I understood why. And – and, well, when you were kids – having tantrums,” he grinned, “your behaviour drove me mad. Didn’t stop me loving you.” He sighed. “Nothing’s changed, I suppose, eh?”

James fiddled with the edge of the sheet. He glanced up, and away again.

“I – I do love you, Dad. That’s why I – I don’t like it.”

“No, you don’t like it full stop. But I’m – I’m very glad to hear you – love me,” Harry swallowed. “I wasn’t even sure if you’d want to see me, once the panic was over.”

“Don’t be daft,” James said, awkwardly.

“Well,” Harry dug in his bag, after a moment; “wizards’ chess?”

They played for three hours.
Lily’s company was a delight. She seemed to have grown up a lot in the past year, and whether this was just time, her mother’s death, or the sophisticating influence of France, he didn’t know, but she had become a woman, and a woman he not only loved, but liked very much.

He realised that he hadn’t spent much time in female company recently. Neville’s death, and Hannah’s subsequent move to stay with her parents, meant that a pair of good friends that had used to be an important part of his life had gone completely.

And thinking about it, he really hadn’t seen much of Mione recently – he’d seen her at the meetings, but she wasn’t always able to be around for the training, and her work commitments seemed pretty heavy.

They ought to get around to having that lunch together.

Harry kept finding himself drawn back to the Ministry – even when Atkins was elsewhere.

It was something about the building. He kept patrolling it, exploring.

He felt certain that if Atkins was intending to do something major, then it would involve the Ministry itself.

And yet he couldn’t see what she could be planning.

But he felt that the more he knew of the Ministry, the better.

The only time he had been accosted, was in the Department of Mysteries. Theodore Nott paused as he walked towards him.

“Afternoon, Harry,” he said, as if Harry wasn’t invisible at all.

“How’s things?” Harry said, as if he wandering round in restricted areas under invisibility wasn’t the slightest bit odd.

They’d ended up sitting down in Theo’s office – a small but attractive room in the Unspeakables’ enclave.

Harry didn’t think he was giving anything too much away by saying that he’d had a worry about the Ministry. That something bad might happen, but that he didn’t know when, or why, and so he was checking it out.

No mention of anyone else.

If Theodore wanted to think him a nutter – well. Many people did. And to be fair, Theo was polite and friendly. Ron, Harry remembered, thought well of him, even though he didn’t appear to know that he was an Unspeakable.

Well, he supposed that was the nature of the job.

“I’ll keep my eyes open,” Theo said, “though you haven’t really given me anything to go on.”

“Yeah, it’s just a bit of a daft idea,” Harry said. “Maybe being in the cells got to me, or something.” He looked at his old school-mate. “What do you tell your family? Do they know
you’re an Unspeakable?” He was pretty sure that his son, Josh, who was one of the group working with George’s kids, didn’t know.

“They think I do clerical work in the Muggle Liaison Department.”

“That’s a fairly brave choice.”

Theo shrugged. “It tends to stop any questions from the sort of person my father keeps company with.”

Harry bit his lip.

“What?” Theo sat forward, looking at him. “Do – do you know something about my Dad?”

“Why do you ask?”

Theo stood up, and leant back on his heels. “He’s been missing a while.”

“You reported that?”

“Harry, you know the sort of man my father is. Of course I haven’t. He could still end up back in Azkaban, if he’s up to something. I try to keep out of his life. It wasn’t easy to get this job, you know. People still look at me, and see him.”

Harry could understand that. People still said he looked like his father, even though he was over twice as old as his father had ever been. “I’m sorry to – it’s bad news. I’m pretty sure he’s dead.”

“Pretty sure? What does that mean?” Theo asked quietly.

“His body is – was - in the North Sea. I saw it.”

“But you’re not sure?”

Harry gripped his hands together. “I – I don’t mean to be gross – “

“I see a lot of gross stuff here.”

Harry nodded. “I – he wasn’t really recognisable. But I have it on good authority.”

Theo sighed, and walked a couple of paces. He looked back at Harry. “I knew something would happen in the end. I can’t say I was expecting - “ he looked at Harry. “The North Sea? Near The Giant’s Causeway?” he said sharply.

Harry nodded. “You know why he was there?”

Theo got to his feet. He turned away, thinking, and then back again. “He always had a thing about the place. That it was magical. That – that he could raise power there. He talked about it when I was young – he’d offered to do it for the Dark Lord.”

Harry watched him, and nodded.

“Voldemort is dead, right?” Theo asked.
And as for Kingsley and Severus ...

Every evening, they’d come through to spend half an hour or so with him, late in the evening, sitting having a cup of tea or a beer. Lily or Albus would join them. It was nice. Relaxed.

Then they’d leave.

Every night, they’d kissed him goodbye.

And that was erotic, frustrating, delicious, and incredible.

Harry felt utterly wanted, for the first time in his life.

It was strange that something so wonderful had come out of something so awful. That if Ginny hadn’t died, he’d never have called on Kingsley and Severus. Never have had the relationship he had now.

He wouldn’t allow himself to feel any guilt: like so much in his life, he’d had no control over what had happened.

But he had control over his future, and he couldn’t wait for the day when Ginny’s murderers were dealt with, when Atkins and her merry band were no longer a threat, and he could move on from this limbo to start living an ordinary, everyday, unthreatening life again.

With these two men.
The sun scorched Harry’s back as he edged around the milling crowds on the terrace at the Odont’s chateau in the Loire valley. The beautifully manicured grounds spread in front of him, rolling down to a lake where water-lilies floated tranquilly along the shoreline. A string of pleasure boats were lined up at a jetty, and guests were laughing and taking to the water, elves at the ready in each to row the occupants.

Harry had studied pictures of the major members of the French Ministry before coming, and had noticed several of them already, although when he had sidled up, the conversations he had heard had been inconsequential.

He had seen Lucius, accompanied by Dorothy Atkins.

He wanted her to look like the vile person he knew her to be, but in fact, she was an attractive witch, not many years older than he was himself. He supposed that although Voldemort had looked inhuman at the end, his younger self had been personable. It was foolish to expect the ugliness inside a person to manifest on the outside, but the sheer ordinariness of Dorothy Atkins, he was sure, made her seem less of a threat.

She was obviously attracted to Lucius, however. Lucius’ manner was gallant but cool; Harry wondered if she liked the challenge.

He scanned an eye over the guests: there were very few young people. He thought of his own marriage to Ginny: although there were relatives of Ginny’s, and some older friends, the vast majority had been their own age. He wondered if any of the young people there were friends of Nanette’s.

There was no sign of Nanette herself, but that was to be expected. In wizarding weddings, a large part of the event often happened before the vows themselves were taken. Most guests arrived by portkey or apparition over a period of time, and it was practical to allow the stomachs of those who were poor travellers to settle. Light refreshments were usually served.

They’d discussed the possibilities for this marriage thoroughly – Kingsley had inserted spies in the catering team and the musicians – and it appeared that they were going with a very old order of service: the ceremony itself would not take place until the sun began to set. It was from a tradition in which the bride was seen as a child in her parents’ house, staying discretely out of the way in her own rooms, until she was escorted to her future husband by her mother and female relatives. After the ceremony, there was usually a formal meal, and then the bride and groom left for their first night together, and the start of their new life. It was as if it was a formal cut-off point between childhood and womanhood, which, in the past, it often had been. In England, as fewer and fewer marriages had been arranged in recent decades, the format had fallen out of favour, as brides had demanded greater involvement in their own wedding day, wanting to share the fun with their friends and families.

The use of the old format was good news for them: there should be conversations and meet-ups to monitor before the actual commitment.

Harry meandered through the gardens, listening in.

At last he came across a crop of young people, ensconced out of sight behind the wall of the boat house at the far side of the lake. They had a flask or two hidden in their robes, and were obviously
well on the way to merry.

He smiled.

Young people.

No patience, and always liking to be breaking the rules.

He wondered if he’d found friends or relatives of Nanette’s at last, or whether they were from Artur’s side. He stayed close for a moment, listening to their gossip.

And then he was instantly alert:

“…pity Peter isn’t here. He could’ve brought us some of his special brew,” one of the guys grumbled.

“Yeah, and he’s so cute! I love his accent,” one of the girls giggled.

“I thought Nanette liked him: she talked to him more than to any of us. Stuck up bitch,” another said.

“Léonie!” one of the others sniggered. “How can you? On her wedding day?”

“Well, she always acted too good for us,” Léonie tossed her hair.

“Just because she’s shy and you’re a tart,” one of the boys grinned.

“Hey! Nothing wrong with liking men,” Léonie pouted.

“Yeah, Artur would agree with you,” another snorted, and they all laughed.

“Anyway, you had no reason to be jealous,” a different guy said. “She was only practising her English. He dumped you because you were shagging Raul, not because of her.”

“They’re so old-fashioned, les Anglais,” Léonie’s lip curled.

“Well, if I thought you were my girlfriend rather than just a convenient shag, I’d drop you too,” another said, to more laughter.

“Do you think Artur’s going to do her?” The girl who’d reprimanded Léonie whispered conspiratorially, wrinkling her nose.

“He’d need to take a potion or two to manage it,” the boy said.

“You are so mean,” she said. “Why did he choose one of the most girly girls around? Surely it would’ve been easier if he’d chosen someone more – athletic – looking?”

“Flat-chested like you, you mean?” one of the boys mocked.

She swatted his arm, apparently unoffended.

“Because her Dad’s as rich as Croesus and she’s going to inherit the lot, stupid,” another boy said, taking another swig from his flask. “Hey, have you tried Burton’s Elixir? Felix gave me some….”

As the conversation moved on, Harry moved away, discomfited and a little upset. Only one of the young people seemed to have any concern for Nanette at all.
Did his own children talk so coarsely and unkindly of others?

He couldn’t remember ever being so cruel when he was their age, but then again, he’d had rather more important things on his mind. Not that it wasn’t important to Nanette…

He listened in to some more conversations, but most were talking to old friends or family.

He felt unsettled, and didn’t know quite why.

Lucius and Atkins, however, were doing a lot of networking, and he hoped George’s buttons were working well. Lucius was wearing two so that there was back-up if one failed.

Eventually, the sun began to sink low in the sky; the boats came into the shore, and torches were lit in the garden. It looked romantic and mysterious, flickering shadows and golden light.

People began to move back into the house, and were ushered into the ballroom, where the ceremony was to take place.

Harry had explored the chateau earlier; there was a musician’s gallery overlooking the ballroom, and he’d decided that that would be the place where he was least likely to be bumped into, and would have the best view of proceedings.

The crowd assembled and slowly hushed. Seats had been placed in concentric rings fanning out from the centre, where Henri Odont sat, facing Artur.

And suddenly, Harry realised why Odont was able to go through with this. Unlike in the Muggle weddings he’d seen on television, Odont did not have to actively give away his daughter. The women did that, and without a mother, he had abrogated that responsibility to his sister. He did not have that physical act to consider. He did not have to place his daughter’s hand in another man’s.

Into Artur’s.

He suddenly felt less uncomfortable with the course of action that they had taken.

Cheering broke out, and he watched as Nanette was lead into the room by her aunt. She was wearing a lilac robe in stiff silk, and she looked delicate and beautiful.

And resolute. There was something about the tension in her shoulders, and the firm expression on her pale face.

His heart thumped at the pain he was about to cause her.

If things went as planned.

He watched as she was led through the throng, people touching her, until she stood in the centre beside Artur. Her aunt lifted her hand and placed it in the young man’s. Harry saw Nanette look at those joined hands, before her head lifted and her eyes swept across Artur’s family, ranged in the inner circle, until she reached her father.

She gave him a small smile, and then, unexpectedly, stepped forward, took her father’s hand, with her free one, and rubbed it against her cheek.

Then she turned away, back to her future husband.
A hush had descended.

An elderly wizard began to speak in a French dialect that Harry’s translation spell couldn’t cope with, but it was clear he was beginning the union.

Harry’s heart sped up.

Surely…

The man took both of their hands in his….and waffled on…

Artur took his vows…

Harry’s eyes darted from Nanette to Lucius.

Lucius was looking down.

Nanette opened her mouth…

And then there was a strange sound, a grunt, a chair scraping, gasps –

Nanette’a head spun round –

“Papa!”

Henri Odont had his hand to his chest, his face waxy, a rictus of pain stretching his mouth…

“Papa!” she screamed again, ripping her hands from where hers and Artur’s were enclosed by the old wizard’s, and dashed to her father, who was slumping now, his sister trying to hold him –

Pandemonium broke out.

The musicians behind Harry had all abandoned their instruments and come forward to watch. Harry squeezed himself against the pillar.

“We should complete the ceremony,” Artur said, looking round. “Maître DuBain, s’il vous plaît – “

The Sonorous that had been applied to their voices to allow the vows to be heard was working perfectly.

“Monsieur, surely not – “

“Don’t you see? We should allow Henri to die happily, knowing that his daughter – “

“No!” Nanette gasped, kneeling at her father’s side. “You did this!”

There were gasps of horror, and tutting.

“You said you would hurt him – “

“What? Why ever would you say such a thing? You’re distraught...”

There were nods of sympathetic agreement.

Henri was trying to speak, pointing a wavering hand at Artur.

“He wants the service to go ahead,” Sabine LeClerc said. She patted his hand. “Of course, Henri. I
will see she is settled.”

“We need help! A mediwizard! Who can help Papa?” Nanette called out, her eyes moving from one face to another, before darting back to her father’s.

“What he wants is to see you married,” Tante Sabine said. She looked at Maître DuBain, and said clearly, “I give my charge, my niece Nanette Odont, into the care of Artur Brouchard, so be it on my magic.”

Harry felt the swirl of power in the room, and with horror, felt the vow – taken on Nanette’s behalf - settle and take hold.

Dread filled him.

He looked at Lucius, but the man was utterly still.

How was that possible? A girl could be wed off – in her own presence and without her own consent?

But the muted cheering in the room – and the magic he had felt – confirmed it.

Then, Henri was being levitated out of the room. Nanette made to go with him.

“In a moment, my little wife,” Artur said, and kissed her.

More half-hearted cheering, with the guests not sure how they were supposed to respond, and then Nanette pulled away, and ran through the crowd after her father.

Artur followed more slowly. His family remained, trying to calm people.

Harry watched Lucius, but his expression was inscrutable.

Harry had let him down.

Let Nanette down.

He made his way slowly downstairs, trying to avoid touching anyone.

It became clear that many visitors – the Ministers, and anyone for whom a whiff of scandal could cause harm – were politely taking their leave of Artur’s parents.

Which is why Harry was surprised to see Atkins still standing with Lucius, chatting with the people in the next row.

Several suspicions focussed at once.

He had thought she was taking a risk, but….was she giving herself an alibi? Being here, in her own face, at such a huge gathering.

His heart began to drum.

Peter Stubbins had gone out with Léonie. They’d been talking about him out by the boat-house – surprised he wasn’t here.

Peter Stubbins worked in the potions labs at the Ministry.
Harry apparated straight out, to EWA headquarters, and strode along to find Kingsley.

“Has anything happened at the Ministry?” he demanded, as he raced into the room.

Kingsley looked up from where he was sitting with two other people by the huge talking mouth.

“What? French or – “

“Ours,” Harry said, and then outlined his concerns.

“I’ve heard nothing – “

“I’m going to look – “

“You might be dashing in to danger – “

“Have you got a spare button?”

Harry was fixed up in a couple of minutes. He kept talking all the while.

“I’m worried about Malfoy: did you hear what happened?”

“No, what?” Kingsley said sharply. “It didn’t work?”

“The button didn’t pick it up?” Harry said, realising that the actual ceremonial parts had been too far away to record. “The potion kicked in a bit late, but I thought she was safe. Then the aunt gave her away: literally gave her away! I felt the magic work, Kingsley: the girl is married to that twat. Lucius’ll kill him.”

“Right. We should get him out of there, then. I’ll get my agents to sort it.”

“Thanks,” Harry said. “God knows what we can do for Nanette; I’ll go back if I’m wrong about the Ministry.”

“And you’ll call us for help if you’re right?”

Harry nodded.

Kingsley clapped him on the arm, and then Harry was gone.

Lucius Malfoy was in a daze.

A daze in which a building anger – fury, even – was fogging his thought processes.

Their plan had failed.

He could not blame Shacklebolt’s unknown agent, who had obviously managed to spike Henri Odont’s drink.

He could not blame the potion, because Severus had said that it may or may not induce an appearance of sudden death – that without knowing Odont’s body weight, he had to err on the side of caution so as not to actually cause him harm.
He had thought any appearance of attack would be enough to halt proceedings: to give Nanette the chance to step back from the brink. Painful as it would have been, if she had thought her father to be dead, she would have been in a position to refuse.

He could not believe that he had been beaten by the aunt; that she had invoked the ancient familial power to give away the girl.

Was she in the pay of the Brouchard’s?

But they were nowhere near as rich as the Odont’s – until Henri died, and Nanette brought all his wealth into the family.

His lips tightened.

Atkins was rabbiting on, talking to anyone and everyone around. He wondered if the drama had made her nervous: she was not normally so garrulous, in his experience.

“Would you like me to see you to the apparition point?” he asked solicitously, taking her elbow.

“What? Oh, I think not: imagine how disappointed they’ll be to find all their guests have left!”

“Dorothy, Henri looked as if he had had a heart attack, or stroke, or something. It would surely be more courteous for us all to leave them to deal with it.”

“But that poor girl – it’s her wedding day! I think we should stay a little longer, don’t you? Think how awful it would be if the poor man has just fainted, and then discovers he’s ruined his daughter’s special day.”

Lucius looked down at her, wondering what she was up to. “Then if you do not mind me leaving you talking with Madame Laval, here, I will go and see what news I can find of Henri.”

“An excellent idea! I’m sure he’ll be as fit as a fiddle in a moment. I’ve never heard of a father having a heart attack at a wedding, have you, Madame?” she turned to Madame Laval, and with a bow to them both, Lucius turned and made his way out of the ballroom.

He turned towards Henri’s study, then spotted an elf directing people to the apparition point.

“Elf!” he said. “What is the news of your master?”

The elf’s eyes opened wide, and he bowed quickly. “Master is being put in his bed, Monsieur,” he said.

“He is alive?”

The elf part-nodded, part-bowed.

“Conscious?”

“Shall Ambrose be checking for Monsieur?”

“You may take me to him,” Lucius commanded.

The elf seemed a little uncertain, but with one further look from Lucius, he turned and trotted towards the stairs. “Please to be following Ambrose, Monsieur.”

The stairs led to a large landing overlooking the hall, with an oval table holding a huge
arrangement of flowers. Two wings led off from it. The elf turned to the left, and Lucius saw Sabine LeClerc exiting a room, shutting the door behind her with a firm click.

Lucius gritted his teeth, and made his way towards her.

“How is Henri, Madame?” he asked politely. “He has a mediwizard with him?”

“He has not yet arrived,” she said, fussing with a handkerchief. “He is not conscious, but he is breathing, for which we must all be grateful.”

“Yes indeed,” Lucius nodded. “And his daughter is with him?”

She drew herself up, and gave him a haughty look.

Lucius raised an eyebrow. It would take a great deal more than that to intimidate him.

“Nanette is, of course, in her rightful place, with her husband.”

Lucius’ brows drew together.

“And surely Artur too, must be concerned for his father-in-law,” he said. “They are both at his bedside, I presume?”

She raised her handkerchief to her lips, as if his suggestions were unsavoury. “Madame Brouchard is, of course, in the guest suite with her husband. The Rites of Meraid are to be invoked, naturellement.”

Lucius felt his heart thump in his chest. His voice dropped dangerously. “Are you telling me, Madame, that Nanette is voluntarily undergoing the loss of her virginity whilst her father lies, perhaps on his deathbed? What sort of cold-hearted bitch are you?”

“How dare you!” she gasped.

“Oh, I dare, Madame,” he said. “Where are they?” He looked along the corridor.

“This is none of your business!” she said, drawing her wand.

Lucius had her disarmed, and his at her throat in an instant. “What are they paying you, I wonder, to betray your care of the girl? You were supposed to stand in the stead of her mother.”

“And I have done my duty – “

“Duty!” he practically spat the word in her face. “You will take me there. Now,” and he prodded his wand-tip under her chin.

“If you think to stop it - “

“What I think is none of your concern,” he said, physically turning her body. “Now!”

“Paul Brouchard will know how to deal with you!” she threatened, as she shook herself away from him and stalked along the corridor.

Lucius said not a word. They turned a corner.

Outside a room sat Paul Brouchard and his wife on straight-backed chairs, each holding a glass of Odont’s champagne.
Paul Brouchard stood up as they approached.

Lucius petrified one after the other, and then turned and did the same to Sabine LeClerc.

He quickly pocketed their wands too.

With his own at the ready, he took a breath, knocked once, and immediately flung open the door.

Nanette was standing facing her husband, wand shaking in her hand. Artur was sitting on the end of the bed, bent forward, stripping his socks. They were the only item of clothing he had left on.

They both stared at him.

“What the devil do you mean by this?” Artur demanded, fumbling in his discarded robe.

Lucius petrified him, and then strode over to Nanette.

He could see a red mark on her cheek, and tear tracks through the dab of make-up she was wearing.

“I have only one question for you,” he said, standing in front of her, voice low. “Do you wish to be married to this man?”

“I am married to him,” she sobbed.

“And is this what you want? I will leave you at once if it is.” Lucius kept six inches of space between them.

“Of course it’s not what I want!” she came to life, surging towards him, thumping her tiny fist on his chest. “How could you think that? You know – “ she gasped in a breath, her hand unconsciously moving to lie flat over his heart, “You know I only did it to save my father, and now he’s dead - !”

“No,” Lucius said, taking her hands in his. “He’s alive.”

She stilled.

“They didn’t tell you?” he growled.

She took a shuddering breath.

“I thought he was dead,” she whispered.

“And yet you would still go through with this?” he asked, indicating Artur’s petrified body, which had tumbled forward onto the floor. They both looked at him, with his fingers tucked into the back of his sock, and the main view being of his spread cheeks and scrotum.

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“I could not decide whether to kill him, or myself;” she whispered, and her head fell onto Lucius’ chest.

He had not meant to touch her.

He hadn’t thought of anything, except saving her. But his hand slid around her, and her body was against his, complete trust in every curve and inch of it.
He was aware of her hair brushing the underside of his jaw, and her chin against his collar bone. Her breasts pressed against him, and her body was warmth and heat.

He held her to him. He could not but be in awe of the astonishing feeling that she trusted him so completely.

She was upset and hurt, and he knew he must not - must not - betray that trust.

Not that he could…

His heart seemed to swell in his chest.

He had never felt….

He could not…

He could make things right for her.

He could help her.

Here was something he could do.

Something right in his life.

Love…was not something he knew about.

But doing the right thing…he had an opportunity…

“You will not kill anyone,” he said, gently, savouring the feel of her against him, regretting….

“I can’t be married to him,” she whispered into his chest.

“I know,” he said, his hand gripping hers tightly, his chin nestling over her head. He didn’t know much of comfort, but he could try.

“I can’t let my father be hurt,” she said.

“I know.”

A hand came up and stroked over her hair.

He looked at Artur, listening, despite his position, to every word.

As were Shacklebolt, and Weasley, and Merlin knew who else.

He sighed, and pulled away a little.

“I know people who can keep you safe,” he said, still holding her hands. “Will you trust me?”

“It’s not me, it’s my father,” she shook her head.

He looked at Artur.

Strode to the bed and took his wand.

And released the spell on him.
“Fucking bastard!” Artur yelled, rolling to his feet.

Lucius had his wand on him.

“I’d watch your language if I were you,” he said. “I don’t condone swearing in front of ladies.”

“Ladies! Fucking sexless bitch!” Artur screamed.

He stood up, completely naked, apart from his socks.

He grasped his erect cock, almost pointing it at them. “Do you have any idea how much this is killing me? I took a fucking potion to get this! Cunt!”

Lucius cast, and a slash appeared across Artur’s cheek.

“Fucking shit!” he swore, lunging at Lucius, who instantly cast a simple jelly-legs jinx, causing Artur to fall over. “Ow! Fuck!”

“One more swear word and I’ll cut out your tongue,” Lucius said coolly.

Artur opened his mouth.

Lucius raised his wand.

Artur shut it again, and swallowed, pulling his robe off the bed and draping it across his lap. “How dare you interfere between a man and his wife,” he said tightly, leaning back against the foot of the bed, his legs still jerking in front of him. “What business is it of yours?” he demanded.

“It is quite obvious that you neither desire your wife, nor she you. I fail to understand why you chose to attempt Meraid’s Rite,” he asked.

“I can f – ” he swallowed, looking at the rising wand tip, and held up his hand in swift apology. “My parents thought it would confirm the marriage. Given,” he sneered at Nanette, “that your father swooned like some mindless girl, and ruined everything.”

“My father – ” Nanette began.

Lucius held up his hand. “Forgive me,” he said, looking at Nanette.

She nodded, and waited.

“We are about to come to an arrangement,” Lucius said.

“Well that’s more like it,” Artur said, standing up rather cautiously. His hands grasped his balls, tugging, and he groaned. “You can fuck her brains out,” he nodded towards Nanette, shrugging. “I told her to cosy up to you, and I see she’s done a damn good job of it. No need for all these histrionics. I would have broken her in for you, but I see you fancy the job yourself. Sweet.”

Lucius pulled himself up tight.

“I didn’t,” Nanette whispered, hands to her face. “I couldn’t come to you after he said that – “

Lucius looked at her. “Is that why you didn’t – ” he brushed his fingers over her ear. She was wearing the ear-rings.

“That, and my father,” she said, her voice shaking.
“We could both fuck her,” Artur said. “I need to fuck someone.” He looked Lucius over, his eyes sharp. “Potter had a thing for you: I can see why. You’re quite – stimulating,” he said. “Especially when you’re all fired up. That languid English gentleman stuff doesn’t do much for me, but I can see the attraction now.” He slid his hand up his cock, and down again. “I had a vision, you know. She was on her knees in front of you, and you can take that sneer off your face: you were loving it!” He tugged harder. “How about she sucks me while you’re doing her?” he said, eyes glazing over, “maybe that would suit you better, ye – ?”

Lucius made a swift motion with his wand, cutting Artur off mid-word.

Artur tried to speak, but only a bubbling sound came out. His jaw worked. He swallowed. His eyes bugged out of his face, and he held his hand to his lips, wiping away blood.

“You want help with that?” Lucius said silkily, gesturing at Artur’s turgid erection.

Artur was shaking his head frantically, blood flying from the corners of his mouth, as he fell backwards on the bed with his hands over himself.

Lucius cast another spell.

Artur pulled his hands away and stared down, watching his erection droop. His horrified eyes darted up to Lucius.

“What?” Lucius asked. “It was troubling you, was it not?”

Artur gargled, choked. Blood spattered onto his chest and legs.

Nanette remained silent, much to Lucius’ relief.

He stood at the end of the bed, staring down at Artur.

“Now,” he said coolly, “I mentioned an arrangement. Nanette is coming with me. If you harm her father – if any harm comes to him, from any direction, for any reason – ” he waved at Artur’s groin. “Well. Let’s say that the spell I just performed on you is permanent. You will not be troubled by an inconvenient erection ever again.”

He saw Artur’s eyes widen.

“How is that possible, you’re wondering? Let me be clearer: you won’t have any erection again. Ever. Unless I undo the spell. And I won’t be doing that in the near future, I assure you. I think you need a little lesson in treating others with more delicacy. More courtesy. Don’t you?”

Artur stared at him. Fury, disbelief and fear patterned over his face.

He tugged at his now deflated cock.

“You see, you have no manners at all, do you? Neither of us wish to see that,” Lucius said, casting a stinging hex at Artur’s hand.

Artur squawked and pulled it away at once, then dragged the bedcover across his lap.

“Better,” Lucius said. “Now. You will behave. You will act as if nothing untoward has occurred. You will return to your home, and allow everyone to assume you have apparated there with your wife. I would remain there for some time, if I were you. When your tongue has healed – yes, I have been generous, it is not entirely severed – ” and you are ready to apologise to Nanette, you may
Artur looked at him with narrowed eyes, rage in every line of his body.

“You are stubborn,” Lucius said. He leanted in a little. “Your tongue will heal. What I have done to your nether regions will not. You will not be aroused again, until I allow it. If Henri, or Nanette, or I, suffer in any way, you will be facing a lifetime as a eunuch. Are we clear?”

Artur tried to spit at him.

Blood sprayed Lucius’ robe.

Lucius jerked back as a stunning spell flew across the room. Artur fell back on the bed. Lucius turned to see Nanette, pointing her wand at Artur.

She looked at Lucius. “He spat at you,” she said.

He smiled.

On the bed, Artur was gurgling and choking.

Lucius whipped a spell at him which flipped him over.

“Note how merciful I am,” he whispered, leaning over the young man. “First, I save your tongue, and then I stop you drowning in your own blood. Do not expect me to always be so generous.”

He straightened, and then looked at Nanette. “Shall we?” he said, holding out his arm.

She stepped towards him, and into its circle.

“Your ear,” he whispered to her.

She nodded, touched the ear-ring, whispered the word, and the next moment, they landed in Lucius’ home in Paris.

He steadied her, then stepped away.

“George,” he said quietly. “Could you come?”

“Pardon?” Nanette asked, eyebrows drawing together.

“Mattieu!” Lucius said, taking Nanette’s arm and leading her through to the salon.

The elf appeared.

“Would you like coffee? Tea, perhaps? The Earl Grey you liked before? Please, do sit down,” he led her to a seat by the fire, where a few logs burned, looking welcoming without throwing out too much heat.

“Oh! Oh, yes, thank you,” she said. “Who is George?”

“That would be me,” George Weasley said, coming through the door that Mattieu was holding open.

He came forward, a nod to Lucius. “George Weasley at your service, Mademoiselle,” he held out
his hand.

She took it tentatively, looking from him to Lucius. She began to rise, but George motioned her to stay seated. “Did I hear there would be tea?” he smiled easily, and the next moment, Mattieu appeared with a laden tray.

“I – I think I am ‘Madame’ now,” she said awkwardly, “but perhaps you could call me Nanette? If you are a friend of Monsieur – of Lucius?”

The two men looked at each other.

“You can trust George,” Lucius said. “I had better return – “

“Oh! Must you?” she gasped. She had just taken a cup from the elf, and the tea slopped into the saucer.

“I’m afraid so,” Lucius said, removing the spill with a wave of his wand. “I have left not only the Brouchard parents, but also your aunt, petrified, and I would like to check on your father. And I’m afraid it would be very ungallant of me not to see that Mrs Atkins had got home safely.”

Nanette’s eyes fell. “Of course.” She took a breath and looked up. “Perhaps Monsieur Weasley, you could find a hotel for me?”

Again, the men exchanged looks.

“Will you allow us a few moments to sort things out, Nanette?” George said. “If you’ll forgive me leaving you with your tea, while I make some arrangements.”

“I – thank you. Thank you both,” she said. “I am sorry to cause so much trouble.”

“This trouble is not of your making,” Lucius said gently. “You should never have had to – ” he pulled in a breath, and changed tack. “I’ll be back as soon as I can. You are not alone, and you are safe,” he added. “Would you – could you – trust me, please?”

“Of course I trust you,” she gave him a little smile. “Please, you must go and see to Mrs Atkins. She must be wondering where on earth you are.”

Lucius gave a little bow, and both men strode out of the door.

Nanette’s hand shook as she took a sip of her tea, but ten minutes later, when the door opened again, she was feeling much more composed.

She stuck a smile on her face as George stepped through, and then her expression startled into astonishment.

“Lila?”

“Hi,” Lily said. “George came to fetch me, to keep you company.” She looked around the vast room, and twitched her nose. Then she turned to George. “I think it would be best if Nanette came back with me. This place is enough to give anyone the creeps.”

Nanette didn’t quite catch the last thing Lila had said in English, or understand why she had dyed her hair, but it was clear the girl wanted to take her away.

“I think I should wait for Monsieur Malfoy,” she said. “He will not know where I have gone.”
Lily looked to George. “You’ll know where he is, George? How about you come and get us when he comes back with some news?” She turned back to Nanette, seeing her mouth about to open. “I’d be really glad of your company,” she said. “I understand your Dad had a funny turn; my Dad’s gone dashing off somewhere, so we’re both waiting for information. Why don’t we curl up in my bedroom while we wait? We can have hot chocolate and ice-cream,” she said.

“Hot chocolate and ice-cream? Together?” Nanette raised an amused eyebrow at the absurdity.

Lily grinned. “Tastes fantastic,” she said. She held out her hand. “Come on. I promise George’ll get us as soon as Mr Malfoy brings news of your father.”

Nanette nodded. How was it that she cared more how Lucius was? That couldn’t be the case, could it? And Lila was being very kind. Monsieur Weasley obviously was busy, and why should he have to look after her? He was only Lucius’ tenant, wasn’t he? It had been very good of him to fetch Lila. Both of them were treating her with kindness and respect, but surely Lucius must have told them that she had just run away from her husband…

With a nod, she glanced once more at Lucius’ room: it felt welcoming and safe to her, but she picked up her courage, and followed Lila from the room and to the floo.
Harry knew at once that something was off at the Ministry.

Although it was a Saturday evening, and it was to be expected that it was much quieter than normal, not a soul was about. Harry had to cast a spell to muffle the sound of his footsteps on the marble floor of the entrance hall.

At least there was someone at the reception desk, looking bored.

When he reached the lifts, he saw a sign on each gate:

*Out of Use*

*for*

*Centennial Maintenance*

Well, that explained a lot. But was the Ministry shut down completely? That seemed impossible. Surely the MLE had to keep a skeleton staff? The Department of Mysteries?

He’d never heard of it happening before, but then, if the lifts were only shut down for maintenance every hundred years, it wasn’t surprising that he didn’t know. Harry wondered how long the wizarding lifts at the Ministry had existed before Muggles had ‘invented’ them – he might be wrong, but he didn’t think Muggles had had lifts for much over a hundred years, all told.

So. It was an unusual day at the Ministry. That in itself made him uneasy. The niggling feeling returned full force.

Should Peter Stubbins have been at the wedding after all? Had he been somehow trapped here?

He apparated down to the floor where the Potions Labs were – and straight out again.

He cast a nameless spell, and was deluged in a torrent of water. He gulped a breath, then barked out a hacking cough.

His face and hands had taken the brunt of the flames, and he could feel his skin, tight across his cheek bones and the backs of his hands. Thank god it was automatic to shut one’s eyes. He put a hand up, feeling against them. He suspected his eyelashes had been burnt off. His hand touched his hair, feeling the coarse edges under the wetness, where the fire had seared it.

“Hey!”

The receptionist was running towards him.

He realised that his invisibility was negated by the waterfall he was creating, his body shape visible inside the flow.

Not to mention the noise and the flooding.

He released the spell, allowing the receptionist to see him. A shaking wand had been pointed at him.
“Who are you? How did you get there? What are you doing?” the young lad croaked.

Harry knew it was important to keep the water on his skin for a bit. “There’s a fire on the Potions’ floor,” he said, “did you know? Who was working there? How many people are in the building?”

“What?” The boy’s wand shook.

Harry sighed, stopped the deluge and stepped forward. “Look,” he said, as calmly as he could, “there’s a huge fire in the building, and you and I have to help sort it out. Now, you must have a list of who’s in the building, yes?”

The boy nodded.

“Good. Who’s the most senior person in tonight?”

“The…the Minister.”

“Benningdean?” Harry’s stomach plummeted.

The boy nodded again.

“Alright, I’ll go and speak to him. Now, you get a list of everyone who’s in, and where they normally work, alright? Lives may depend on it. Depend on you,” he added, seriously.

The young man’s eyes widened.

“What’s your name?” Harry asked gently.

“Dolph Peterson, Sir.”

“I’m Harry,” Harry said. “Harry Potter. I’d shake your hand, but mine’s a bit burnt,” he apologised, looking down at the taut skin. He applied a cooling charm over his entire body. He shivered, then straightened, taking in the shock on the boy’s face. “Okay, Dolph. We need to keep calm, alright? We’re going to do everything we can to sort this out. Do you have a procedure for emergencies?”

“I - I don’t know. I only started working here this week,” Dolph stuttered.

“And they left you all on your own? That was tough.”

“I thought Lucinda was coming in, but she never turned up.”

“Okay, I’m sure the Minister will know what to do. I’ll go and ask him, and I’ll be back in a minute, alright?”

“But the lifts aren’t working –”

Harry cast a protective bubble around himself, just in case, and with a look at Dolph, apparated to the Minister’s office on Level 1.

Benningdean leapt up. Stubbington had his wand out.

“Good reflexes,” Harry said approvingly. “There’s a fierce fire in Level 9 –“

“This floor’s on fire,” Stubbington said gruffly. “It’s rushing up the lift shaft. We’ve sealed this room, but – we’re trapped. We’ve tried to send memos for help, but I suspect they’re just getting burned up.”
“The stairs?”

“There aren’t any.”

“Bloody hell!” Harry said. “Sprinkler system?”

“What?”

“You know – there must be a sprinkler system, surely? Water to put out the flames?”

Benningdean shook his head. “There’s never been a fire in the building, as far as I know - ” he began coughing into the back of his arm.

Smoke was curling under the door, and Harry could feel the heat in the room. The magical window was shimmering in and out of existence, revealing the brickwork behind it.

“Right,” Harry said, “we can discuss the details in a minute. Let’s get out of here.”

“Do you have a portkey?” Stubbington asked.

“No. We’ll apparate – ”

“The building is warded against it.”

“I got here that way,” Harry shrugged. “Is anyone else on this floor?”

“No, just the Minister in this evening.”

“And you,” Harry said, looking at Stubbington.

“I’m supposed to be protection, but – “

“Well, you’re both alive,” Harry said. “I’m going to take you down to the Atrium – it’s still intact at the moment, which suggests that your floor has probably been targeted. There’s a poor lad on reception who’s doing his first week here. I’ve told him to get a list of who’s in. He’ll need you to take control, Minister.”

Benningdean nodded, rubbing a hand through his hair, before coughing again.

Harry took a hold of each of their arms. “Be prepared for – anything,” he said, looking to Stubbington.

The Auror nodded, wand gripped firmly. Harry wrapped them into a bubble, just in case, and then apparated.

In the Atrium, smoke was beginning to leach from the lift shafts. Dolph ran towards them, looking pale, with a parchment in his hand.

“Minister! You’re safe!”

“Yes, fine, thanks to Mr Potter,” Benningdean said.

“Have you got the list?” Harry asked.

Dolph nodded. “Eighty one people are in the building, counting us. Er, not counting you, Mr Potter. I’ve sent out memos to everyone, but I don’t know whether they’ll get them. I’ve not had
any back.”

“Well done,” Bennindean said. “What’s your name, lad?”

Harry took stock whilst the Minister took control. He’d hoped Kingsley and some reinforcements might have arrived. Then he looked down at his robe, and realised that the button was singed badly. Not to mention soaked.

Kingsley wouldn’t know what was happening.

“I’ll be straight back,” he said, “I’m going to get help. Oh – see if you could drop the anti-apparition wards – that’ll be the easiest way for people to escape.”

“They won’t even think of trying – “

“They’ll try anything if there looks like there’s no other hope,” Harry said, and apparated.

“Harry! Shit, are you alright?” Kingsley strode over.

“I’ll need some burn ointment – I hope Severus has got some,” he said. “The Ministry’s on fire. 78 people unaccounted for, so far – “

“Fucking hell! It’s Saturday night. The Minister wasn’t in, I assume?”

“He was, but he’s safe. He’s got Stubbington with him, but their floor was on fire, and they were trapped in the office. All the lifts are not working, - maintenance, apparently, but they’re carrying the fire, I think.”

“Damn! It’s Centennial Lift Maintenance Day,” Kingsley swore. “I was so busy thinking about the wedding… What about the floos?”

“I don’t know, but I’d worry that the fire would get into the chimneys, or that lighting the fires would just make it worse?”

Kingsley nodded.

“I’ll gather as many as I can, and get us there by emergency portkeys. Where’s safe?”

“The Atrium for the moment, but it’s starting to smoke.”

“Okay. You go and get Severus to sort you out – “

“Don’t be daft,” Harry said. “See you in the Ministry,” and he was gone again.

The Minister had not been able to drop the anti-apparition wards, and there was no sign of the goblin maintenance team, to try and get the lifts working again. They didn’t spend long on the idea, as the shafts seemed to be the main conduits for the fire.
They set up base outside the Ministry. A team from the Department of Muggle Accidents and Catastrophes had been called in, headed by the members of the Muggle-Worthy Excuse Committee, and they were creating a scenario that made Muggles think that a film was being shot.

Harry set about rescuing people. After looking at the list, he prioritized the areas where he was likely to find the largest numbers at the same location. He had just brought the second group to the surface when Benningdean grabbed his arm.

Harry turned to him in surprise.

“The elves, Mr Potter,” Benningdean said.

“The elves?” Harry began, and then turned pale. “Oh my god. I didn’t even think – how many of them are working at the Ministry?”

“I don’t know, but I suspect well over fifty,” Benningdean said.

“But – surely they can apparate?”

“I – obviously they do within the building,” Benningdean said uncertainly.

“You think there might be some restriction on them that stops them apparating elsewhere?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where do they live? In the Ministry?”

“I don’t know,” Benningdean said again. “I’m sorry –” his head whipped round as a shout rose up from across the pavement.

Smoke and stone blew into the air. Harry and Benningdean dashed over. Several members of Kingsley’s team and some Aurors were casting spells to break through to the first level of the Ministry, which was just below ground level.

There was a crack of apparition by the old telephone box which served as the guest entrance, and Ron stood there, looking wild.

“Rose’s alarm went off. Where is she? What the hell is going on? Rose!” Ron shouted, then dashed forward, as his daughter appeared from amidst a cloud of dust. “Rose!”

Ron was there, brushing her down, patting her back as she coughed.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Really, Dad. Just got the edge of the blow-back on the spellwork. I’m fine,” she said again. “I must get back to work.”

Harry stepped up beside his friend, watched him open his mouth, then shut it again, as his daughter turned to head back to the hole that was beginning to open up, issuing smoke into the evening air.

“Tough, eh?” Harry said gently.

Ron swallowed, and nodded, his eyes not leaving his daughter.

“She’s sensible,” Kingsley said, coming up beside them. “You have to trust her, Ron.”

A jet of flame suddenly burst up through the hole.
The whole Ministry was going to be destroyed, Harry thought. The fire was rampant in the lower levels, but it had only hit the Minister’s level through his private lift shaft.

Unless a fire had been deliberately set on that floor.

Whatever the cause, there were many people trapped in the layers in-between, not to mention the elves, and they had no way of extinguishing the fire.

Or did they?

Harry realised that he had been panicking, concentrating on rescuing people rather than dealing with the fire itself. It went against the grain to divert his attention from the people themselves, but he was becoming fearful that he would not have time to save everyone. But if he could put out the fire….

“Call the Fire Brigade,” he said, turning to Kingsley and the Minister.

“The Muggles?” Benningdean queried.

Harry nodded. “You can obliviate them afterwards, or whatever. Tell them the film set’s on fire. If they can get out the Level 1 fire, I’ll try and deal with the rest – ”

“What’re you thinking?” Kingsley took hold of his arm.

“I’m thinking of what we did with the irrigation system,” Harry said, looking at him meaningfully.

“You – ”

“I’m going to try – ”

“Harry – ”

Harry touched his arm, and then he was gone.

“Fuck,” Kinglsey said.

“What’s he going to do? It’s too late. The whole Ministry – it’s gone,” Benningdean said.

Down in the bowels of the building, on Level 10, it was smoky and dark, but the fire didn’t appear to have dropped there. Which increased the likelihood, Harry thought, that it had started in the Potions’ Labs on Level 9.

There was a floor below this one – the secret floor where he had been kept prisoner, but he couldn’t risk going there, for fear of his magic being dampened. He needed every ounce of it.

He sent out his senses, feeling for the water that he knew was near, for the hatches that led into this level and the one below.

He called to the water, felt it rushing and straining against metal. He stumbled through the dark, only a small light from his wand within the bubble illuminating his way. The air was already searingly hot: he could not risk causing the place to ignite.
He heard voices.

Realised.

There were prisoners in the cells.

They had not been on the list.

He should have thought of them.

He raced to the desk. There were two warders, both lying on the floor where the air was clearest.

“Where are the keys?” Harry demanded.

“You – how did you get here? Get us out!” The warders scrambled to their feet.

“I’ll get you all out. Where are the keys?”

“ Fucking hell, they’re only prisoners – “

Harry pointed his wand. The other man grabbed his bunch of keys, and came with Harry to the cells, key and spellwork at the ready.

“This one’s a vicious bastard,” he whispered to Harry, as they opened the third cell. “Rapist.”

Harry nodded. He pointed his own wand at the chap.

Soon, they had all seven prisoners.

“Take hold,” Harry said, putting his hand into the middle. “Guards, do your duty when we get to the top, okay?”

They nodded, and he apparated them all to the surface.

People ran over. Harry saw Kingsley’s head whip round, before he disappeared again.

It seemed even hotter. Sparks were falling down the lift shaft near the warders’ desk.

It occurred to Harry that the goblins who provided the centennial maintenance hadn’t been on the list, and he hadn’t seen them either. Surely they would have been the first to realise that something dreadful was wrong? Would have felt the heat in the shafts and tunnels that the lifts took? Only one lift went to the secret floor below, which meant that this was the lowest floor that most lifts stopped at. He raced along to the lift bank. The lift systems didn’t follow Muggle requirements like straight shafts, he knew, skidding sideways and all over the place as they moved. It made logical sense that goblins had carved the shafts and passages, as they had carved tunnels and rail tracks into Gringotts. The layout of the Ministry, he realised, didn’t really follow the logic of a normal building. Each floor was not necessarily above the other, which was why the lifts meandered. That should help with dealing with the fire – if the shafts were the conduit, rather than, necessarily, the floors and ceilings.

Smoke was belching out of some of the shafts, and one contained a carriage that appeared to have crashed. Harry checked it inside, but it was empty. He was about to head back when the smoke curled away in the next shaft. Harry caught a glimpse – he wrenched open the gates, cursing as his hands made contact with the hot metal. He jumped the couple of feet into the bottom of the shaft. Four goblins lay there, their limbs twisted. Silent. He couldn’t find a pulse on the couple he tried, though he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to feel it through their skin, or even if he was trying in the
right place. He glanced up. The shaft had a long, vertical drop. High above, he could see what he assumed was the bottom of a lift carriage. He heard it groan. Grabbing their hands together in the middle, he apparated.

Straight to the doors of Gringotts.

The doorman leapt forward.

“Centennial Maintenance Team from the Ministry,” Harry gasped. “It’s on fire. I don’t know if they’re alive or dead, but I thought this was the best place to seek help.”

In a flash, Harry felt the wards of the building enveloping them. He looked towards the street: fortunately it was quiet, with no-one in sight.

“Thank you, Mr Potter, Sir,” the goblin said, and the doors were opening, and two more goblins were coming out, and with a nod, Harry apparated back to Level 10.

He strode along the corridor, till he saw one of the huge hatches, then backed off.

Once again, he reached for the water. His wand pointed at the hatch.

He heard the groan of metal, the scraping noise as the giant flywheel began to turn. Water began to trickle in. He beckoned it, and flicked his wand again at the wheel. It flew round, loosened now, and then the hatch crashed back, and water gushed in, foaming and tossing.

Harry backed off, wading as the water rose steadily. There was a second hatch, and he repeated the process, feeling the chill water rising up to his waist, rushing and tumbling, before it surged into the lift shafts and poured downwards.

It would take too long. By the time the water had filled the lower level – and he hoped there were no other prisoners there, as he had been, because he couldn’t risk attempting to save them…

Kingsley had said that floor was hardly ever used, hadn’t he?

He needed more.

Wrapped in his cocoon, he apparated up a level.

The fire thrummed against the protective globe, and Harry blinked, the brightness after the gloom below almost unbearable.

As his eyes adjusted, he looked around him.

There was something beautiful, and incredible, about those flames, the fierce power of the fire.

It was almost mesmerising, but he had work to do. He ignored the roar and hiss, attuning his senses instead, feeling out.

He ran, stumbling over fallen masonry and melting ironwork, looking for the hatches. They were hidden on this floor, with its confusing doors, and there was no way he wanted to fight his way through the Department of Mysteries.

He could feel it.

The weight of water, pressing, surging.
Waiting for him.

Once again, he called to it.

He could feel it ahead, and dashed on. There was a hatch, shimmering with heat. He cast at it, heard the groan of the metal, but the flywheel couldn’t turn. He cast his magic to pull at it, saw it buck, and then – water was roiling in, a waterfall, its pent-up energy battling the fire. The air filled with steam, hissing, sizzling, and he ran back, wading, as the water finally tore the hatch from its hinges and the metal disc surged forward, swept towards him by the torrent. He ducked into a side corridor as it crashed past, hitting against the walls, and sucked in a breath of relief.

Except it was hard to breath.

The air in his bubble was limited, he realised, as dizziness suddenly crowded his vision with mottling spots of blackness.

He apparated to the surface, choking, falling to his knee.

“Slowly,” a deep voice said, and he looked up, regretting the move at once as his vision dimmed.

A man knelt next to him, offering support.

He would recognise that voice anywhere. His lips curved, but his mouth hurt as he did it.

He reached out a quick hand, acknowledging Severus as he tried to control his gasping breaths.

He’d never loved fresh air so much.

“Drink this,” Severus said, handing him a flask.

Harry swallowed it without asking, and found his breathing easing at once.

“God, that’s good. What was it?” he asked, and then coughed, and coughed some more.

Snape held him as black gunk came hawking up.

“As you can see, it helps clear smoke damage,” he said, voice even. He looked at what Harry had spat onto the pavement.

“It’s not as bad as I’d feared.”

“I’ve used a protective bubble after the first time,” Harry wheezed, then took a cautious breath, and found that it came more easily still. He’d been concentrating so much on what he’d been doing that he hadn’t realised how tight his chest had become.

He looked up to realise that Kingsley, Benningdean and Ron were standing around him.

And Dorothy Atkins.

“Mr Potter,” she said coolly. “I could hardly believe my ears when I heard that you were in the building, but of course it’s no surprise that you had a hand in this.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Ron snarled. “Can’t you see he’s saving people?”

“With prisoners being one of your first priorities,” she sneered. “How illuminating.”

“Hey mate,” Harry smiled at him, a hand out, ignoring her.
Ron gave it a sort of low five. “You alright there, Harry? What can I do?”

“There are people still trapped,” Harry said. “I’m going to get them.” He looked at Benningdean, who was staring at Atkins as if she had a lobster on her head. “Level 6 Floo Network Authority and the Portkey Office, right? Seven in total?”

“One of the other receptionists who’s just come in thinks that two of the British Gobstone team have been in their office since last night. Long game. They weren’t on the list. That’s on Level 7,” Benningdean said.

Harry nodded. He suddenly felt astonishingly weary. Atkins was the last straw.

Severus handed him a bottle.

Harry took a gulp. “Water?”

Severus nodded, and Harry drank it thirstily. “Thanks,” he said, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, then jerking it away, wincing. He touched his lips tentatively.

“You’re suffering from minor burns,” Snape said quietly. “I can deal with them with a paste later.”

Harry gave him a lop-sided smile. “Thanks. You haven’t any Pepper-Up on you, have you?”

Snape handed him another vial. “One dose only,” he said firmly. “When it wears off, you give up.”

“How many people still missing?”

“Fifty eight,” Benningdean said, “including twelve Aurors.”

“Do them last,” Ron said.

Everyone stared at him.

“Your concern for your colleagues is duly noted,” Atkins said sarcastically, eyeing Ron up and down.

“They should have more skills to cope than anyone else,” he said, working to keep his voice civil.

“Fair point,” Kingsley agreed.

“If you apparate me in with you, we can be twice as quick,” Ron said. “You know, hunting for people.”

Harry looked at him, and nodded. He’d be glad to have Ron.

“Want me to come too?” Kingsley said. “I didn’t think of that.”

Harry shook his head. “You’re better here,” he said, his eyes darting from Atkins to Benningdean. “Masterminding things.”

“I fail to see why you’re here at all,” Atkins looked at Kingsley. “You have no jurisdiction here.”

“I’m extremely glad of his assistance,” Benningdean said firmly. “Perhaps you, and the Aurors present, might work out how the wards could be dropped?” He raised an eyebrow.

“As you wish, Minister, but I can assure you, there will be a thorough investigation of this night’s
events,” Atkins said, turning on her heel and marching off with her head high.

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Stupid cow,” Ron said.

Harry snorted, and then said, “You’ll need to make yourself a protective bubble, Ron. Depending on where the water’s reached, you’ll be burnt, boiled, or drowned.”


“The water that’s putting the fire out,” Harry said. He turned to Ron. “Ready? I’ve got an idea where the elves might be –”

“You’re putting them before people?” Ron said, then held up his hands at the look Harry gave him. “Hey, I meant nothing by it, and you’ll be in Hermione’s best books forever.”

Harry started to smile, but cut it short as it hurt. “Hopefully, if they’re where I think they are, and they’ve been trapped together, they can help us get everyone else out –”

“But if they can’t apparate –” Benningdean said.

“If they can apparate within the building, they can help us find people, and they’ll be able to apparate to the top level and just climb out, if the fire brigade can get some ladders down –”

“The firemen’ll have heart attacks,” Kingsley grinned.

“Just say it was for a movie like Lord of the Rings, or something. Muggle make-up and prosthetics are so amazing, they’ll believe it.”

Benningdean snorted. “Yessir!” he saluted Harry, and headed off.

It was good having help.

Harry apparated himself and Ron to the kitchens. He remembered Hetty, Lucius’ Malfoy’s elf, saying that elves usually lived near their work. He reckoned that providing food was one of the main jobs of the elves in the Ministry, and he made his way through the empty kitchens, only a vague mist of smoke eerily twisting around the cookers and work tables, opening every door as he went. There were pantries, stores full of potatoes and vegetables, cupboards full of china and glassware. Another was piled high with neatly ordered linens, but at last they tried a door that wouldn’t budge.

Harry looked at Ron.

Harry let his senses explore, and felt the unfamiliar spell looping not just over the door but stretching around the room.

“Do you recognise it?” Harry said, seeing Ron doing his own assessment.

“It has the feel of something that’s in the wards, but not really, no,” Ron said. He looked at Harry. “Fred’s method?”
Harry nodded. He leant against the door. “Is anyone in there?” he shouted, adding a *Sonorous* to his voice after the first word.

An excited babble met his ears.

“Stand back!” Harry yelled. “Stand well away from the door and wall!”

He moved back, and he and Ron took up positions, and then, after a nod to each other, blasted the wall a little way away from the door.

Ron had told Harry years before, when Harry was working on putting spells on the door of a silver cupboard that he was making, that it was silly not to do the whole piece, because once, when Charlie had spelled the door to the twins’ bedroom shut, Fred had just blasted a hole in the wall to get out. Molly hadn’t been pleased, but it had been a good lesson to them all to look for the simple solution.

It worked.

Through the clearing dust, Harry could see that the room was full of elves. There were surely nearer a hundred, Harry thought. He beckoned them out, and soon the creatures were stumbling over the fallen rubble, filling the kitchen.

“Who is the most senior of you?” Harry asked one of the first.

“I is being Dolbi,” one of the elves said, coming forward and bowing low.

Harry gave him a small bow back. “The Ministry is on fire,” he said. “Are you able to apparate out of the building?”

Dolbi’s large, wrinkled visage shook from side to side.

“Can you apparate within the building?” Ron asked.

Dolbi disappeared, and reappeared a moment later, water flipping off from his ears as he shook himself.

“Can you apparate within the building?” Ron asked.

Dolbi disappeared, and reappeared a moment later, water flipping off from his ears as he shook himself.

“Good,” Harry said in relief. “Dolbi, I realise someone has treated you horribly by locking you in your room, but if one or two of you – and no more – would be kind enough to help us locate the wizards and witches who’re still trapped, we’d be very grateful. The rest of you,” Harry said, looking up, “I just need to check the first level, but If you can apparate there, a team has been blasting access into the Ministry. There should be ladders and you can climb out. You *can* leave the Ministry, can’t you?”

Dolbi’s eyes were wide, but his head nodded in agreement.

“If they haven’t the ladders ready, I can help you apparate out from there,” Harry said, “but you need to protect yourself from the heat and water, all right? The fire has been burning on that floor. I’ll just go and check - ”

“Dolbi will be doing that, Master Potter, Sir,” Dolbi said, “and then I is helping you.”

“Thanks,” Harry said, conscious of time passing and the people still trapped. He didn’t know how much the fire was still raging. “Can you put someone in charge of making sure everyone – all your elves – are safe?” Harry said. “And I can see there are some elflings and young elves here,” he noticed the tell-tale tea-towel bumps, and tiny elves. “Can one of you help them and make sure
they’re protected? I’m sure you will…” he trailed off.

“Bobo is doing that,” Dolbi said, and another elf came forward and bowed, and immediately started organising the elves.

“Ron, you and I can start on the next group, and Dolbi, if you can join us whenever you can –”

Harry apparated Ron to the next location. Soon, Dolbi and another elf were helping them. The Gobstones players were already dead, and they reluctantly left the bodies to speed to the next people, hastened by the fear of more deaths.

Fortunately, everyone else on the list was alive.

At last, they stood on the pavement outside, and everyone started cheering. There were several flashes, as pictures were taken.

Harry didn’t feel that happy.

He hadn’t saved everyone.

He hadn’t stopped her.

She had an alibi.

He had no idea where Peter Stubbins was, no proof to link her or him to the crime.

“Time to get home,” Severus said, stepping up beside Harry. “I’ve told the mediwizards that I can treat you, if you’d prefer that?”

Severus had been busy himself, brewing more lung-clearing potion on the pavement and working with the mediwizards from St. Mungo’s, who were treating all the people they’d rescued.

Harry looked at the mediwizard lurking behind Severus, and nodded. “Thanks.”

The mediwizard smiled at him and headed off, and in his place Draco Malfoy loped over, from where he’d been standing next to a reporter.

“Harry,” he nodded in acknowledgement. “You look like shit.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Harry agreed. “Feel like it too.”

“You’ve saved loads of people: it’ll be a big story. Any way you want me to play it?”

Harry’s head was a mush. “I can’t even think straight,” he said. “Kingsley’ll tell you. I’ve got one more job,” he sighed.

Draco, Ron, Snape and Kingsley looked at him. Atkins seemed to have disappeared, and Benningdean was talking with the Head of the Auror Division, who’d been trapped in the building with the other Aurors.

“I need to make the water go out again. What’s the tide like on the Thames?”

Stubbington, who was lurking behind Benningdean, apparated away and then back. “On the turn.”

Harry nodded. “Thank Merlin for that.”
“Are you up to this, Harry?” Kingsley said, touching his arm. “You can’t kill yourself – “

“The Ministry will keep flooding if I don’t stop it,” he said.

“And you can?” Stubbington said, brows furrowed.

“Hope so,” Harry said, and apparated.

He landed neck deep in water, and had to hold back his panic. A floating desk hit the side of his head, disorientating him.

It was dark and noisy.

He should have asked Severus for gillyweed.

He forced the fear down, and let himself float.

The water wouldn’t hurt him.

He could apparate out at will.

The coolness of it was soothing.

He had about a foot between his head and the ceiling.

Plenty.

He cast a spell to fix his glasses to his face, and sunk down in the water, letting it consume him.

He felt its gentle touch against him, and allowed himself to drift, both literally and mentally. Just feeling. He bobbed to the surface, suddenly relaxed, floating easily.

It wasn’t quite the right words to say that he thanked it.

He felt too much part of it, at one with it, for the words to be right.

But he thought of his joy at saving life. So many lives. Saved because the water was there.

He thought of the relief as it soothed his burns.

He rejoiced in its properties, in its counterpart to fire.

He allowed his warmth for it to suffuse him, his gratitude for what it had done.

And he told it to retreat with the tide, back to the sea, to the freedom of open water, open space.

He could feel, like a pull on his heartstring, whatever that was, the inexorable tug, drawing the water back.

He smiled.

He bobbed a little in it, and then, at last, apparated out.

He landed, sodden, on the pavement.

“Are you alright?” Benningdean was there at once.
Kingsley cast a drying spell, and Severus threw his cloak over Harry.

Harry nodded.

“It’s going out with the tide. You’ll need to get teams down to repair all the hatches before the tide comes in again.”

“I’ll see to it,” Benningdean said. He extended his hand. “We owe you a debt of gratitude – I owe you my life –”

“You won’t be thanking me when you see the mess in the morning,” Harry said, rising to his feet. “It sounds as if you’ve saved the whole building from being destroyed.”

“The Department of Mysteries and the Hall of Prophecies are probably wrecked.”

“They were full of very peculiar things,” Benningdean said, “and I’m not much one for believing in prophecies. We should make our own fate, don’t you think?”

Harry barked a laugh, which became a cough, and shook the hand extended to him with his fingertips.

As Benningdean walked away, Kingsley said, “I’m afraid the evening isn’t over yet.”

Harry looked at him.

“Our…mutual friend needs to see you. Your daughter has…a guest.”

Harry tried to fathom what was being said, and then it clicked. “Oh. Right. I’d better go see him.”

“Why not let Kingsley apparate you to your house, and floo from there? I’ll bring you some burn paste shortly.”

“To Grimmauld Place?”

“If that’s alright with you?”

Harry nodded. His energy was slumping fast.

He turned to Ron. “Thanks. Good job, yeah?”

Ron grinned at him, and then hugged him. Harry couldn’t hide the wince. His skin felt too tight.

Ron looked at Snape. “I think he needs that burns paste everywhere.” He looked down at Harry. “You’re such a heroic twit,” he said. “You never said you were in pain.”

“It’s alright,” Harry shrugged, but that hurt too. “We had to save them.”

Ron nodded. “Yeah. And we got Jemima and Hugh,” he said, mentioning the two Aurors that he had been training, who had been in the building. “I owe you.”

“Don’t be daft,” Harry smiled, but it was hard work even to force the muscles to work.

“Get him back,” Ron said. “He’s had it.”
“Excuse me – “

Harry looked up.

Around them had gathered quite a crowd.

They were the people that Harry had rescued, that hadn’t, as yet, been taken to St. Mungo’s.

“Thank you,” one said, and then, voices all around echoed the same, thanking Harry and Ron.

“Don’t forget the elves,” Harry pointed at Dolbi and his friend, who were over standing with the rest of their group, “and everyone who’s done everything up here. And the Fire Brigade.”

There was a lot of general cheering. The Fire Brigade were obviously confused but pleased to have done a good job.

Ron and Harry looked at each other and smiled, lips twitching in amusement.

Harry felt soothed. He hadn’t saved everyone, but he could see people with their wives and husbands, and the general sense of joy was infectious.

“Masters?” A voice piped up.

They looked down.

“Dolbi,” Harry said, stretching out a hand. “Thank you.”

“Thank you, Masters,” Dolbi said to them both. “We – forgives us – we is wondering where to go?”

They all looked at each other.

“You’d better come to The Leaky,” Ron said.

“We is not wanting to be in the way – “

“Well, I expect there’ll be a lot of celebrating tonight, if a few of you might help Polly out in the kitchen?” Ron suggested diplomatically.

Dolbi beamed.

Ron grinned at Harry and shrugged.

“Rather you than me,” Harry whispered in his ear, and then Kingsley put his hand on his arm.

“I’ll need to come and talk to you tomorrow, Dolbi,” Kingsley said to the elf, who nodded.

“Ready?” he said to Harry, and then apparated them, and they were in Harry’s parlour.

Albus came ambling in as Kingsley held Harry through the disorientation.

“Dad, at last – fuck, you look like shit! Are you hurt?”
“He’ll be alright,” Kingsley said, his arms still around Harry. “Severus is going to bring some burn paste – “

“Burns? Dad! Oh my god,” Albus said, stepping forward.

Harry’s head was on Kingsley’s chest. Somehow, somewhere, all the energy had drained out of him. He forced his head round. “I’ll be fine. Been like this for hours. Is Nanette here?”

“The French girl?”

Harry nodded.

“Asleep on the sofa. Lils is with her. We offered her the guest room, but she won’t go to bed. Says she needs to hear from Malfoy. I was going to get Draco or Scorp, but Lils says it’s Lucius she needs?”

Harry nodded. “I’ll go speak to him.”

“He’s waiting in Paris,” Kingsley said. “He wouldn’t enter your home without your permission.”

“So bloody upright,” Harry said, his head still leaning on Kingsley’s chest.

“You want me to come?” Kingsley asked.

“Please,” Harry said, “I’m knackered.”

Albus looked to Kingsley, worry in his eyes.

“He’s been doing the impossible again,” Kingsley said, voice reassuring. “He’s just used up all his energy, and a dose worth of Pepper-Up too.”

“Oh, right,” Albus said. He’d used Pepper-Up doing exams, and knew what it felt like when you came down afterwards. “Does he have to – ?”

“I do,” Harry said. He pulled himself upright, but swayed.

Both Albus and Kingsley stepped forward to help.

Harry smiled. “I feel like I could sleep for a week. Albus, get Mitty to check the spare bedroom is made up and fresh for Nanette, yeah?”

“Lils has already done it.”

“You’re great. Okay, I’ll go do this and be back. Can you get Mitty to make me a pot of tea? I need it.”

Albus touched him gently. “Sure. See you in a moment.”

Harry nodded.

Kingsley led him to the floo, and climbed in with Harry.

Lucius had been waiting for hours, getting more and more worried and frustrated. He knew
Nanette would be safe with Lily Potter, but he needed to reassure himself. Reassure her.

But he could not usurp Potter’s privacy.

He had never been invited further than the parlour, and although Nanette could be brought there, it was a breach of manners too far to enter Potter’s house without his express permission. He knew she was safe. That was enough.

Or it should be.

It was almost three in the morning.

His floo flared, and he strode towards it.

Any comments he thought to make – the anger that he had felt that Potter had abandoned them – dissipated when he saw the state that Potter was in.

He was burnt, crinkled, and barely able to stand.

He opened his mouth, but words eluded him.

“Sorry to make you wait,” Potter said, still leaning against Shacklebolt.

Lucius could tell it was not from an exaggerated affection.

“Thank you for coming,” Lucius said, with some dignity. “You are not well.”

“Just need a bit of sleep,” Potter said. “Nanette’s dozing on the sofa, but she won’t go to bed until she sees you. Will you come?”

So simple. So generous.

Lucius swallowed.

“Thank you,” he said, “I am most grateful.”

“Her father alright?” Potter asked, still not able to stand unaided.

“Yes, recovering well. I have to own to petrifying Artur, the Brouchard parents, and her aunt.”

“If you managed not to kill any of them, you did well,” Potter said. “I wanted to. Tell me about it tomorrow. Come and put her mind at rest. She’ll need to know she can depend on you,” he looked Lucius in the eye.

“I haven’t just foisted her on you – “

“I know,” Potter said, reaching out a hand. He turned to Kingsley. “I don’t know if I can walk. Sorry,” he said, swinging back to Lucius.

“If you will allow me to assist,” Lucius said, stepping forward.

Kingsley looked at him, over Potter’s head, and nodded.

“Thanks,” Potter said. Again, he raised his head, even more slowly, to look at Kingsley. “I think I might be sick.”

“Try not to get Lucius’ robes, then,” Shacklebolt said with a smile. “He still has his formal best
“So do I,” Potter said, glancing down at the scorched tatters he was wearing.

Lucius, at a nod from Shacklebolt, slid Potter’s arm over his shoulder.

They moved to the floo.

“Can we all fit?” Potter asked.

“No. Hold on to me,” Shacklebolt said. “You go first: 12 Grimmauld Place,” he said to Lucius.

Lucius nodded. It was not as if he was unfamiliar with the address. He took a handful of floo powder and stepped into the flames.

He was not surprised to see Severus on the other side, and one of the Potter sons.

“He needs help,” he said.

Severus nodded, and turned to the boy. “Albus, take Mr Malfoy to Nanette, would you?”

“Shall I watch them?”

Severus looked at Lucius. “You can trust him with her,” he said.

Lucius nodded.

The floo flared.

Shacklebolt and Potter staggered through. Albus Potter darted forward to help Severus catch them.

“I’m alright,” Potter said, giving his son a smile. “Just tired.”

“I’m taking Mr Malfoy to Nanette. Severus and Kingsley will look after you, yeah?”

Potter nodded. “Thanks, Albus.” He tried to straighten.

Albus looked at Lucius. “This way, please. She’s asleep, you know, but…”

Lucius, thoughtful, followed the boy out of the room.

The rest of the night was a blur to Harry, although, to be truthful, it was already the early hours of the morning. Severus and Kingsley helped him to his room, and out of his clothes. He had a vague memory of cleaning spells, and Severus gently applying a stinking paste to his face and hands.

Something else was stroked over his body, but he was already falling asleep. He felt a cover pulled over him.

Felt alone.

“Don’t go,” he said, reaching out a hand.

There was a pause.
He tried to find consciousness.

“Kingsley needs to get into the office,” Severus’ voice said. “I’ll stay. I need to tell your children you’re alright. Sleep. I’ll be back.”

Harry tried to nod. His hand patted the bed. “In here,” he said, and then he was asleep.

Kingsley and Severus walked to the door.

“Are you alright?” Severus asked, standing close.

“He did the impossible today.”

“The story of his life,” Severus said.

“I – I wouldn’t have believed it conceivable. Even after everything I knew,” Kingsley whispered.

Severus looked at him. “He just wants to feel ordinary,” he said.

Kingsley barked a laugh, biting it off. “I don’t know what the press is going to make of this.”

“You spoke to Draco -”

“I’m not worried about The Prophet. But this can’t be ignored. And bloody Atkins – she made him seem – and we have bugger–all – no proof –”

Severus nodded. “We need to sleep on it. It will look better in the morning.”

“I can’t believe you just said that. You’re channelling my mother,” Kingsley had relaxed a little, though, and was smiling at his lover.

“She can be very wise,” Severus said, “but frankly, we’re talking common sense. Go and do what you need. I’ll speak to Lucius in a moment. Will you come back here?”

“We can’t sleep together here –“

“You can, if Dad wants it,” Albus said, reaching the top of the stairs and coming along the corridor. “How is he?”

“He’ll likely sleep the clock around,” Severus said, “but he should be fine. He needs burns paste on every four hours for the next forty eight, but he went so long without I expect his skin is going to peel anyway.”

“Urgh,” Albus said. “Will you tell me what happened?”

“I expect Lily wants to know too,” Severus said. “I’ll come down and explain.”

“What’s with Malfoy and the girl?” Albus asked, putting a hand on Snape’s arm.

Kingsley and Severus exchanged looks.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Albus withdrew his hand, his tone redolent of hurt.
“It’s just not our story to tell,” Kingsley said easily, touching his shoulder for a moment. “But I’ll tell you this, without problem. She was forced to marry a horrid man today – a guy who likes torturing people. He’d threatened her father’s life if she didn’t go ahead.”

“Shit!” Albus said. “Poor girl! But I thought something was up with her father?”

“We used a drug to try and make him appear dead, which would have allowed her the opportunity to refuse. It didn’t work as planned.”

“Shit!” Albus said again. “She’s only a kid, isn’t she?”

“Indeed,” Snape said, eyes twinkling at Kingsley.

“Alright,” Albus grinned, catching the look. “But, she’s like, Lily’s age, isn’t she?”

Snape nodded.

“Well, Lily’s taken her under her wing,” Albus said. “I think it might do her good, actually. You know, someone who has worse shit to deal with than she has. That sounds mean – “

“No, well, yes; but understandable,” Kingsley said, as they headed down the stairs.

“Is Lily finding life difficult?” Snape asked quietly.

Albus turned and looked at him. “I think she feels she ought to be the woman of the house,” he said. He shrugged. “I know Dad’s enjoying her company, but – she isn’t Mum. She can’t be Mum.”

There was a moment’s silence. “I’m hoping that your father isn’t looking for a woman substitute,” Snape said smoothly.

Albus choked, looked over his shoulder from one man to the other, and grinned. “Point,” he said, as they came to the bottom of the stairs. He shoved his hands in his pockets. “I – I’m probably a bit jealous.”

“Your father has been relying on you,” Kingsley said, leaning an elbow on the newel post.

“Not so much that. We get on.”

“I think he’d like to get on with all of you, don’t you?” Snape said.

“Yeah.” He hunched his shoulders. “I – I like that he talks to me. I suppose I feel less special that he talks to Lily too. I shouldn’t be laying this on you – it’s stupid. It’s practically dawn: it’s lack of sleep.”

“You do understand that – if you’ll have us – “ Kingsley said, “that – well, if your Dad is family with us, we’re family with you, aren’t we? You’re welcome to come and talk to us anytime.”

Albus grinned. “You’ll regret that!”

“Possibly,” Snape said, “but if you’d like to do some extra potions’ work, I’m willing to teach you medical potions for four hours a week. It should give you an edge in the applications process.”

“Seriously?” Albus’ face was alight.

“I may live to regret it, in which case – “
But they were interrupted by Lucius, Lily and Nanette appearing.

There was a pause, and then a general move towards the parlour and the floo.

The rose-tinted light of early morning was flooding in the landing window as Lily took Nanette up the stairs. Albus and Snape followed.

They were all alive, and safe.

Anything else could wait until the morning.
Draco sat in his office, photos from outside the Ministry spread out in front of him. The draft articles were ready to go, and the print-room was waiting, no doubt wondering why he was stalling.

The picture they wanted to use on the front page was of Harry, battered and tattered, one hand on the pavement, as he leant forward on one knee, looking up at Dorothy Atkins, resplendent and pristine in her wedding attire. The camera had recorded the moment when she had said, “Mr Potter, I could hardly believe my ears when I heard that you were in the building, but of course it’s no surprise that you had a hand in this.”

Her tone and supercilious look said one thing, and Harry’s ravaged and exhausted face said another.

Were they brave enough to allow the readers to judge what was going on?

She could argue that she was just astonished that he could apparate into the Ministry, and that of course, as Saviour of the Wizarding World, it was not at all unexpected that he should once again be saving lives.

But her tone said something else entirely.

Was it too early to make a move against her?

Would doing so put his father in danger?

Draco got up and headed over to the ever-hot flask of coffee that sat on a side-table. He rubbed a hand over his eyes, which felt gritty, both from tiredness and the smoke and dust at the Ministry.

He poured himself a cup with a slightly shaking hand.

Too much caffeine.

He sat back in his chair, sipping, enjoying the warmth and strength of the drink.

Potter’s face stared up at him.

How could one man have such power?

That was the other question that the story would provoke: there was no getting away from the fact that he had done the impossible. Repeatedly.

At least the picture showed that it took effort, and guts, and pain.

That he was human.

The door opened, and with thanks to the man who had brought him to the office, Kingsley strode in.

“How is he?” Draco said, getting up. “Coffee?”

“Please. With hot milk, if you have it: I hope to sleep sometime this night,” Kingsley said.
Draco snorted, and after a moment’s preparation, handed him a cup. Kingsley took a mouthful, and sighed with pleasure.

“He’s fine, I take it, or you wouldn’t look so relaxed.”

“Yes, sorry,” Kingsley said. “He’s home, asleep the minute his head hit the pillow, more or less. Severus is treating him for his burns and what-not, but says he should be fine.”

“I’m wondering what to print: this is what I think we ought to go with,” he said, turning the spread around for Kingsley to read.

There was silence for a couple of minutes, whilst Kingsley scanned the article.

“Most of the paper is taken up with coverage,” Draco said. “Individual stories, and so on. But almost all of them are people praising Harry. Ron too, some of them – I’ve made sure there’s a couple of those for balance, and stories about how people felt the fire developing, and what they tried to do, when they found that they couldn’t escape. There’s something else as well.”

His voice was ominous, and Kingsley’s head jerked up.

“Yes?”

“I – I just got the link when going over the pictures, and the comments. Kingsley, it was the Centennial Lift Maintenance night.”

“Yes, I heard earlier. But if the lifts had been working, the fire might have carried even more – “

Draco was shaking his head.

Kingsley paused.

Draco leant across the table, grasping his arm. “You know the date. Purebloods have it from the cradle, it’s in a damn nursery rhyme! We don’t think about it – it’s part of us. No one would think to go to the Ministry on that day – “

Kingsley stared at him. “Are you telling me that – that everybody in the building was a Muggleborn or half-blood?”

“I think so,” Draco nodded. “I haven’t checked everyone yet. We will. It’s a big story – ”

“Fucking Merlin, Draco, not just a story! Genocide - ”

Draco nodded.

Kingsley sat on the edge of his seat. Then he got up, and began pacing.

He turned and looked at Draco, and paced some more.

“What? What are you thinking?”

“I know there were nearly a hundred people in there, but – it’s a drop in the ocean, and too important a place for that to be why – “

“Perhaps the plan was to blame them,” Draco said slowly.

They were silent for a couple of minutes. Kingsley eventually stillled, and stuck his hands in his
pockets. “What else are you concerned about?”

“Three things in particular: we can’t hide how – how powerful Harry is. People are going to be – spooked. That’s why I think we should go with this picture,” he tapped the one he’d been looking at earlier. “He looks vulnerable.”

“Human. Yes,” Kingsley said, echoing Draco’s earlier thought. “What others have you got?”

Draco showed him several, but Kingsley ended up agreeing with the first. “Okay, run that one. You’re right.”

“I know my job,” Draco said, “but what we do now is going to affect people. We need to know just how much to say and what not to say.”

“Yes. You have power here,” Kingsley looked at him. “What else?”

“Atkins. And my father.”

Kingsley sat down again, nodding. “What’s your thoughts?”

“I think that picture brings her into the story. We could cut her, just have it without the words and without her in it, but – it starts something. Most people don’t know much about her. If we can tie in this unsympathetic thought – and a reminder that her department victimised Harry – we may get our foot in the door against her. Because if she did this, she’s going to come out fighting. She’s played a major card. She could still make it work. But we could throw some ice under her feet.”

“Let me think about that. What about your Dad?”

He’s going to come under the spotlight if it starts shining on her. Even if we say nothing, the other papers and mags will start digging. We already ran that they were seen together, so…”

“What’s your main worry? His reputation or his safety?” Kingsley said, straight to the point.

“I – I don’t know. Both, I suppose,” Draco rubbed his eyes again. “Are your eyes killing you? I think it’s the smoke.”

“Cucumbers on them when you go to bed,” Kingsley said.

“Really?”

“My mother’s cure-all for anything eye-related. She’ll have them waiting for you.”

Draco tensed, and then forced his shoulders down, before saying, “I expect she will. She’s a very kind woman.”

Kingsley nodded. “I’m glad you appreciate that.”

Draco picked up his cup, inspecting the grounds in the bottom. “I’m too tired to have this conversation – “

“There’s no conversation. As long as you treat her with respect and kindness, I have nothing else to say on the matter.”

Draco looked at him, and nodded slowly. “You need have no anxieties.”

“Good. I think you’re gut instinct on all this is spot on,” Kingsley said, waving a hand over the
paperwork on the table. “Run the picture. Play up Harry’s human side – the heroics speak for themselves. Don’t comment on Atkins, let that picture speak for itself too. She sounds a bitch, and it’ll set people’s alarms going – “

“They’ll be alarmed about Harry – “

“They would anyway. We need to set some doubt in about her. We’ve got bugger-all on her, and she’ll slip away like an eel. As for your father – “

Draco waited, as Kingsley paused.

“I don’t know if there’s more to be achieved by him staying in his position, or if he ought to withdraw….I really need to discuss it with him. There are other factors…I don’t think anything you’re printing tonight is going to make a difference either way?”

“No,” Draco said. “I’m just – “

“Of course you’re worried. He’s your father.”

“You say that very easily,” Draco said after a moment. “You must know that our history’s not – easy.”

“I know. Well, I know a little.” Kingsley stood up. “He’s been doing a good thing, Draco. You’d be surprised if you knew it all.”

“I’m surprised already.” Draco stood too.

“Severus found redemption. Don’t give up hope on your father.”

“Harry said the same to me, some time back,” Draco said, perching on the edge of the desk. “I – you – he fought against you both. I – I was a shit. I don’t understand how you’re all so forgiving.”

Kingsley shrugged. “Buggered if I want to get into that at this time of night,” he gave a tired grin. “It’s not necessarily that people change completely,” he said. “Maybe it’s just they use who they are, what they can be, for a different purpose. Given different motivation. God, I’m too knackered for this,” he held out his hand, “and you have hours more, I imagine.”

Draco nodded. “My workers are cursing me while they twiddle their thumbs,” he said, reaching across and shaking it.

“You see? Thinking about others is maybe what defines us as civilized. Don’t quote me. On that sugar-coated note, I’ll leave you to it. Thanks for waiting.”

“Thanks for your advice. Appreciated.”

“Your instincts are good. You’re good at this.”

Draco nodded. “I am. We ought to get together, all of us. I don’t think it can wait till Tuesday.”

“I don’t know if Harry will be awake before Tuesday,” Kingsley said, “but yes. I’ll try and set it up for tomorrow ni – that is – tonight. I’ll be in touch.”

And with a nod, he was gone.
James was sitting in the chair in his room at St Mungo’s, feeling extremely irritated. He was due to go home, but no-one had yet come with his clothes. His breakfast had been late, and the mediwitch who usually treated him hadn’t yet appeared.

He allowed himself to think about it, though, and realised that although he was pissed off, he really was quite calm about it. He didn’t feel full of the raging anger that would have had him blowing up only a few days earlier.

The door opened, and a very elderly man dressed in mediwizard clothes appeared. His head was bowed over James’ chart.

“Where’s Fiona?” James asked.

The man looked up. “Resting, I expect. She was called out to the emergency last night, like half the staff here. I’ve been pulled in from retirement. You’ve got a very interesting complaint, young man.”

“Well, I think it’s almost cured. If your readings are alright, I should be going home today.”

“So I see, so I see. Well, let’s hope that all is well, eh? Be so good as to take off your shirt, hmm? I do like to listen to the heart with a Muggle stethoscope. Such fun!”

James raised an eyebrow, thinking this man would be bosom buddies with his grandfather, but did as he was told. He sat on the edge of his bed, and the wizard stuck the thing on his chest. James jumped.

“Bit cold, eh? I think the Muggles warm them, but I’ve no idea how without a spell.”

James rolled his eyes. “What was the emergency?”

“Hmmm?” the wizard said, pulling away and unplugging the ends from his ears.

“You said there was an emergency.”

“Oh, a fire. Very unusual. Normally you can put anything out with a good old-fashioned Aguamenti, can’t you? Big fires never build up. Unless it’s Fiendfyre of course. But then there’s little hope,” he shook his head. “Medicine: so interesting, don’t you think?”

“Er, my brother does. Wants to be a mediwizard.”

“Good show!” he said. “It’s all in the papers, of course. Potter saved the day again. Come to think of it, I think he saved people from Fiendfyre in the Battle of Hogwarts – “

“Potter? Harry Potter?” James leapt off the bed.

“What? Yes, of course, calm down, now. What other Potter is there?”

“Me?” James snapped.

“Hmm?” The wizard looked at the chart again. “Oh, James Potter! How funny! No relation, I suppose – “
“My father.”

“Oh, dear boy, why didn’t you say? Here, have a look at *The Prophet* — he fished in his bag, and then dragged a rumpled copy out.

The picture jumped out at James. “He’s hurt!”

“Minor burns, they say, nothing serious — “

“Is he here?”

“No, no, child, he went home. Professor Snape was treating him. Well, he made lung-clearing potion for practically everyone, so they say, right on the pavement! Marvellous! Had experience from a goblin mine fire, apparently. I do love a bit of field medicine — “

“So — Dad’s at home?”

“That’s what the paper says — “

James grabbed his wand from the bedside table and strode to the door.

“Hey? Where are you going to, Mr Potter?”

“Home,” James said, opening it.

“But I haven’t finished my investigations! You’re a most interesting case — “

James threw the paper back at him and hurried along the corridor.

Why had no-one come to tell him? Was his Dad really okay? Why hadn’t Lily or Albus come?

From the apparition room he went straight to the parlour at Grimmauld Place. He tugged open the door —

“Oh, pardon, M’sieur!”

He grabbed the arms of the girl who had just barrelled into him. Her hair floated across his skin, and he was suddenly conscious that he was wearing only his pyjama pants, slung low on his hips.

Behind him, the floo flared.

Lucius Malfoy stepped out.

James wondered, in a lurching moment of uncertainty, whether he had come to the wrong house.

Lucius Malfoy’s eyes drifted over him, taking in his nakedness, and his hold on —

“Lucius!” the girl pulled free, and the next moment was standing just in front of Malfoy, a stream of French erupting from her mouth.

“James!”

His head swung round, and the next moment the second girl of the morning was in his arms.

This time, she was familiar.

“Lily!” He hugged her tight. “I just heard. Is Dad okay? Why didn’t anyone get me?”
“Because we all went to bed about three in the morning or something, and we’ve only just got up,” she said. “Apart from Nanette, who’s obviously been up and dressed and ready for her visitor for the last hour,” she smiled over at the two at the fireplace.

Lucius had heard her, and stilled Nanette’s chatter with the tiniest touch on her arm.

“Miss Potter,” he said, coming over, “thank you for being so kind as to allow me to visit again. I have news of Nanette’s father for her.”

Malfoy’s eyes roamed coldly over James’ nakedness, and it was all James could do not to cover himself up like a shy maiden.

Lily, though, just gave him a smile, and turned to Nanette. James pulled on all his knowledge of French – necessary in a family with French cousins – to understand as his sister spoke:

“Nanette, would you be so kind as to take Mr Malfoy into the drawing room and give him some tea? Just call for Mitty. This is my brother James, who I’m sure would be much happier to be introduced once he’s dressed. He’s just heard about Dad,” she added, in explanation, “and from the looks of things, he’s leapt straight out of his hospital bed.”

It was neatly done.

“Excusez-moi,” James bowed, and left the room quickly, taking the stairs two at a time.

“Wait,” Lily called, rushing up behind, as Malfoy and the girl headed to the drawing room.

He paused, then turned, hearing footsteps. Albus was just coming down from his room, still, to James’ relief, also in pyjamas.

“Hey,” Albus smiled, “did Lils reach you already?”

“The mediwizard told me. How is he?”

His father’s door opened, and he stiffened as Snape exited.

Neither Lily nor Albus acted as if it was anything untoward.

“How is he?” Lily repeated the question, as Snape reached them.

“And good morning to you too,” he said, giving her the slightest of smiles, before glancing at James and Albus. “Albus, get your brother something to wear before he catches his death.”

Albus stuck out his wand, and a moment later a tee-shirt zoomed down the stairs.

“Thanks,” James said, and meant it.

“Dad?” Lily prompted again.

“Still asleep. I’m just fetching the burn paste – “

“How bad are they?” James interrupted.

“His face and hands will peel,” Snape said. “No worse than a bad case of sunburn. Uncomfortable for a day or two, but the skin underneath will be fine. The rest of him is – sensitive, after the prolonged heat exposure. I will give him some more lung-clearing potion when he wakes, and then something to ease his lungs further. They have suffered the most strain. Well, apart from his
magic, that is.”

“He’s strained his magic? Is that possible?” James asked.

“It is when you attempt the impossible repeatedly,” Snape looked at him. “I do not expect him to wake till at least this afternoon – I hope he won’t, to give him some recovery time. After that – your father is a bit of an unknown quantity. I can’t say what shape his magic will be in.”

“Unknown quantity? What does that mean?”

“Do you know what happened?” Albus asked him.

“I saw the front of the paper, and came straight here.”

“I haven’t even seen the paper yet today, you probably know more than us,” Albus said, shocking him, and easing his irritation at once.

“Can I see him?” James asked.

“Me too,” Lily said.

“Do not wake him,” Snape said, and led them back down the corridor. “I will be back in a moment,” and he cast a spell. The door opened silently, and he ushered them in, before shutting it behind them.

James’ eyes were riveted to the sight of his father in the bed.

Having seen Snape leaving the room, he’d prepared himself to see signs of Snape and Kingsley’s occupation, but it didn’t look as if anyone else had slept in the bed – though there was a chair pulled up beside it that wasn’t usually there.

His father looked tiny. His hair looked awful – sticky and flattened. His face – what was wrong with his eyebrows?

And he realised. They were half burnt off.

The thought of it – that his father was that close to so much heat, or flame, was scary.

The door opened again, and Snape appeared with a large bowl.

He came over to the bed. “I’ll do his face,” he said quietly. “It requires great care around the eyes. Would any of you like to do his hands?”

Before James could say anything, Lily and Albus had stepped forward.

He stood, watching, as his brother and sister dipped their fingers in the pot, which seemed to contain a slimy green ointment, and following Snape’s instructions, began to stroke it lightly over his father’s hands, which lay on the duvet.

Snape too had dipped his fingers, and was methodically coating his father’s face. He had expected to be repulsed, to see Snape touching his father so intimately, but Snape’s actions were no different to the others’. He watched the care with which Lily eased the stuff into the furrows where nail met skin, and where Snape smoothed it into the creases around his father’s eyes, then gently massaged it into his head. No wonder his father’s hair looked so disgusting. His eyes widened as Snape finished by smearing a thin coat of the paste into his father’s nostrils.
There was nothing sexy about such an action.

It spoke only of thoroughness, and care.

Snape could have left it to a mediwizard, he was sure.

But he hadn’t.

He really cared about his father – even down to doing that, the thought of which made him recoil.

Only the slight flickering movements behind his father’s eyelids, and the steady rise and fall of his chest, revealed that he was alive. He had not responded to the touch at all, and that was shocking, because he could never remember his father not jumping to alertness from sleep, instantly on guard, always.

“If you have a camera, now is the time to take a photo, to tease him with later,” Snape said, standing back, and eyeing their handiwork.

His father’s face was completely green and slimy, his hair a greasy, sticky mess, his hands green and, James’ realised, slightly swollen.

He was a rather comical sight.

Lily giggled. Albus muffled a bark of laughter, and dashed out the room, grinning, “Getting it!”

The fact that Snape was willing to joke meant that everything was okay, he realised.

The tension in him eased. He nodded at Snape, took a last look at his father, and headed to the door.

Snape and Lily followed. Snape shut the door silently after them.

“Thank you,” he said to Snape.

He was aware of Lily staring at him, but he couldn’t explain how scared he’d been when the mediwizard had spoken, when he’d seen that photo.

“My pleasure,” Snape nodded. “I’m going to go and find a cup of tea. Have you had your assessment and treatment today?” he asked James.

“I – half. I had to come home to see Dad.”

“Of course,” Snape agreed.

The lack of dispute again took the wind out of his sails. “I suppose I ought to go back and finish up. Then – ” he looked from Lily to Albus, who’d just reappeared, “I’d like to come back here.”

“Sure. If you give me twenty minutes to do this,” Albus waved the camera he’d just collected, “get dressed, and have a bite to eat, I’ll come with you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, why not? We’ll take a copy of the paper and read up, and I’ll tell you the little I know.”

“And by the time you’re back, I expect Mr Malfoy will have gone,” Lily said.
And so it was.

In the drawing room, Lucius sat facing Nanette.

He’d had plenty of explanations prepared the previous night, but when he had seen her, exhausted and barely with it, he had stayed only long enough to reassure her that he had seen her father, who was fully recovered, and assured him she was safe, and had merely asked her to trust him, and that he would visit her at eleven thirty the next morning, to explain, if that was acceptable to her.

She had acquiesced.

He hadn’t expected to arrive to find her in the arms of a half-naked young man, and the sight had shocked him more than he wanted to admit.

Artur, he could detest.

James Potter, the heir to the Potter estates – his owner, should he, by some miracle, live longer than Harry Potter – was another matter entirely.

He was the sort of man that Nanette deserved.

It tasted bitter in his mouth.

Of course, James was the heir. But if her fertility issues could be sorted… Severus was in the house. He needed to introduce them.

A flashing thought of Nanette with children scampering round her skirts slid into his mind.

She would be a good mother. She deserved happiness.

He would do everything he could to ensure it.

Her own family were despicable.

Her father had been beside himself when Lucius had told him that he had taken Nanette to safety.

He’d threatened to cut her off.

“That is precisely what I asked you to do before this marriage took place,” Lucius had snapped. “Unless you do so, I believe not only your life, but hers, is in danger.”

Henri had started to say something, and then stopped. “Do you think Artur – the Brouchards – did this to me?” he demanded. He was still in his bed, dressed in his nightwear, and he indicated his person as he spoke.

Lucius could have lied. But –

“No. I did it.”

Henri’s face was a picture.

“You poisoned me?” He almost backed himself through the headboard. “You killed Benôit!” he
gasped.

“Do not be so foolish,” Lucius twirled his wand. “I had no interest in Benôit.”

“But… but…”

“You refused to listen to your daughter. How many times had she told you that she did not wish to marry that disgusting piece of merde?”

“She – she had stopped protesting – “

“How astute of you to have noticed,” Lucius sneered. “That is because Artur threatened to harm you if she did not consent.”

“He would not – I do not believe you!”

Henri had gone pale.

“No? You’re lying.”

Lucius tapped his wand against his hand, and regarded the cowering man.

“Hold still,” he said, pointing his wand at him, and performing a complex scanning motion.

“I see,” he said, when he had finished. “That explains a lot.”

“What? What did you find? Is there another curse on me?”

“A compulsion,” Lucius said. “Someone has placed a compulsion on you. It would explain why you were so keen to give Nanette to Artur, despite all the evidence to show how unhappy such an arrangement would make her.”

It was a lie.

Lucius knew it, and so did Odont.

But it would give him an out, a reason to capitulate.

The question was, would he take it?

He saw Henri eyeing him up, reassessing recent events.

Lucius’ increased status, his relationship with Atkins…

“Mordieu,” Henri said, kneeling up on the bed, “can you remove it?”

Lucius breathed a silent sigh of relief. He felt nothing but disgust for Henri, to have such a jewel in his keeping and to misuse it, but Nanette loved her father.

It would bring her happiness.

He waved his wand, uttered a few words under his breath, and ended with a flamboyant flick, as if casting the spell from Henri’s body and out of the window.

It was comical watching Henri’s acting.

He clasped his chest, turned his head this way and that.
Scrambled to the side of the bed, and pulled on his dressing gown.

He came to stand before Lucius.

“Nanette?” he gasped. “Is she – safe?”

“She is, now that I have stopped Artur’s attempt to rape her,” he said cruelly. Henri did not deserve to get off scot-free.

“R –rape? It was to be a marriage of convenience – “

“In the circumstances, the Brouchards decided the Rites of Meraid would be best.”

“B – but – Artur – I understood he – “

“He took a potion,” Lucius said. “I found him naked and more than ready to – proceed. He had already hit your daughter. She was deciding whether to take her own life.”

“N –no,” Henri moaned, and this time, the emotion was real, as he grabbed hold of Lucius’ arm, staggering.

Lucius shook him off, but led him to a chair.

“This is what you wanted for your daughter, yes? You knew that he was cruel.”

“He – I – the compulsion – ” Henri’s eyes darted to his, and away.

“Yes. Made you blind, no doubt,” Lucius said. “Nevertheless, she is now married to him – “

“Then she must have agreed – “

“No. She refused, the minute she saw you collapse. Your sister invoked familial power, and handed her over. She said it was what you would want.”

Henri sobbed.

“What can I do?” he asked, after Lucius ignored his snuffling.

“Artur married her for the huge dowry you placed on her. He has never shown the slightest interest in her, or care for her wellbeing. If you die, and she dies, he will inherit your entire estate. Do not think him incapable of it. You saw what he did to that man – “

“That man was a half-blood!”

Lucius looked him up and down. “And he tortured him for fun, with nothing to gain except a little shade of the bad-boy about him. He already trades on that, with his drinking, and his – unnatural interests. The young people are attracted to him because of his image, but as they grow older, they will not tolerate his continued interest in his perversion. And he will not stop. These men don’t,” he said, realising, for the first time, that perhaps it was not a choice, after all.

Shacklebolt had given up being Minister for Magic for it, after all.

Maybe his grandson – but that was not a thought to follow now.

“He will need money to support his lifestyle and to buy his friendships. I do not doubt that he will kill you, and then her.”
“No, no, no,” Henri was shaking his head. “This is not what I thought,” he muttered. “I only wanted that she should have a place – given her condition – “

“Her condition should not have prevented you seeking her happiness,” Lucius snapped. “She has talent as a Healer – she could have found her own way – “

“I must get the marriage annulled – “

“No.”

“No? No? What do you mean?”

“To do so, on her wedding day, would disgrace her. It would disgrace her aunt, and yourself, and cause a huge scandal. That is to be avoided.”

“But – “

“You will call your lawyer now and change your will.”

“I can’t disinherit her!”

“You must. Wait.” Lucius moved to the window, thinking. It was late, but his brain was tumbling around ideas.

Henri looked to him as to a saviour, to solve all his problems. If it had not been for Nanette, he would have left him in his own mire.

“You could make a clause. That would be better. If Nanette has no children – yes, yes, I know she can’t, but you do not wish to announce it to the world – if she dies, childless, before her husband, you have a clause that means that everything she has inherited from you will go to some… cause. Let me think.”

“That sounds good. Yes. I could leave it to the orphanage in Reims – “

“You could, or you could buy your way to a bit more power with it.”

“But I would be dead – “

Lucius refrained from rolling his eyes. “The point would be to make the conditions of your will clear now: the point being to avoid your death, and hers. If you’re both dead, what does it matter?”

“So…so… I don’t quite follow…”

“Your estate must go to something that would benefit our cause.”

“Oh! Yes!” Henri said excitedly.

“But in a way that stops the Brouchards getting their hands on it,” Lucius continued.

“I don’t know what that would be,” Henri said after a moment.

“Is Nanette the only beneficiary?” Lucius asked. “Perhaps you have already left something to a cousin, or - ?”

“No cousins,” Henri shook his head. “I made a couple of silly bequests – you know.”
“I do not. What do you mean, *silly bequests*?”

“Well, one to the hospital where her mother was treated – “

“Medical research? That is worthy – “

“Actually,” Henri said sheepishly, “it was to buy lilies for the wards. Delphine liked lilies, when she was in the hospital.”

“And the other? Bequest?” Lucius said, not commenting, because it was a strange, but not entirely stupid thing to have done.

“Oh. Ah. Silly of me, but – well, I don’t know if you knew them. I used to love the *Magiciens* series of books when I was young.”

“I remember them. Tales of famous wizards and witches through the ages.”

“Yes indeed,” Henri said, with animation. “I have several first copies. 1564 was the first imprint! And still the company goes on!”

“Yes?”

“Yes! Well, I know this sounds stupid, but when I went to school I discovered that some of my friends had never even heard of them! So – so I left a little bequest to Beauxbatons so that all pupils should be given a set of six – my favourite heroes – when they arrived.”

“That’s it,” Lucius said. “Well done, Henri. How rich are you?”

“Er, very. *Pourquoi*?”

“The tales are all, I imagine, of Purebloods – all the early ones –”

“Of course.”

“There you are, then. You gift an entire set – how many is that?”

“One hundred and twenty four books, currently,” Henri said knowledgeably.

“Yes. Good. A set to every child in the wizarding world.”

“In France? That would be expensive, but not –“

“In the entire world. Henri, there you have it. They will need to employ translators, research wizards from other lands – and you have your perfect philanthropic gift that increases knowledge of our historic wizarding culture.”

“I – that is – what an excellent – I will see my lawyer in the morning!”

“See him now.”

“But – “

“He will not be surprised, and no doubt you pay him well. There is nothing like a near-death experience to make a man want to put his affairs in order.”

“Alright,” Henri said dubiously. “And then what do I do?”
“In the morning, you will see the Brouchards at breakfast, and any other guests you have in the chateau. Your sister, no doubt. You will act as if nothing is untoward. You will say that Nanette and Artur have already departed on their honeymoon. You will apologise for your fainting attack. You will say that although the mediwizard has given you a clean bill of health, the touch of mortality has made you get your affairs in order. You will say that it is wonderful to know that Nanette is now in the care of a family that you understand are going to be so important in the scheme of things, and that you have no doubts that she will be well cared for. You could mention the dowry in passing, if you wish. And then you can say that, talking among family, you know that you will not be looking to have grandchildren, but that you wanted to give something to the next generation, to increase their respect for traditional wizarding culture, and you spring your deed on them. They will not be able to do anything but say that it is an excellent idea.”

“I hope I can remember all that,” Henri said dubiously.

“As long as it comes out, and soon, however you wish to term it, is up to you,” Lucius said.

“And then? Nanette and Artur are to pretend to be married?”

“They are married,” Lucius said. “You saw to that. No-one will be surprised if they are not seen around. Nanette will not be returning to France.”

“You – she is not here? But – ”

“She is a married woman, and no longer your daughter,” Lucius said. “Her whereabouts are not your concern.”

“That’s preposterous!”

“Do not imagine,” Lucius said coolly, “that I have any – compassion – for you. These arrangements I make are for two reasons only: to safeguard a girl who has been let down by her own family, in a manner that should shame any Pureblood wizard of conscience, and to attempt to keep our organisation cohesive and productive for our future plans.”

“You think so little of me that you would keep my daughter from me?”

“Yes,” Lucius said bluntly. “But I am aware that your daughter loves you. When she is ready, she will be in touch.”

Henri’s mouth opened and shut.

“She – she is safe?”

“Yes.”

“You have her on your estate in England?”

“Would I be so foolish as to take her to so obvious a place? I will not tell you. You have my word that she is safe.”

“And she will come to no harm at your hands?”

Lucius drew himself up. “You are insulting.”

“I – I am only concerned – “

“I might have believed it more a week ago, had you been willing to listen when I sought you out.
Enough. I will tell her you are well. You will do your part to ensure her continued safety, yes?”

“I – yes.”

Lucius nodded, and was gone.

Now, he sat looking at Nanette, thinking what strange things families were. How could she care so much for a man who had put her into such a position?

“What is it, Lucius?” she said, leaning forward. “You look very thoughtful.”

Her use of his name startled him back to the task ahead.

“Has Lila – Lily – told you where you are?”

“She said that was for you to do,” she responded, “but I heard her brother call her Lily, rather than Lila. Who is this family? They have been very kind to me,” she added, “and yet – you do not seem like you are – close friends.”

Lucius sat forward and took her hand. “I have much to tell you. Firstly, I must admit that I have deceived you. Will you hear me out?”

Her eyes darted from his to the door.

“I will not hurt you,” he said quickly, and withdrew his wand.

Her eyes widened.

He laid it across his palm and presented it to her.

“I – it was only the elf,” she said, her hand touching his wrist briefly.

He saw a house elf - a rather mis-shapen house-elf, standing waiting patiently inside the door, with a laden tray. He gestured it over, and the elf trotted forward, placing the tray on the table between them. Suddenly, a little face peeked out at him.

Nanette grinned at his startled expression. “Thank you, Mitty,” she said to the elf, and with a curtsey and a nod, they were both gone.

Lucius’ lips were twitching. He still held out his wand.

“I would not be here if I didn’t trust you,” Nanette said. “Coffee? Or there is tea?”

“Coffee, thank you,” he said. “But now, I must place my trust in you. If you choose to reveal what I tell you, you could place me, and the occupants of this house, in harm’s way.”

“Then you have my word that I will not reveal it,” she said, pouring the coffee. “Lila came to help me before, and has been nothing but kindness itself since I arrived. What is going on?” She handed him a cup, with the tiny dash of milk that he liked.

“I do not know how much you know of English history,” he said, and took a sip. He looked at her. “Lily is the daughter of Harry Potter. This is his house.”

She sat up straight, leaving her cup on the tray. “The Harry Potter?”
“Yes.”

“You fought against him – he fought the Dark Lord, that is.”

“Yes.”

“You – you went to prison.”

“Yes.”

“I do not understand.”

“I have been acting as a spy. In France.”

“On – who?”

“The Brouchards. Lavals, your father, and all of that group.”

“They want to get lots of Purebloods into positions of power.”

“Yes.”

“You are a Pureblood. You – that is what you fought for before, is it not?”

“Yes. Do drink your coffee, Nanette, it’ll get cold.”

“I can charm it warm,” she said, but picked up the cup. “Why?”

“Why am I spying?”

She nodded.

He sighed deeply. “Mr Potter owns me.”


He laughed. “No. If I had been, I think people would have seen through my presence at once, don’t you?”

“I’m sorry if I appear stupid – ” she said stiffly.

He put down his cup. “Of course you’re not,” he said. “Will you let me explain?”

“I’m all ears.”

Lucius’ lip quirked. When she was haughty, she looked so wonderful. He sobered. “It does not reflect well on me.”

“And spying does?”

“That – you make a good point,” he nodded. “It is just – perhaps – some of my – thoughts have changed, during – well. I will start at the beginning,” he said. He was not a man to stutter like a schoolboy. “I do not know if you follow the gossip about what goes on in England? The murder of Mr Potter’s wife?”

“I had heard of it, but Papa does not like me reading the scandal-rags – oh! That means Lily’s
mother died recently! Oh! The poor girl! And she has been so kind!"

Lucius nodded. "My son - I have one son, Draco – was accused of her murder."

"Vraiment? Pourquoi?" her brow furrowed.

"He was Mrs Potter's lover. They planned to marry. He did not kill her."

"This is – full of intrigue, is it not?"

"Yes. Intrigue and bad people," he nodded.

He stood up, and walked to the window. "I – Draco only has one son. One child."

"Yes?"

He glanced at her. "Forgive me if you find this offensive – I was brought up – I have always thought that it was essential to do everything to carry on the family line."

Again her brow furrowed. She looked at him patiently.

"Scorpius – Draco’s son – he – I will be blunt: he likes men."

"Like Artur?"

"He is not like Artur," he said, rather more sharply than he had ever addressed Nanette before. He took a breath. "I beg your pardon. Scorpius – he has never tried to hide his – his – ”

"That he likes men? It is more acceptable in England?"

"No. Not acceptable at all. But he – he has been in a relationship with a young man since he was at school. Fourteen or fifteen. They live together. Openly."

She nodded. "That is very brave of them, n’est-ce pas?"

Lucius had never thought of it like that. He had thought Scorpius’ behaviour appalling, to so publicly disgrace the family name. He did not comment.

"He – I knew he was stubborn. It meant that Draco must continue the family line. When he planned to marry Ginevra Potter – it was good news."

"I see."

Lucius found himself unable to make out what she meant by that.

"I offered myself to Potter in his place."

"You sacrificed yourself for your son?" she stared at him.

"It was important – to me – that the line be continued."

"Even if your son was a murderer?"

Lucius had never even considered that. He had killed people himself, after all.

"Yes. Draco is a good man, essentially. But – Potter told me that he hadn’t done it."
“He knew?”

“He did.”

“And yet he accepted your offer?”

“He went to a lot of trouble to clear Draco. He hadn’t needed to – they’d had past history, Draco had stolen his wife – “

“It sounds – he could not be a good man if he accepted your offer, even knowing the truth.”

Lucius took a deep breath. “He is a good man,” he said, quietly, “but not a fool. He accepted my offer, so that we could find the people who did kill his wife, and set up my son.”

“Would you not have helped him anyway?”

Lucius opened his mouth and shut it again. Would he?

“I – I would not have thought of working with him. We have – a past. We were enemies, but even so – I did not treat him well. He had no cause to trust – or respect – me.”

“I think there is too much you are not telling me, for me to understand,” she said. “Why was it important to save your son? I understand, if it was affection, but – surely you could carry on the line? If that was your motive? I think it must be because you loved him.”

How did she always sweep his feet out from under him?

If he had been able to father children, would he have left Draco to his fate?

He had always couched it in terms of the family duty, the need to pass on the line, but the answer was simple.

Of course he would have given himself.

“You’re right,” he nodded. “Draco has done well in the world, despite – despite the start I gave him. And I – there was little in my life. It was easy to give it up. But do not think well of me, because – the line was important. I – I am no longer able to father children.”

“Oh,” she said.

She stood up, and came towards him. Her hand reached out and rested over his.

He glanced up at her, from the depths of his shame.

“I am sorry,” she said gently. “Is that why you are so kind to me?”

“Am I kind to you?” A quizzical smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Her light touch – with words, and emotion, never failed to ease his spirit. “I have torn you away from your father, your husband, your home and your country.”

“Yes, and from Artur’s blows and humiliations – ” She stopped abruptly.

Lucius’ eyes darkened. What else had that bastard done to her?

“I am very glad to be here,” she hurried on. “I know I am safe with you.”
“Thank you,” he said. He would not discomfit her.

But he would find out, and Artur would pay.

“Well,” he said. “What you need to know is that I trust Mr Potter, and I have come to respect him a great deal.”

“Truly?”

“Yes.”

“You – you do not agree with my father, and the others?”

“I still believe that Purebloods have a history that it is important to remember, and value, but Mr Potter is not a Pureblood, and he is, by far, the most powerful wizard I have ever met. I would be foolish to bury my head in the sand, and believe that only Purebloods have a place in our world.”

“Oh, good!” she said, with obvious relief.

He raised an eyebrow.

“Annabelle – she is my very best friend from when I used to go to school. She’s a half-blood,” she whispered. “I – we write to each other. Papa would not allow her to visit, of course – well, I could not suggest such a thing. Not even to come to my wedding.”

He nodded, and smiled at her. “I’m afraid you cannot tell her where you are just yet.”

She nodded. “What is to happen to me?”

Lucius explained the conversation he had had with her father.

“So – you think I should stay married?” she said, her face horrified.

“If you leave it for a little while, you can part without too much scandal,” he said.

“I don’t wish to be married to him.”

“You don’t have to see him,” he said, gently, “and I will not allow him to hurt you. And you have Mr Potter’s support as well.”

“He – he knows about me? All about me? Why I was marrying Artur?” she said in embarrassment.

“I hope you will forgive me for revealing such personal information about you, but it was essential,” he said. He paused, and then added tentatively, “If I could make a suggestion?”

She nodded, watching him.

“There is a Potions’ Master in the house – Severus Snape. He is of world-renown. He may be able to help you with your fertility. I know there are no guarantees, but I would trust him above anyone else as regards the creation of potions. Then, perhaps, in time, when you’re divorced from Artur, you might be able to meet a young man and have a family after all.”

She stood up. “That is very kind of you to suggest,” she said, picking up the tray with her back to him. “How does he come to be here?” she asked, changing the subject.

Lucius understood that it was a touchy area. He opened the door to allow her to take the tray to the
kitchen, explaining about what had happened the previous evening, in so far as he had read the paper himself that morning.

It was late afternoon, and James was sitting in his father’s bedroom with Albus. They had a silencing ward up, and were playing a game of wizarding chess. Lily and the French girl were going through Lily’s clothes, resizing some for Nanette.

James blushed with embarrassment as he thought of her. He had compounded the awkwardness of their first meeting, when he’d been all but naked and wearing scruffy old pyjama bottoms, and hadn’t yet shaved, by going for excessive politeness at lunch, calling her Mademoiselle. Lily had only introduced her as Nanette, so how was he to know? He must have looked a right fool, with his mouth hanging open, when she had said that, actually, she was Madame. He hadn’t caught on quickly enough, and Lily had just said, “She got married last night. It’s over.”

Nobody had told him anything about it. How was he supposed to have known that? What was he supposed to have said? What was Lucius Malfoy doing with her?

He’d felt a little better after discovering that Albus knew almost as little as he did.

He moved a piece –

“AARK!”

They both leapt up. His father had sat up in bed, and was coughing. His face was contorting, and it looked like he wasn’t getting in any air at all.

“Get Severus!” Albus yelled, getting behind his father and thumping him on the back.

A huge wodge of something black hit the duvet.

A rattling sound came from his father’s throat.

James was out the door and yelling over the banister in a second.

Severus came leaping up the stairs, and straight into the room.

He grabbed the bowl from the bedside, and climbed on the bed behind his father.

“You’re alright,” he said firmly, beginning to make little chopping motions across his father’s back. “I know you think you can’t breathe, but you can. Get this up, and it will be easier.”

He watched, as Snape soothed, pummelled and cajoled his father, everyone’s panic receding as he worked. His father hawked up several lots of disgusting stuff into the bowl.

Eventually, after a particularly big result, his father took in a calmer breath. “Fucking hell, Snape,” he wheezed.

“What can you expect if you go diving into fires for hours on end?” Severus said acerbically.

“I thought I’d already taken the stuff to clear my lungs,” his father said, resting his head on his hand. “God, is there any water?” he looked at Albus, who handed him a glass.
James was pleased to see that Albus slopped a little. It had been terrifying.

“That was the start,” Snape said.

“Bloody hell! And you didn’t tell me?”

“What would be the point of that?” Snape said, coming off the bed and wiping a cloth gently over his father’s brow, where the sweat had washed the ointment into rivulets.

“What?” His father coughed again, and they all tensed.

Except Snape, who just held his father’s arms, supporting him.

When he’d finished, his father’s head slumped to the side against Snape’s chest. Snape smoothed a hand over his hair as if it wasn’t covered in slime.

“I’m ruining your robe.”

“Fortunately, I am wearing my brewing apron,” Snape said. He reached across for his father’s glasses and put them into his hand. “You really are as blind as a bat, aren’t you?”

“Thought it was a bit odd that you were wearing white, but I had other things on my mind.” He rolled his eyes, and then sniffed. “Urgh! Is this stuff up my nose?” He looked at his hands, and the mess on Snape’s pinny.

“Yes, but you can blow if you want,” Snape said, handing him a hanky.

There was something so – calm, and practical about it all. James looked across at Albus, only to find that he was watching him.

Snape soothed his father.

Snape had soothed them all, really.

He’d been panic stricken.

There was no fancy touching, or anything for him to feel squeamish about.

“James,” his father said, interrupting his thoughts. “You’re home! Sorry, I – what day is it?”

“It’s five thirty on Sunday afternoon,” he said, looking at his watch. He knew how disorientating this medical treatment stuff could be.

“You – they – I didn’t pick you up.”

“I’m here,” he said gently. “I came to see you were okay, and Severus made me go back and check out properly. I’m fine. Apart from the not drinking beer, of course,” he said, with a grin.

His father started to smile back, winced, and then set off coughing again. It was another nasty bout. Snape again slipped behind him, doing the little chopping movements on his back.

It was still horrible, watching what came up, and his father looking so awful, but it was less scary.

After it, Snape gave him a different potion.

His father drank it without question, then licked his lips. “What was that?”
“You do know you’re supposed to ask first?” Snape said.

His father grinned. “It’s a bit late for me to start worrying about trusting you.”

Snape hmmed at him. “It was just something to soothe your throat. It’ll feel somewhat raw.”

Harry nodded, and lay back on the pillows. “We need to have a confab.”

“Kingsley agrees. He’s been arranging one.”

“Tonight?”

“Can you cope?”

“We need to do it.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“You’ll look after me.”

James, looking from one to the other, knew that his father was right.

“What about the French girl?” he asked, interrupting the flow between the two.

“Nanette? I ought to see her –“

“Lily’s taken her under her wing,” Snape said.

“Oh, good. I expect I’d frighten the shit out of her like this,” he said, and coughed again.

Snape dealt with it.

“Kingsley thinks it might be time for Lucius to come to the meeting,” he said, as he rearranged the pillows behind his father.

James noted the open tone. Snape was inviting his father’s opinion. His decision.

Harry lay back. He looked at Snape and then at the two of them. “What do you think?” he asked.

James hadn’t expected to be consulted. What did he think?

“I think Scorp ought to know that his grandfather’s helping us,” Albus said, “but are the two going to be alright in the same room together?”

There was a sudden silence in the room. Albus glanced at him, and away again.

It was a shock to be put into the same bracket as Lucius Malfoy. Was that how they saw him? Was that what he was like?

He swallowed. “They’ve tried to destroy the Ministry: I think we have bigger issues,” he said. He looked at Snape. “You were a spy: what do you think is best, as regards Mr Malfoy? Will it endanger him more, or less, if everyone knows?”

The release of tension was astonishing. Did they always walk on tenterhooks around him? Had he really been so – so volatile? Difficult?

“That is one half of the equation,” Snape said. “The other is whether he might reveal something
about us. As far as we know, however, Atkins is not known to have any skill at Legilimency, and conversely, I do know that Lucius is able at occluding.”

“Ask him if he’s willing to come, then,” his father said.

Not order him, James noted.

“And Nanette?” Albus asked.

“It seems rude, but I don’t feel – “

“Agreed,” Snape said.

“Do I get another hour’s sleep?”

“Yes, but I’m going to sit with you,” Snape said. “It might be a bit rough from now on.”

“I’m going to be hawking my guts up in front of our guests? While I’m green?” his father demanded.

“You’re used to embarrassing yourself,” Snape said, “you’ll get over it.”

Harry swatted his hand.

Albus snorted. “I don’t know if everyone else will. That stuff’s disgusting.”

“Better out than in. I’m channelling Gloria,” Snape sighed.

“Do you think someone ought to warn Scorp?” Albus asked, after he’d stopped chuckling. “It’ll be a helluva shock to just walk in.”

Harry nodded. “Could you go and see if his father will? Or you could go.”

“I’ll do it,” Albus said. “I wanted to ask Andy if his Mum has any views on the training hospitals, anyway.” He patted his father’s arm, and left.

James looked at the chess game, then up at Snape. He took a breath. “Want to take over Albus’ pieces? I ought to warn you, he’s losing.”

His father was quiet; Snape looked at the board.

“Prepare to crash and burn,” he said, sitting himself down in Albus’ chair.

James laughed.
Lucius followed Lily Potter along to the sitting room at Grimmauld Place.

Ronald Weasley entered just before them, and through the open door Lucius saw Potter, who appeared to be covered in green slime, sitting in a chair draped with a towel, presumably so that he didn’t ruin the upholstery.

Weasley took one look, performed an elaborate bow, and said, “Your humble servant, oh Alien Majesty. What planet did you say, again?”

“Don’t be daft,” George Weasley said, from the left, “he’s obviously monarch of the house-elves. About the right size, too.”

“Cheek!” Potter said, “You’re not supposed to mock the afflicted, you know.”

Lucius paused, quickly masking his astonishment.

“Mr Malfoy,” Potter said, standing. “Welcome.”

All heads turned to look at him.

“I can’t shake your hand,” Potter continued, flapping a green appendage at him, “but do take a seat.” He indicated a comfortable-looking arm-chair. “We normally sit in the kitchen round the table, but they’re worried I’ll keel over,” he said, apparently untroubled. “Everyone,” he said, looking round, “I’m asking you to put old feelings behind you. Lucius Malfoy has been acting as our spy since the start.”

“Why?” A man, obviously a Weasley, with a severely scarred face asked, staring at him coldly.

“Because his son was fitted up for Ginny’s murder?” Potter raised a brow, then went on, “Let’s get down to business, because the kids will tell you, my cough is disgusting, thanks to Severus’ potions, and you really don’t want to see it. Lucius, we’ll hold off on the formal introductions for today: I can never remember names when I’m told twenty in a row, anyway, can you? People, say who you are when you start speaking, if you think Lucius might not know you. Draco, you’ve had some interesting ideas: can you bring us up to date?”

Lucius settled himself into the chair and listened. He looked around the room as he did so.

He was not surprised to see Shacklebolt and Severus, the Potter children, and Weasleys of all descriptions, including the Granger-Weasley woman. Minerva McGonagall was a surprise, and next to her was a rather astonishing vision of a woman, dark-skinned, ample-bosomed, wearing an eye-dazzling outfit. He glanced from her to Shacklebolt. They didn’t look alike, but then Shacklebolt was bald. Hair, he thought, glancing at all the redheads, was such a defining feature. A head moved forward from behind the wing of a chair, and he did a double-take. Blond to the point of silvery -

Scorpius.

His grandson.
And beside him, the man he’d seen in court.

His lover.

They were helping Potter?

Draco was being allowed to outline events?

Draco had already explained the attack on the Ministry; all of them appeared to know the details from the reports in the papers. There were several gasps, though, as he explained about the Centennial Lift Maintenance, and the implications in terms of who was present. His son pulled out a parchment and put it on the coffee table.

“I got my hands on this: it’s an article for Witch Weekly, which as you might have noticed, is becoming more and more – traditional. Even so, it’s not their usual fare, and it’s pretty blatant: it refutes the article we printed today, about them not knowing about CLM, and insinuates that the halfbloods and Muggleborns knew all about it, and deliberately took advantage to bring down the Ministry.”

“How can they print that?” Lily Potter asked.

“Easy. No names, just a suggestion.”

“But they could all have been killed. If Harry hadn’t saved them. It doesn’t make sense,” Scorpius’ lover said. “Oh,” he looked at Lucius, and raised his head. “Andy Boniface.”

Lucius inclined his in acknowledgement.

“How did you know? What was happening?” Scorpius asked Potter, and then turned deliberately to his grandfather. “Scorpius Malfoy,” he introduced himself.

Lucius couldn’t fault the sarcasm.

Potter rolled his eyes. “I’ve been worried about the Ministry since Lucius first found out about Mrs Atkins’ involvement, and I’ve wandered around it several times – “


“Oh,” Potter said awkwardly. “I can go invisible. No-one knew I was there. Well, not until this week, actually. Theodore Nott saw right through it.”

“Theodore Nott? I’m Hermione Weasley, by the way, but you probably know that from court,” she said to Lucius. She turned back to Potter. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Potter nodded. “He’s an Unspeakable – “

“He was having you on! He works in the Muggle Liaison Office, or something,” Ronald Weasley shook his head. “Ron Weasley,” he said briefly.

“No, that’s a cover,” Potter said. “He saw me, just as if I wasn’t invisible. Said hi. And we had tea in his office. In the Unspeakables’ section. I was going to mention it at the next meeting. That he might be useful to help us. What?” Potter said.

Severus and Draco were looking at each other.
“I wouldn’t trust Nott with a knut,” Draco said. “Severus?”

“I would have to concur.”

“But – is this because he – ” Potter paused. “Hell, this is awkward! Because he didn’t side with the Death Eaters?”

Tension rose in the room. Lucius was aware of people not looking at him.

“He didn’t side with you either,” Snape said softly, looking at Potter. “Theodore is an extremely clever and manipulative person.”

“I don’t remember him ever being in trouble,” the Hermione woman said, her brow furrowed.

“No. From the very first year, Nott knew how to come out of anything as clean as a whistle,” Severus said. “There was never enough evidence to pin him down for any misdemeanour.”

“Nobody trusted him,” Draco said.

“Well, shit,” Ron said. “I’ve seen him around the building a bit. He’s always been – nice. Friendly, but in a sort of – don’t laugh - respectful way.”

Draco nodded. “Oh, he always knew how to play people,” he said.

“Did you tell him anything?” Shacklebolt asked.

“I don’t remember him ever being in trouble,” the Hermione woman said, her brow furrowed.

“Was it because he didn’t side with the Death Eaters?”

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“Did you tell him anything?” Shacklebolt asked.

“Yeah,” Potter admitted, going pale. “I mean, I played off that I was a bit concerned about the Ministry – said maybe I was a bit bonkers after being locked up there. What other explanation did I have for wandering round? But – I told him that his Dad was dead. I’m sorry,” he said. “I – I must be so bloody gullible – sorry, Ladies - “

“If you don’t know him, that’s what he’s all about,” Draco said.

“Did you tell him anything else?” Ron Weasley asked.

Lucius had to admit he was intrigued with the dynamics. Ron’s voice held sympathy, but he didn’t hold back on the blunt question, anymore than Shacklebolt had, or any of the others. The openness- the lack of guile and manipulation – was a new experience.

“That we found his Dad near the Giant’s Causeway,” Potter sighed. “He acted like he was really surprised – but he said his Dad had wanted to raise power for Voldemort. He even asked if Voldemort was still alive! God, I’m such an idiot!”

“You don’t think – I mean, there’s the Time Room down there, isn’t there?” Hermione said.

“Time Room?” Scorpius asked.

“There are time-turners. You don’t think – I mean, he can’t bring back Voldemort, can he?”

There was a horrified silence.

“You can turn back time?” Scorpius’ boyfriend asked.

“He’s dead,” Potter said flatly.

“I can see no reason why he’d wish to bring back the Dark Lord,” Lucius said quietly.
“Because he didn’t follow him when Voldemort was alive, there’s no reason to think that he would be interested in him now?” Minerva McGonagall posited.

“That, and the fact that if he was the least bit interested in the Dark Lord, he would know that his lack of – support – previously – when others his age were expected to do his bidding, would not go unpunished.”

Lucius stared straight ahead as he spoke, but he couldn’t help but notice that several people glanced at Draco and away quickly.

“Well, that’s a relief,” the Vision said. “I’m Gloria, by the way. So, Severus, do you think he’s likely to be involved with Mrs Atkins?”

“If it served his own interests, he could be,” he conceded.

“We’ll look into it,” Shacklebolt said. “He might be a red herring.”

“Don’t discount him, he’s slippery,” Draco warned, “and I hate to say this, but if he’s suspect, I’m concerned about his son. Josh.”

“In the club at Hogwarts? With my kids? You think he could be spying?” George Weasley, as usual, got straight to the point.

“Just because his father – ” Potter began.

“I know,” Draco said tightly. “But – it needs bearing in mind. I’d see whether your kids are having any contact with him over the holidays, George, and – it might be unfair, but - “

“Warn them?” George nodded. “Yeah.”

“Poor kid if he is straight up. Teddy,” a man with fluorescent blue hair said, introducing himself with a challenging look. His hair flicked to dark brown, and back again.

Lucius recalled that his wife’s niece had been a metamorphmagus. She’d been an Auror, and married the werewolf. He looked at the man, who stared straight back at him. Was this man his great nephew? He glanced from him to Draco, then to Scorpius and his partner. To find connections of his own family within the room was unexpected and unsettling. He had thought himself an outsider in this.

“Yes, but parents can’t help wanting to protect their own,” McGonagall commented, diverting him, and then there was silence.

Lucius was suddenly aware that everyone was avoiding looking at him.

That they all considered he had failed to protect his son.

He swallowed.

They were right.

“So, backing up a bit,” Gloria said, “how did you come to know about the fire, Harry?”

“Um,” Potter said. “Sorry, we got off track, and thank god we did. We’ll look into Nott, then? I mean, he might be alright.” He looked at Shacklebolt, who nodded. “Anyway, the fire: I was at the wedding in France, with Lucius and Atkins, except invisible, listening in to conversations. You know, lots of top-knobs and conspirators there. So, anyway, first, I overheard some of the
youngsters say they were surprised that Peter Stubbins wasn’t there – Sam Donnelly’s son, works in the Ministry Potions’ Department, if you remember, but had had a relationship with Léonie Laval in the past, so is part of the French connection. Then, after the wedding went to pot, when everyone was leaving – especially all the Ministers, and anyone worried about their reputation - Atkins wasn’t. Which was odd. And I realised it was giving her an alibi, and she was stringing it out, so I went to the Ministry."

“And it was on fire? But no-one was doing anything?”

“Not at that stage; you couldn’t tell in the atrium. But the lower levels were going up, and guess what? The Minister’s floor. I only discovered the fire when I apparated down, which was stupid, and why I look like this,” he said, pointing at his green visage.

“You’ll be alright?” a girl asked.

Potter nodded, glanced at Lucius, and said, “Yes, thanks, Victoire. Severus has me well in hand.”

There was a moment’s silence, and then Albus Potter sniggered.

“Oi!” Potter said, as chuckles began to circle the room.

Lucius could not hide his astonishment, but looking round, he noticed that Scorpius and his lover Andy were exchanging glances. Were they too surprised?

“So – Peter Stubbins. Did you rescue him?” Teddy asked.

Potter shook his head. “He wasn’t on the list.”

“But he had been in – and out – that afternoon,” Shacklebolt said.

“So you definitely need to find him,” Teddy looked at Shacklebolt.

“Yes, and surprise, surprise, the last time he was seen was leaving the Ministry yesterday. He never arrived home.”

“You’ll be following that up?” the scarred one said. “Bill Weasley,” he added, looking at Lucius, his face still cold.

Lucius remembered that he’d been attacked by Fenrir Greyback, and wondered if he too were a werewolf. Was he in a room with two such creatures? Did the trait pass on? Was no-one here bothered?

“Oh yes,” Shacklebolt nodded. “Watching his mother too.”

“The trouble is, Polyjuice, isn’t it? Hugo Weasley,” a boy said. “Who knows who anyone is, really?”

There was a moment’s silence.

“If a body turns up,” Ron Weasley said, “that’s when you know the identity for sure.”

“It’s a very good point – ” Potter said, and then began coughing. He tried to say something, but it looked like no breath was getting in.

“Look away and talk among yourselves,” Albus Potter said loudly, over the noise, as he grabbed the basin from beside his father’s chair and Severus leant Potter forward a little and began
pummelling his back from behind.

All eyes were riveted though, but then Hermione Weasley threw up an opaque screen.

To Lucius’ surprise, she turned and made polite conversation with him.

It was generous of her.

Five minutes later, the screen was down. Potter looked – exhausted.

Everyone was aware of it.

“I’ve told Harry to listen and not speak unless necessary,” Severus said, “and if we could be – concise – that would be wise.”

There was a moment’s quiet.

“I’m alright,” Potter said. “Don’t look so worried.”

“Peter Stubbins is a Pureblood, right?” Hermione asked.

“Yup,” Shacklebolt nodded.

“So why was he in on Centennial Maintenance Day, unless he was up to no good? And following on from that, we ought to check the records for who else – especially anyone else who was a Pureblood – went in to the Ministry.”

“Good point,” Shacklebolt nodded, waving to a quick-quotes quill to write it on a parchment beside him. “What else is essential for today?”

“Lucius,” Potter said.

All eyes turned to look at him.

Lucius controlled his muscles, and didn’t move. He raised an eyebrow at Potter, who turned to Shacklebolt.

“You tell?” he patted his chest.

Shacklebolt nodded. “I’m sorry that we’ve had to keep some of you in the dark – as you know, we all agreed that was best in the light of the dangers that knowledge can bring, both for yourselves, and for our spy. But events have moved on fast. Lucius is now very closely involved with Dorothy Atkins. I don’t want him being hurt in the crossfire. And the bottom line is, Harry is wondering whether it’s time to call it a day. The risks are increasing, and we know who our suspects are: Mr Malfoy has done a good job.”

Lucius didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know that Potter was thinking of stopping his task, though he was aware that things were going to be a lot more difficult after the events of the previous night.

“Sorry,” Bill Weasley said, “but in what way is this related to what happened last night?”

“As well as the fire, Harry mentioned the wedding. This was a wedding between Artur Brouchard, one of the French group, and Nanette Odont, daughter of Henri. We were concerned for Nanette’s safety. To cut a long story short, Miss Odont was being blackmailed into the marriage. Our attempt at interception failed. She is married to Artur. Mr Malfoy helped her escape, and she’s here.”
“Here in London?” Victoire asked, sitting forward.

“Here, playing with Allie, the elfling,” Lily nodded.

“And – she’s trustworthy? She wasn’t on Ron’s charts, was she?” Bill Weasley said, with some sarcasm.

“She’s only eighteen,” Lily said, defensively. “She’s not going to hurt anyone.”

“Your father was younger when he killed Voldemort,” Ron Weasley said. “How come she hasn’t been mentioned before?”

“That - that may be my fault,” Lucius said. “I – did not consider her part of the group.”

“And we’re supposed to trust your judgement?” Scorpius sneered, looking him in the eye.

“I trust his judgement in this,” Potter said firmly. “Lucius spoke to me about Nanette, I followed up a bit, and I didn’t think she was relevant to our investigation, so blame me. Artur Brouchard, as we know, is a bastard of the first order: he enjoys torture – “

“And he’s gay,” Scorpius said, standing up. “I’m disappointed in you, Harry. As for you, Grandfather – I thought you would’ve approved a homosexual marrying to hide his ‘sickness’. Isn’t that what you expected of me?”

The room fell silent.

No one stepped in to break it.

“I understand,” Lucius said slowly, “that the people in this room are, it seems, of a more liberal mind than I. I can hardly deny that I have long held - traditional - views on many aspects of our society. Despite my association with Mr Potter, I am not prepared to give up every view I have ever held with barely a thought.” He took a breath. The rising hostility was a thrumming power in the room. “I have compared your behaviour to Artur’s,” he said, looking at Scorpius, and ignoring the shocked gasps, “and meeting Miss Odont has made me realise how unfair it is for a woman to be married to such a man.”

There were cries of outrage.

Lucius looked at his grandson. “As a result, I must – admire – your convictions: I see now that it would be inappropriate for you to marry a woman, and having witnessed the general depravity of Artur’s behaviour, I can only applaud the honesty and discretion in which you conduct your own life.”

There was a stunned silence.

“I am truly grateful to Mr Potter,” he continued, “for taking in this child. I have no right to ask anything of any of you, but I do believe her to be badly wronged by her family and society, and in need of kindness and friends, and I trust that some, if not all of you, might extend one or the other to her.” He looked around the room. “She cannot return to France at present; if she is seen in London with Mr Potter’s family, it will undoubtedly raise questions that could harm my work in support of our ideals. She is, essentially, under house arrest for no fault of her own.”

“I’m happy to go chat with her,” Victoire said, breaking the awkwardness. “I know your French is really coming on, Lily, but she may be glad of another native speaker.”
“Thank you,” Lucius said, “I am sure she would appreciate that.” He looked round. “I am grateful for your concern for me, but if Nanette can be kept safe, I believe I still have a role to play. Henri knows I have taken her, but not where, as do the Brouchards. They have no idea, however, that I am linked to you, and feel that I am outraged because of the way in which her marriage was forced against her will. Others too were anxious at the wedding, when she accused Artur, and her aunt gave her away regardless.”

“She did?” another girl gasped. “Rose. Weasley, of course,” she touched her hair.

“Indeed, she did,” Lucius nodded.

“Wow. What was in it for the aunt?” James Potter asked.

“My thoughts entirely,” Lucius turned to him. His eyes ran over James before he continued, “Mrs Atkins is, I assume, our main focus at this point, rather than affairs in France?”

“If you’re willing to carry on, I’d be grateful,” Shacklebolt said. “We can’t pin anything on Atkins at present, and we don’t know what she’ll do next. But – if she was the brains behind this – well, Benningdean is still alive, the Ministry still exists – she’s not going to be a happy girl at all. And that will lead to mistakes.”

“Or a re-think on her strategies, at least,” Severus said. “She seems a cold woman. She may not react much. But if she makes new plans, she may wish to have help,” he looked at Lucius.

“And – you’re all going to trust him?” Andy said, his voice shaking slightly. “I’m sorry, Scorpius, Mr Malfoy,” he looked from his lover to Draco, “for offending you, but I don’t understand why. Not after – everything.”

Another silence followed.

Potter looked at Lucius. He nodded.

“He owns me,” Lucius said.
It was late the next afternoon when Ron and Kingsley arrived. Harry was in the lounge, watching an old film with Lily, Albus and Nanette. Like Draco, Nanette had never seen Muggle television before, and was glued to the screen.

Harry’s face was still green – he’d be able to finish with the ointment by the next morning. Ron’s and Kingsley’s however, were grim, and Harry got up at once, following them out to the kitchen, where Severus had commandeered the stove for brewing.

Severus took one look at Kingsley, waved his wand to cut off the heat, and came and sat at the table.

“I can see it’s bad news,” Harry said. “What is it?”

“Jemima came into The Leaky to get me,” Ron said. “She’s been into work – “

“She was well enough?”

“Yeah, well, I expect she should have stayed off another day or two, but she said she felt fine. Hasn’t been coughing up anywhere near as much gunk as you,” he shrugged. “Anyway, there was a lot of panic suddenly, you know, while they were doing the clean-up – right mess, I gather, what with the fire and then the water.”

Harry nodded.

“Bodies?” Snape said.

“We got out the gobstones people,” Harry said, “at the end.” His face darkened. “Who did we miss?”

“No mate, it’s not that,” Ron said, a quick hand on his arm. He looked at Kingsley. “I called Kingsley at once.”

“I got in touch with Benningdean. I think the Unspeakables were trying to keep it quiet, but he insisted on going to see. We both went with him,” he looked across at Ron.

“Go on,” Harry said.

“The Department of Mysteries was flooded,” Ron said, looking at Harry carefully.

“I know,” Harry said. “I’m sorry – the potions’ labs were on the same floor – “

“It’s not that,” Ron interrupted. “You know the – the Death Chamber?”

Of course Harry knew the Death Chamber.

His gut tightened.

“What?”

“The room was locked, so we know no-one floated in there – “

“You found a body?”
Ron nodded. “More than one. Peter Stubbins was there.”

Harry frowned. “In – in a locked room? Had he – could you tell – was he burnt?”

“No,” Kingsley said. “Not at all.”

“Oh god. He was locked in there and I flooded it – “

“No,” Ron said, “that’s not it. Harry,” he took a big breath, “there’s no easy way of saying this. There were lots of bodies in the room. We think – we think they floated back out from behind the Veil.”

Harry stared at him. And realised what he was saying. “Sirius.”

Ron nodded.

“I – he – they – they’re all dead?”

“Merlin, yes of course they are!”

“But,” Harry gripped the edge of the table, “do you know how they died, Ron? Were – were they alive behind there? Did I kill them all? Drown them all?”

There was a horrified silence. Ron gawped.


“I don’t think you did,” Kingsley interrupted. “I’ve seen the bodies, and they don’t look like they died from drowning. But I’ll get tests run. To put your mind at rest.”

“You won’t lie to me?”

“I won’t lie to you,” Kingsley agreed.

Harry looked up at Snape, who hadn’t said anything.

“You’re quiet.”

“I’m sorry you’re – upset - about Black,” he said. “But I believe the archway covered by the Veil is a final passing place. Also, your godfather was hit by an Avada Kedavra, before falling into it, was he not? Do not think they were alive behind it, and torture yourself – what sort of half-existence could that have been? Black had already spent half his life locked away – do not wish him alive at the expense of him having been imprisoned again.”

Harry stared at him. He knew Severus had never liked Sirius – could understand why. In the circumstances, his comments were thoughtful and practical. And perhaps what he needed more than Ron’s fearful treading, although of course Ron had had to suffer through his teenage angst and reaction to Sirius’ death.

He nodded. “Thanks.” He looked to the other two. “Thanks for coming to tell me. What’s going to happen?”

“They’re trying to identify the bodies, but some could be centuries old. I suspect the families will be contacted so that they can make burial arrangements. Although – you know, with all the seating ledges – maybe most of them – maybe it was a place of execution.”
Harry nodded again. “I’m not burying Sirius with his shitty family.”

“Too right,” Ron said.

“We ought to discuss the other implications. With regard to Stubbins,” Kingsley said. “If you’re up to it?”

“Yeah,” Harry nodded. “Of course I am. It – it was just a shock.” He straightened up. “What are you thinking? Someone – fucking Merlin! Someone pushed him through the Veil?”

Kingsley nodded. “I can’t imagine he chose to leap through. If he was involved in Ginny’s murder, he’s kept his head down, kept his cool. This is the scenario I’m thinking of, but shoot me down: I’m just – trying to work out what happened.”

Harry nodded.

Snape sat quietly.

Ron looked as if Kingsley had already discussed this with him.

“First off: he was logged in and out of the Ministry during the morning.”

“So – so do you think he went back? Or that – that - someone else – logged out in his place?” Harry asked.

“They’d have to be prepared to do that, wouldn’t they?” Ron said. “To have the Polyjuice at the ready; to have planned killing him?”

Kingsley nodded, but Harry shook his head.

They both looked at him.

“The reception guy – Dolph – it was his first week. Anyone could have told him they were someone else – he probably wouldn’t know who was who.”

“So it could have been on the spur of the moment,” Kingsley mused. “Okay. Well, we know for sure someone knew he was in, and left in his stead, so let’s assume he wasn’t working alone; nothing we know of him suggests he was particularly clever, or devious, or power-hungry.”

“So you think he was working with someone else? Apart from his mother?” Harry asked.

“We know his mother wasn’t there – assuming she wasn’t using Polyjuice, which of course, she could have been. But she and her husband went to a quidditch match, and stayed to socialize with old team-mates, which would be tough for an imposter to get away with. And we know Atkins was out of it, even if she was the guiding hand behind it, which again, we can’t be sure of: she was in France with you and Lucius.”

“So?” Harry said. He looked at them both. “Are you – are you really thinking – Nott? I know he works in the Department of Mysteries, but – “

“Yeah,” Ron said. “That’s what we’re thinking.” He looked to Kingsley to take up the idea.

“We know that Stubbins arrived before the lifts were shut down, and that Nott was in the building too – “

“He logged in?”
“No. Interesting, isn’t it? But I talked to the elves,” Ron said, “and he ordered some coffee. He was in.”

“Wow. So that’s – we don’t know how he did that?”

“He could have logged in as someone else, we’ll be checking that out,” Kingsley said. “As for him and Stubbins: they worked on the same floor: it’s more than likely that they knew each other. We don’t know enough about Nott yet, but let’s just go with the idea that he’s involved for the moment. Now, it could be that they were working together, or that each was reporting directly to Atkins without knowing the other’s role.”

Harry nodded. “I could see her playing it close to hand – I mean, the French lot didn’t even know who she was.”

“Yes, exactly. So, going with that thought, let’s say Stubbins sets up a potion with a time-delay that will ignite in the lab – this is supposition now, but with no-one else in, he’d have the opportunity to brew anything he wanted. His plan is to get it all set up before the lifts shut down for the rest of the day. He comes across Nott. Let’s say Nott invites him to have a bit of a look in the Department of Mysteries while it’s quiet: he’s not going to say no, is he? And if they were working together - maybe Nott told him there was a secret way out of the building? Which he may have, for all we know, as yet.”

“And what we think,” Ron said, “is that without knowing what the Veil was, it’s quite possible that Nott told him it was a portal and he just stepped straight in. Or else he just stepped in to have a look.”

“You – you hear voices from it,” Harry said. “If you’ve seen death.”

“Yeah, but that might just make him more likely to think there were people on the other side, wouldn’t it?” Ron argued.

“Possibly,” Harry said dubiously, remembering not just the eeriness of those voices, but the way that the Veil seemed to urge him to walk through it.

“Or Nott pushed him,” Ron finished bluntly.

“Why do we think he would do that?” Harry asked, after a moment.

“Atkins orders? Get rid of the weaker ones and any of them that know what she’s up to?”

“That – if that’s true,” Harry said, “- I mean, that’s just cold. And ruthless.”

“It doesn’t say much for Nott, either,” Snape said, “if he was willing to kill a young man, who was following orders and on their side, purely to get rid of the evidence.”

“Not to mention the elves,” Ron said, grim-faced.

“There were the goblins too,” Harry mused.

“What?” Kingsley and Ron said together.

“Oh shit, I forgot to tell you,” Harry said.

Kingsley raised an eyebrow.

“There were four goblins at the bottom of the lift shaft on Level 9: I couldn’t tell whether they were
alive or dead, but I think they were probably dead. Looked like they’d fallen down the shaft. I took them straight to Gringotts. They hadn’t been on the list either.”

“Blimey, I didn’t even think of them,” Ron said. “That was before I was there, yeah?”

Harry nodded.

“We’d better check that out. There’s been no mention of them in the press, which is a good thing,” Kingsley said. “If any of them are alive, and they know anything – “

“That would be brilliant,” Ron agreed. “Do you think they might have been pushed down the shaft? Or did it look like an accident?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said. He was quiet for a moment. “Do you think – I’m just – “

“Spit it out, Harry,” Ron said, “but without any of that muck,” he grinned.

Harry didn’t grin back. “We’ve been thinking that Peter Stubbins was the third man. Who killed Gin,” he clarified. “But does what we know of him suggest that he could do it?”

“If we’re right, he was planning to kill loads of people in the Ministry,” Ron said.

Harry nodded. “Yes, but he wouldn’t have had to see that. Killing Gin was – vicious, and cold-blooded. Physical.”

“You’re thinking a man who could push or lead another to his death, whilst all the time pretending to be his friend or ally – is a better candidate?” Snape asked.

Harry nodded. “I don’t know if he did, or if he killed the goblins, but – “

“I’ll kill him,” Ron said, through gritted teeth. “We went to school with him. He chatted to me in the canteen – “

“He chatted to me too,” Harry said. “He might be a hundred percent nice, but if he isn’t – isn’t that just the same sort of behaviour? Betrayal? Murder?”

“It sounds all too possible,” Snape said. “He would be an excellent partner-in-arms to Atkins, from what we know of her. Neither lets anything stand in their way, and they’re both completely amoral.”

“There hasn’t been any mention of him at all, though,” Harry said fairly. “Not through Lucius, or anyone.”

“And yet we seem to have Notts linked in everywhere else,” Ron said. “Old man Nott, Josh Nott… it all seems a bit too much to be coincidence.”

“We’ll look into him closely,” Kingsley said.

“What about the elves?” Harry asked. “Do they know who trapped them in their room?”

“A masked man,” Ron said, raising an eyebrow at Harry.

“The same – the same mask as at Gin’s - ?”

Ron nodded. “I drew them a picture. You know, of a head with the mask on.”
“Shit.” Harry looked up. “I don’t really understand – “

“They usually have a really quiet evening on the Lift Maintenance night, so they were all gathered there anyway. He started casting the spell around the space. Dolbi – the old one in charge – confronted him. He recognised the feeling of the spell as being like the one that kept them within the confines of the building. The man finished the spell even as he confronted him. The elves didn’t know what to make of it: he hadn’t hurt them, so they were just waiting for normal resumption of activities. They would have burnt to death,” Ron said grimly.

“Thank Merlin Benningdean remembered them,” Harry said. “He goes up in my estimation a hell of a lot for that. I was so busy thinking of the list, I didn’t even think – “

“Yeah,” Ron agreed.

“Benningdean is acting with sense and – leadership,” Kingsley said, rubbing a hand over his face.

Harry, looking at him, realised how very tired he looked. He knew that the previous evening, Kingsley had sat with him in the lounge as his children saw all the visitors off – and that Kingsley had fallen asleep in the chair.

Severus had come back into the room and just said, “He didn’t sleep at all last night. I slept in the armchair in your room, he just went back to the Ministry to keep his eye on things.”

The children had been behind Snape.

“I – couldn’t we do Dad’s pummelling tonight?” Albus asked. “So you can both get home?”

Snape shook his head. “I know what I’m doing, and it’s only another night. Your father should be fine then.”

“Why don’t you sleep in the link room?” Albus asked. “You and Kingsley? If you put a monitoring charm on Dad, you could be with him a second, through the bathroom. Or I could sit with him, and get you. Would Kingsley sleep through that? I won’t suggest Dad’s bed, because I can’t imagine any of you would get any rest while Dad’s covered in that stuff and coughing his guts up.”

“I – that’s very kind of you,” Snape said, glancing to the two behind Albus. “Kingsley can just go home, though, and the armchair is not uncomfortable.”

“Don’t – you’re doing that because of me,” James said gruffly.

They all went sharply silent.

“I have no wish to offend anyone,” Snape said. “I’m here to treat Harry, not abuse your home.”

“It – you are looking after Dad,” James said, “and – it – this – this is Dad’s home. I’m glad for what you’re doing for him. Please,” he said awkwardly. “There’s no need to be exhausted.”

“Then I’ll gladly take up the offer,” Snape said. “Thank you.”

“No,” James swallowed. “Thank you.”

Now, Harry wondered if Kingsley had not slept well in his house. Or if he just needed a bit more to
“If they’ve deliberately killed Stubbins, his mother will be next,” Snape said, breaking up Harry’s thoughts.

“Bloody hell!” Ron said. He looked at Kingsley. “Who’s going to tell her? That her son is dead.”

“Benningdean and Dowling – the chap who replaced Felton,” Kingsley said. “Benningdean and I have had a chat about it. He’s seeing the families of the gobstone team too, so it’s not out of the ordinary. Then they’ll see his father. If you’ve got any Polyjuice stores, Severus, I thought I’d go too, just as an anonymous Auror. It’ll be interesting to see how they all react.”

“Too right! If Samantha Donnelly killed Ginny because her husband left her, what’ll she do to whoever killed her son? And who will she hold responsible? Benningdean knows they have to make clear that the boy was killed by going through the Veil, yeah? Not that Harry had anything to do with it? Which he didn’t,” Ron added quickly.

“He does,” Kingsley said. “He’s up to speed on our suspicions: being nearly killed himself is going to make him cautious.”

“Well,” Snape said, “I think we’ll know shortly whether Atkins and Samantha Donnelly are in league together.”

They all looked at him.

“If they were, Donnelly is either going to give her up, or kill her. If Atkins doesn’t kill her first.”

“Does Atkins know? About the bodies?” Harry asked.

“Rumours spread like wildfire in the MLE,” Ron said, “and if she has a pet Unspeakable too …. Anyway, everyone will know soon.”

“True. It’ll be interesting to see if she hikes up her security,” Harry said. “I presume she’s being watched?”

“Oh yes,” Kingsley nodded. He stood up. “Well, I need to be going. I’ll see you later, hmm?” He touched Harry’s arm.

“I’ll come and get you some Polyjuice,” Severus said, getting up.

“So,” Ron said, looking at Harry after the two had left the room. “It’s – er - it’s all happening, then? You know, with Kingsley and Snape?” He gestured with his head towards the door.

Harry raised a brow. “How did you come to that conclusion?”

Ron shrugged. “I’m right, aren’t I?”

“Yeah,” Harry smiled.

“Oh. Right. You – you’ve done the dirty, then?” Ron looked a bit taken aback after all.

“Do you really want to know all the delicious details?” Harry teased.

“What? No! No way!”

“Well then,” Harry said. He grinned at Ron, as his friend went bright red. “It’s – I’m really happy,
Ron.

“Well,” Ron said brusquely, “that what matters, eh? Good. Yeah. Hermione will be pleased.”

“Is Hermione alright? I haven’t seen her so much, and she looks – I mean, she looks great, but – ”

“Yeah, yeah, she’s fine,” Ron said. “We must get together. Catch up.”

“I was wondering about having everyone to dinner, or something,” Harry said, “but ‘cos we’ve been having all these meetings here, I don’t want it to be about - you know, I don’t mean forgetting Ginny, but – just a chance to all have a nice meal together. You and us, and Kingsley and Severus, hopefully, I haven’t asked them yet, and your parents – do you think they’ll come?”

“Er – you making this thing – sort of obvious, then?” Ron asked.

“This thing?” Severus said, coming back into the room.

Ron went red again.

“He means our relationship. I was just wondering about having people to dinner – you and Kingsley, if you will, the family, Ron’s, the grandparents.”

“You’re taking the bull by the horns?”

“I’m not hiding it,” Harry shrugged, “but it might be too soon – and maybe too much - for Ron’s parents?”

“It might be,” Ron said. “Why don’t I sort of feel them out?”

“Would you? Thanks, that’d be great. I – I don’t want to lose them, y’know, but I don’t want to offend them either.”

“There’s no hurry, is there?” Snape said, looking at Harry.

Harry looked at him and grinned, reassured by what he wasn’t saying. “Nah,” he agreed, “I can wait twenty years. And the rest. James has – I’m hoping – sort of accepted it a little, and no offence, Ron, but he’s the only one who really matters.”

Outside the door, James, who’d just got in from work, paused. His father – his father saw this as a really long-term relationship, then.

And yet – after everything that’d been said – after everything that he’d said – his father still cared what he thought.

He waited quietly as the conversation moved on, then entered the room, bright and breezy.

“Urgh, Dad! Still green?”

“It suits him, don’t you think?” Ron said, turning round. “Can’t see his face. Got to be an improvement.”

“Bastards,” Harry said, grinning.
At the stove, Snape glanced around at James. He’d been aware of him at the door, and he was pretty sure Harry had been too.

James came over, cautiously, and ventured a peek in the cauldron. His nose wrinkled. “Merlin, what on earth is that?”

It was an offer of acceptance.

Snape took it.

The next morning, Harry found himself under a cool shower. Severus was carefully washing the ointment off his face and out of his hair, standing behind him to work his fingers through his scalp.

“Urnnghh,” Harry said, as his head was rested back against Snape’s chest.

Below, Kingsley was crouched down, his mouth wrapped around Harry’s cock.

Harry felt Snape behind him, hand doing something…

“Open your legs a little wider,” Snape said in his ear.

Harry did so, but tensed a little.

“Don’t be silly,” Snape slid a soothing hand over his chest, fingers stretching between his nipples. “I’m not going to take you now. When we do that, it’s going to be long, and slow, and you’re going to be riding me, so you have all the control, all right?”

Harry nodded, relaxing, his mouth turning to Severus’ for a kiss, his hand on Kingsley’s head. He could barely think.

He felt Severus’ cock slide between his legs, and gasped into his mouth. A hand down his hip and he brought his legs together, trapping Severus’ cock. Severus’d obviously applied some waterproof lube, because he slid backward, then rocked forward again, his cock sliding along Harry’s perineum and nudging his balls.

“Oh god,” he gasped, into Snape’s mouth.

Kingsley sucked harder.

Snape rocked again, and again.

“I’m gonna –”

“Yes, that’s it,” Snape said, mouth on his neck, as Harry looked down, seeing Kingsley, and both his and Snape’s hands on his head.

He came.

As reality returned, Kingsley gently gave a last lick, Harry’s now over-sensitized cock jolting. Kingsley stood up, smiling, and kissed him.

It was strange to taste his own come in another’s mouth, but he then watched in disbelief as
Kingsley stretched over his shoulder, kissing Snape.

Kingsley’s cock slid against his stomach. He realised that Snape had moved his, no longer brushing his sensitive balls, but now encased in the crack of his arse.

“Oh god,” he said again.

“Alright?” Kingsley asked.

“You – your cock – and Severus’,” he gasped.

“Hurting?” Kingsley pulled away a little.

Snape reached round, coating Kingsley with the lube. Harry watched his hand, white on dark skin, Severus’ thumb slicking over the head, his hand sliding firmly down the shaft.

He could feel Kingsley’s thighs against his as he pushed into it.

The water continued to beat down on them.

“So – so hot,” he gasped.

“You like it?”

“Yeah,” he said, feeling himself begin to harden again; Snape’s hand slipped over him, slick and encouraging, and Harry put a hand round Kingsley, pulling him in, and the other back behind Severus, and then they were moving together, more and more urgently…

Later, as they were drying off, Kingsley said, “Well, that was inventive.”

“Yeah - Snape made a step for me! I didn’t even realise!” Harry said, in some mortification.

“My knees were killing me,” Snape said, smirking. “You’re short.”

“And that wasn’t quite the sort of inventive I meant,” Kingsley laughed, “but it worked, didn’t it?”

Harry snorted, bending over to towel his legs and forgetting his embarrassment. “I’ve come twice and it isn’t even seven thirty yet: I’ve not really got anything to complain about, have I?”

“Well, you might have to wait till this evening for a third,” Snape said, eyeing the curve of Harry’s behind, and smiling at Kingsley who was doing the same.

Harry gasped.

“Or do you want us to go home?” Snape asked.

“No!”

They both laughed.

Harry blushed.

“In my bed tonight, yeah? All of us? Now I’m clean? Or do you need to get back to the house?”
“Later this week, but we’ll stay here with you if you’re really alright about it.”

“I think you’ve sort of been accepted here – if you go, we might have to start again,” he said. “Let’s just go on as if this is our normality, I want it to be our normality.”

“Perhaps,” Severus said, “you might like to bring Lily and Nanette to Villa Olorosa in a few days. They might like the change of scene.”

“I – are you sure?” Harry asked.

“They’ll entertain each other, I imagine,” Kingsley said, “and I expect Albus will be glad to have the house to himself to – entertain in.”

“I bet,” Harry chuckled.

They headed downstairs.

“Are you not going back today?” he asked Severus. “To work? I’m all better and your lab stuff is there…”

“I want to keep my eye on you for one more day,” Snape said. “Your cough isn’t entirely gone, and there are two patients at St Mungo’s from the Ministry who are also needing some additional potions. If you don’t mind me working in your kitchen?”

“Course I don’t,” Harry said, as they opened the door.

Sitting neatly at the table was Nanette.

“Good morning, Nanette! You’re up early,” Harry said, with the slight slowness needed for her to understand.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Mr Potter? I didn’t recognise you without – “ she waved a hand around her face. “Good morning, Messieurs,” she said to Kingsley and Severus, with a shy smile.

Greetings were made and they all sat down to eat. Mitty, Dinky and Allie were in attendance.

Harry couldn’t help thinking how bizarre it was that Nanette was seeking refuge from her gay husband, and was instead sitting with three gay men.

She seemed to accept them with equanimity; he wondered if she knew they were together.

Kingsley ate quickly and headed off.

“Are you alright being here?” Harry asked. “I know it must feel like you’re a prisoner, and I’m wondering what we could do to help?”

“You are already so kind,” she shook her head. “I do not wish you to have to worry about me.”

“I wonder if I could make a suggestion?” Snape said.

They both looked at him.

“Firstly, I could provide Polyjuice, if you’re prepared to undergo the unpleasant taste and the transformation. Then, perhaps, you could go shopping with Lily. No one would think anything of Lily speaking French to someone, now that she is attending Beauxbatons. Secondly, and if you’ll forgive the impertinence, I know a little of your…condition. If you wish to discuss it with me,
today would be a most sensible time, as I am here…”

She went bright red. “You – you are most generous – “

“I have to tell you,” Snape said gently, “that the chances of me being able to help are very small.”

“But – but she could see a mediwitch too, couldn’t she? To check things out – “

“I don’t think a visit to St. Mungo’s would go unnoticed – “

“Andy’s mother,” Harry said.

“Ah. That’s a reasonable suggestion. And I have to call in to St. Mungo’s to deliver some potions. I could speak to her, and see if she’ll make a house-call.”

“I – I have no - I need to arrange access to my vault, but I don’t know how – ” Nanette said in embarrassment. “And – there is no hurry. I – “

Harry interrupted. “Neither of us want to force you to do something against your will, Nanette, but please, don’t worry about money. It isn’t a problem at all, and Susan Boniface is very down to earth – I went to school with her, and her son Andy is Scorpius Malfoy’s partner – “

“Monsieur Malfoy’s grandson?”

“That’s right,” Harry nodded.

Severus twinkled at him. Any mention of the Malfoy name seemed to be a stamp of approval for Nanette.

“Do you really think she would come?”

“I’ll ask,” Snape said.

The day passed quickly. Susan took a late lunchbreak and spent it with Nanette and Severus.

“I’m sorry, my dear,” she said, sitting beside Nanette at the kitchen table. She had examined her upstairs, and had then conferred with Severus. “I’m so awfully sorry. I’m afraid we aren’t able to reverse the situation. You will not be able to bear children.”

Nanette nodded. “I saw many mediwizards in France: they said the same thing. I did not expect anything different. I am sorry to have wasted your time -”

“You haven’t wasted it in the least,” Susan smiled.

Nanette had taken to this no-nonsense woman, who hadn’t fussed about her as many of the others had.

“There is much happiness in life to be had, without children,” Susan said. “Don’t let this stop you doing what you want to do.”

“Most men wish to marry to continue their line,” Nanette shrugged.

“Well, if they do, they’re not the right man for anyone!” Susan said sharply, startling Nanette.
Susan put her hand over hers. “What I’m trying to say, is that no man should be looking for the mother of his children first, rather than a wife. What sort of relationship is that?”

“A usual one?”

Susan snorted. “I do understand that passing down the line has always been important to the old families,” she said. “My own and my husband’s included. But we married for love.”

“But you have a son.”

“Yes, but he won’t be having any children. He loves another man.”

Nanette nodded. “Scorpius Malfoy, yes?”

“That’s right,” Susan agreed.

“But – they might split up one day – they’ll both have the families that they should – “

“Oh, I hope not!”

“N –no?” Nanette stared at her.

“They love each other – you have to see it to realise. I can’t imagine Andy without Scorpius. I mean, I know couples do break up, but – they’re so very happy together. I couldn’t wish for more for my child.”

“But – what about grandchildren? The family line?”

“We might have grandchildren, if our daughter decides to produce any, but the line –” she looked at Nanette; “of course my husband was a little disappointed to think that there would be no more Bonifaces, but he loves Andy, and we both love Scorpius.”

“You –” Nanette started, and then stopped, looking down.

“You can say anything you like,” Susan said gently. “Goodness knows, you’ve had to answer my intimate questions.”

“You – you’re young. You could have more children.”

Susan laughed. “Well, we could, I suppose, but I like my job, and I like my family as it is.”

“You –” Nanette glanced at her. “You don’t worry that your husband might look for another wife? I’m sorry -”

“No, no, that’s a fair question. But it comes back to what I said at the start: my husband married me for me, not just to produce heirs. What I’m trying to say is that even fertile people can’t guarantee what will happen – even if they have children, they might lose them to illness or war, or indeed, to the child’s own – circumstances. We can’t have children just to expect them to be breeding machines. This family line business is all a bit silly. Somewhere or other, there’ll be a distant relative carrying on that name, probably. Kingsley has brothers carrying on the Shacklebolt name, doesn’t he, Severus? And you? Is there anyone else?”

Severus, who had made himself available, but was stirring a potion quietly, adding the odd ingredient, turned round. If Nanette hadn’t known before, she would now. “Yes, plenty of Shacklebolts. As for my family, my father was a Muggle – and unless you’re from the nobility, which he wasn’t, Muggles really aren’t concerned about passing on the line.”
“Do – do you mind me asking - ?”

“Go right ahead,” Snape said. “As Susan says, we’ve invaded your privacy. I won’t answer if I don’t wish to.”

“Do – you – you are in a relationship with Monsieur Shacklebolt? That is, you won’t be having children? Does – does it not bother you? Apart from the hereditary side? Because – ” she looked down, and they waited while she swallowed. “I think perhaps I am not a – proper – that is, I am not at all bothered!” she exclaimed. “I know you have been so kind to try and help me – but – I – it is bad to say it – I don’t care that I cannot have children!”

There was a silence.

“You are disgusted with me,” she said, rising, “I am so sorry – ”

“Not at all,” Snape cut across her. “I was just thinking. You’ve raised some very interesting points indeed. Let me start at the beginning of your questions: yes, I’m in a relationship with Kingsley – and now Harry too, and here he is,” he said, as Harry opened the door.

“Alright if I join you, or shall I go away?”

They looked to Nanette. “Of course it is your house – ”

“That’s not the point at all,” Harry stayed at the door.

Nanette was looking from Harry to Snape. “You – three of you are in a relationship?”

“Yup,” Harry said, coming in. “Bit bizarre, isn’t it?”

“Merlin,” Susan said, “you don’t do things by halves, Harry!”

He grinned. “I’m lucky, aren’t I?”

“It – I – I have never heard of such a thing before,” Nanette said. “I must be very naïve.”

“Not at all,” Susan said. “I thought I’d seen it all, but obviously not.”

“Back to your question,” Snape said, turning from the stove and handing them all a cup of tea, which he’d been making at the same time, “I never really thought about children. Before – I was a spy, like Lucius – apart from having no love-life, having a family wasn’t something I could have even considered.”

“Yeah, but you did teach kids,” Harry said.

“Maybe that was compensating, then,” Nanette said.

“I don’t think so,” Susan grinned at Harry, who snorted.

“How – what do you mean?” Nanette looked from one to the other.

“Susan means,” Snape said, “that when they were both my pupils, they may have found me a trifle…strict.”

“You taught them? Strict is good in a teacher, no?”

“Read that as grumpy,” Harry grinned, though the smile fell away. “He had good reason.”
“Now, though,” she said, looking from Snape to Harry, “you – you have gained children,” she said, “n’est-ce pas?”

Harry looked at Snape. He hadn’t thought of it like that, but Snape was very good with the kids. Patient.

“That’s an interesting view,” Snape said, “and also, an option that might come your way. But to come back to your concern – I don’t think it the least odd that you don’t feel concerned about having children – why should you? And in the circumstances, it’s foolish to waste time on guilt: be glad of it.”

She nodded. “That is what I thought. I have a new life to make, do I not?”

“You do,” Harry said. “And you have friends to support you.”

“You’re very kind,” she gave him a shy smile, then turned to Susan. “Madame? Would it be an – an imposition – if I asked whether you knew of any Healer’s that might wish to take on an apprentice? I have a little skill, and Lucius suggested that perhaps I could develop it – “

Scorpius sat, Andy at his side, in his father’s study. He was glad Gloria wasn’t around; she was nice enough, but a bit overpowering, and he needed to speak to his father.

Draco ran his hand over his head, a sure sign of stress.

“I can’t – I understand all about keeping him safe – but – did you think I’d give Grandfather away? I thought you thought better of me than that, Dad.”

“Of course I didn’t think that! I didn’t know myself to begin with – Father never said anything. Not that we – I don’t see him, as you know. Potter told me. That’s why I went to get Potter after you told me about seeing him in that pub. I thought he might tell you then. It wasn’t my secret to tell, Scorpius – either that he was spying, or that Potter now owns the entire Malfoy fortune.”

“You don’t care about that, do you?” Scorpius asked. “You’ve done very well without it. I thought you didn’t want his money?”

“I don’t. I wouldn’t have touched it. But I would have left it in trust for you – “

“I don’t want it!”

“ – I thought it would be a ” - Draco stuck his thumb to his nose - “ to him after his attitude towards you.”

Scorpius laughed, relaxing. “I really don’t give a shit about his money, or Malfoy Manor, or wherever else he has. We’ve got along without them all these years, haven’t we? I have everything I need,” he said, a hand touching Andy’s leg.

Andy turned and cast him a beaming smile.


“I wish you’d call him Harry,” Scorpius interrupted. “You sound like you still hold a schoolboy grudge when you call him that.”
“Thanks,” Draco raised an eyebrow at his son. “I do.”

Andy laughed, and Scorpius grinned.

“Not that he wasn’t saving my life even then,” Draco sighed. “Look, Harry felt you knowing could put you both at risk - ”

“How?”

“Because if anyone saw you being nice to Father, they’d see something odd in it, after all these years: everyone knows we don’t talk. And also, if anyone thought you were chummy, they’d be more likely to hurt you to find out information about him – “

“I could stand it – “

“No.”

The flat tone of Draco’s voice halted Scorpius in his tracks.

“Potter – Harry - was a prisoner in Malfoy Manor. Granger was tortured here. I witnessed – “ he swallowed. “Even if you could stand it – what if they tortured Andy to get information from you?”

Scorpius stared at Andy, grasping his hand, and back at his father, who had stood up, his back to them.

“I don’t – I can’t – I can’t have anyone else being hurt,” Draco said. “And if keeping you out of it was part of that – “

Scorpius nodded. His father was normally so calm, and seeing him distressed –

“But we know now,” Andy said.

“Yes,” Draco said heavily. “I – I don’t understand Po – Harry - how he can – he feels responsible, despite everything – “

“Did – he and your father actually fight each other, back then?” Andy asked, “Or was it – you know – just being on opposite sides?”

“My father gloated over his capture. I saw it. And they’d fought before, more than once – “

“When Harry was a kid and your father a man?”

Draco nodded. It was only when he’d had Scorpius, that he’d realised how appalling that was: that Potter had been hounded and hurt when he was still at school.

“He – you don’t think Harry is – setting him up?” Andy said tentatively.

“He could just have taken his life, straight off, for mine. That was what my father offered him: all his possessions and his life: that’s the terms of the trade.”

“Grandfather must love you then, despite everything,” Scorpius said.

Draco just looked at him.

“He –“ Scorpius said slowly, “he did it because of me? Because I won’t have children? I’m glad I’m a pouf, then!”
“Oh, Scorp,” Draco grinned.

“He just expects you to remarry?” Andy asked.

“I expect I will,” Draco said.

There was a shocked silence.

“Er – no offence, but – isn’t Gloria a little old to have kids? Not that I know about these things,” Scorpius said.

Draco laughed.

Later, reclining in Andy’s arms, sated and sweaty, Scorpius pressed a kiss into Andy’s chest.

“Thank you.”

Andy hugged him tighter. “I could say it was my pleasure too,” his voice was smiling.

“You – that was exactly what I needed.”

Andy had been slow, and patient, and thorough, worshiping Scorpius’ body, showing him exactly how much he loved him; how much he valued him.

“I – I understand, but – it hurts. Like they couldn’t trust me.”

Andy stroked Scorpius’ shoulder, soothing and encouraging. “I think it was more that they cared about you too much,” he said.

“Grandfather certainly doesn’t, and Harry hardly knows me.”

Yeah, but Harry cares about everyone,” Andy teased.

Scorpius snorted, and wriggled closer. “So – that business with Severus – is Harry really one of us, then? And Kingsley didn’t seem upset.”

“I think they’re together. All three of them,” Andy, who’d been watching the interaction closely, said.

“Really?” Scorpius got up on his elbow to look at Andy, who waggled an eyebrow at him.

Andy loved how naïve Scorpius could be.

“Blimey. Once we were the adventurous ones. Now Dad’s dating a woman old enough to be his grandmother, I should think, and Harry’s having a threesome.”

“Don’t forget your grandfather and the girl.”

Scorpius, who’d been settling down again, sat upright. “You do not think Grandfather is having a thing with that girl? She’s like, eighteen, isn’t she? And she’s married!”

“Just teasing,” Andy grinned, “I’ve not even met her. But he seems to have put himself at a lot of risk for some strange kid.”
The implication that he’d never put himself out for Scorpius hung in the air a moment, but Scorpius decided to focus on the topic at hand.

“Merlin, I thought you knew something there!” Scorpius scolded. “I think we need to introduce ourselves, don’t you?”

“Because of your grandfather?”

Scorpius paused, noting the tone of Andy’s voice. “Yeah, alright,” he said. “Because she’s alone and I speak French and we can be friendly.”

Andy snorted, and this time his tone was amused. “And because you just want to check she isn’t your grandfather’s hottie.”

“You’re trying to make me sick, aren’t you?” Scorpius said, settling into the curve of Andy’s body again.

“Stranger things have happened,” Andy said lightly. “Glory, glory hallelujah,” he began to sing quietly.

Scorpius biffed his fist against his ribs. “You don’t think they’ll stay together, do you?”

“Would you care?”

Scorpius lay there, thinking. “I suppose not. She’s a bit much for me, but I expect I’d get used to it.”

“Your Dad has always been very supportive of us,” Andy said.

“Yeah,” Scorpius agreed, soothing a hand over Andy’s nipple. His finger tugged on Andy’s nipple ring. “I really like this. I don’t know why, I can’t help thinking about it. Being there. Wanting to do this,” his leant forward, slipping his tongue through the ring, and tugging gently.

Andy groaned. “Good. I like you thinking about me,” he said, his body arching, encouraging.

Some time later, they were once again laying back, panting. “We need a shower,” Scorpius said, slicking a hand down his sweat-sheened chest, and through the come spattered on his belly.

“Yup,” Andy said.

Neither moved.

“Do you think Dad and Gloria go at it more than once? I mean, couldn’t she have a heart attack at her age?”

“I’d be more worried about her suffocating your Dad with those bosoms,” Andy said.

“Oh, Merlin’s bollocks,” Scorpius laughed, “I really did not need that visual!”

“I could do without the thought of either of them at it at all, thanks,” Andy said. “Especially after that.”

“Yeah, sorry,” Scorpius said, grinning.

Another silence.
“How – do you think – I mean – Harry and Severus and Kingsley?”

“How does a threesome work?”

“I – not really. I don’t know. I – it’s just hard to take in.”

“You’re not interested?” Andy said, voice devoid of intonation.

Scorpius turned his head and looked at him, then leaned up and kissed him very thoroughly. “I can’t imagine ever – ever – wanting to share you, with anyone. I can’t imagine ever wanting anyone else. I love you, Andy. We’re – complete. Us two. Aren’t we?”

Andy smiled, and reached up to kiss Scorpius some more. As Scorpius settled back, happy and content, Andy said, “Yeah, fair enough. I won’t bother asking them if we can get together to try out a fivesome then. What? Ow!” he laughed, as Scorpius began attacking him with the pillow.

It was a week that seemed quiet, and yet full of building expectation. The clan seemed to gather at Grimmauld Place every night.

Lucius was surprised, on arriving one night, to see all the young people gathered in the sitting room, watching something on a Muggle television. Nanette was pointing something out to Scorpius.

James, he noticed, was watching her.

She should be with these young people.

He’d been paying morning calls to Nanette, but perhaps he could tail that off now, as she found herself new friends. He would still keep her informed of her father, of course, but his own efforts were now concentrated in London.

He’d sent Atkins an owl the day after the Ministry burnt down – light in tone, solicitous, supportive. That evening, he’d sent her flowers – scented stocks – ‘to offer something delicate after the horrid smoke.’

She’d sent him a thank-you note, and a suggestion to meet for lunch.

She’d been cool, and calm, and he could see, utterly furious. He didn’t ask. She was too jumpy, too on edge.

That was good.

The papers were full of rumour and speculation about the cause of the fire, discussion on the lack of safety measures, the inappropriateness of the temporary locations of the Ministry, the timescale for repairs, and the shocking details of the bodies in the Department of Mysteries.

As the week rolled on it became clear that it was not going to be possible to identify the twenty-four bodies that had been recovered in the Veil room. Their clothing had been dated from the fifteenth century onwards. The suggestion was made (and quickly shot down) that a single funeral would be appropriate. Some conservationists caused uproar by wanting to inspect (and retrieve) the
perfectly preserved costumes.

People wrote in in outrage asking what such a dangerous item as the Veil was doing in the Ministry in the first place. More importantly, respect for the grief of international quidditch player Phillip Stubbins, and his ex-wife, ex-league player and Hogwarts’ professor Samantha Donnelly, gave way to questions about what Peter Stubbins had been doing in the Ministry on CLM day, and how he had happened to fall through the Veil, which, reports had discovered, was kept in a locked room in the Department of Mysteries.

Speculation noted that he worked on the same floor, and could have inadvertently left a potion simmering before falling accidentally through the Veil, had someone left the door open and he’d been curious. Other writers suggested he had set the fire deliberately and gone through the Veil in an attempt at suicide. A third theory suggested that someone had deliberately pushed him through when they realised what he’d been doing.

The MLE said that the investigation would be thorough, that they were not prepared to comment at this time, and that its condolences were with the bereaved parents.

Harry decided to bury Sirius separately, beside his own parents. His father’s family had taken Sirius in when he’d run away from home, and his parents had loved him enough to make him Harry’s godfather. Sirius, in turn, had left Harry his home, as if Harry had been his son. It seemed right.

Benningdean allowed for the body to be released, and on the Friday, a small group of them stood by the graveside in Godric’s Hollow. His children were there, Kingsley and Severus, Ron and Hermione and other Weasleys, and even Molly and Arthur. He was delighted to see Hagrid, and also Minerva, Aberforth Dumbledore, and Dedelus Diggle, who had all been members of the Order of the Phoenix with Sirius. To his surprise, Scorpius also came.

“I hope you don’t mind,” Scorpius said. “I know I never knew him, but he was related to my grandmother, and we thought one of us ought to bid him on his way.”

Harry was touched that the Malfoys had discussed it and done everything they could to be inoffensive, whilst showing that the family wanted to pay due respect and make the important farewells that wizarding custom so valued.

“You’re very welcome,” Harry said, and was pleased to see the relief on Scorpius face.

The service was quick and unfussy. Harry knew that Ron and Hermione were still a little unsure of his reactions, but so much time had passed. And having had his own children, he realised how little he had really known Sirius, and how desperate he must have been for affection to so willingly want to live with someone who was almost a stranger. All the same, Sirius had offered him a home and care, and he valued and appreciated the kindness his parent’s old friend had shown him.

Afterwards, they’d had a picnic in the field that lay between the ruins of his parents’ house and the graveyard. Harry hadn’t been to Godric’s Hollow for years, though he had taken his children when they were younger to see their grandparents’ graves, and the village where they’d lived. James had been filled with gory excitement at the ruins of the house, demanding, “So this is where they were killed? Right here? Or was it here?” And he’d jumped two feet to the side, waving a twig, and shouting “Expelliarmus!” at the air. Somehow, his childish glee in the horrible had taken the
shadows of the past and given them a good shaking, letting light and sorrow and relief wash over it and sweep the grimness away.

Children had that affect, Harry had found.

Later that afternoon, Harry, Lily and Nanette had floo-ed through to Spain. The girls had been more than happy to share Gloria’s room, and had explored the little estate, apparating back to the house to fetch their swimming cossies so that they could have an evening dip in the river.

Harry, Severus and Kingsley had enjoyed a good bottle of wine, and olives, and just the pleasure of relaxing on the patio as the evening drew in.

Later, Harry had found himself the object of a combined assault on his senses by Severus and Kingsley. He’d allowed himself to revel in their attention, luxuriate in their skilled fingers and mouths.

“That feels so dirty,” Harry gasped, “fucking brilliant, it is!”

The position probably looked awkward, if anyone had walked in, but the door was well warded and actually, it wasn’t a contortion at all. He was kneeling straddling Severus, their cocks rubbing deliciously against each other, and Severus had his legs draped over the end of the bed. Kingsley was kneeling on the floor, and somehow he seemed to be applying his tongue to Harry’s rear and Severus’ balls almost in the same lick.

“We need a mirror,” he shuddered, as another swipe of tongue had him thrusting back towards Kingsley, his cock sliding over Severus’ as he moved.

“Exhibitionist,” Severus said, reaching up to bite his neck, at the same time making a motion with his fingers.

Both of them looked.

“Oh god,” Harry said, seeing them in the reflection Severus had just created. “Oh god, that’s amazing.”

“You taste amazing,” Kingsley said, drawing back a little to look at them. “Severus too,” he leaned forward, nudging Harry up with his nose and applying his mouth to Severus.

“I – I don’t know how you can say that,” Harry said, “I hope I only taste of cleaning spells – ungh!”

Severus had reached between them and taken their cocks in his hand. He could feel Kingsley behind them, and looked over his shoulder; Severus was sliding further down the bed and he shifted to keep his balance. He looked in the mirror, and realised that Kingsley was sliding his fingers into Severus.

“Oh god,” he said again. Then – “shall I get out of the way?”

“You’re not in the way,” Severus growled, stroking his thumb over the heads of their cocks, his other hand on the inside of Harry’s thigh.

And then he felt Kingsley coming to his feet, watched in the mirror as he slid in, felt Severus
arching under him; Kingsley’s arm reached out and hauled him back against him, his back to Kingsley’s chest.

“Wet your fingers and pinch Severus’ nipples,” Kingsley said into his ear.

He took a last fleeting glimpse in the mirror, seeing the huge power of Kingsley’s thighs and buttocks driving into Severus, lifting them both, and then he leant forward, his tongue stroking over Severus’ in a change to instructions, his teeth nipping, and there was no more thought, only fire and motion and pleasure.

They collapsed, shortly after, in a tangle of limbs. When they’d got their breath back, Harry crawled off Severus, and up the bed. They followed him, one on either side.

Harry felt relaxed, tired, energised, all in one go. They settled a bit. He shifted. Shifted again a moment later.

“What is it?” Kingsley asked. “Are you alright?”

Harry blushed. “Uh,” he said.

“Yes?” Severus’ eyes opened, shaking off the sleep.

“I – nothing.”

“Don’t be daft. Wasn’t it good?” Kingsley asked gently.

“Bloody amazing,” Harry said. “You’re so strong.” He reached out and put his hand on Kingsley’s bicep.

It didn’t even go half-way round.

“Let’s not have secrets in bed,” Severus said. “Or anywhere else, come to that.”

“My – my arse – it’s sort of – I’m aware of it. Damp. Wriggly,” he covered his face in his hands.

“Did you like it?”

“You know I did.”

“Would you like something more?” Severus asked, voice deep.

“More?” Harry gulped. “Now?”

“Would you like more now? Maybe just my fingers? To see how it feels? You’re already loose from Kingsley.”

“You were falling asleep.”

“I was, but the prospect of exploring your body is waking me fast.” He looked down.

“You – I thought only kids got erections every five minutes.”

“You don’t seem to be – disinterested either,” Kingsley said, a hand stroking over Harry’s twitching cock.

“Oh, I’m going to watch this,” Kingsley smiled, “and you can tell me if you want me to do anything.”

“D-do anything?” Harry wriggled, as Kingsley poured a little lube into his palm. Severus dipped his fingers into it, and then Kingsley slipped the rest over Harry’s cock.

“I – I can’t believe – I mean, we’ve already – and it was brilliant – “ he said, lifting up and dropping his legs open as Severus slid a pillow under him.

“This can just be play. Doesn’t have to go anywhere,” Kingsley said. “Just see if you like it. You decide.”

Not long after, Harry decided he liked it very much indeed.
Unforeseen Outcomes

Monday came. Phillip Stubbins had also asked for his son’s body, for a private funeral, to be held that afternoon.

Everything had got rather complicated.

There was to be a burial service for the remainder of the bodies that had returned from the Veil, but, given that evidence was now coming to light that at least five of them had indeed been sent through the Veil after they had been found guilty of murder, the families of the gobstones team didn’t want to have anything to do with it, whilst at the same time, wanted some form of state ceremony for their two players, who had died, they felt, through their dedication to their sport.

So far, although Kingsley’s team had been monitoring both Atkins and Donnelly, neither of them had made contact with each other. Or appeared to crack.

Harry hadn’t looked at the papers over the weekend, but reading them now, it was clear that someone was doing a good job of stirring things up, and he was the target. How had he known about the fire? How had he been able to apparate in and out of the Ministry when no-one else could? Were his acts of apparent heroism really a cover for his plot to destroy the Ministry, after the accusation of murder (and accusation which had been dropped, the reporter noted, rather than Potter being cleared).

“I’m surprised they haven’t asked why I’m not helping with the rebuilding effort,” Harry sighed. “I never thought the day would come when The Prophet had the most balanced coverage.”

“Draco’s doing a good job?” Albus asked, round a mouthful of cornflakes.

Harry nodded. “Yeah, I think he is. Obviously, I’m a bit biased on this one, but in general, you know, I think The Prophet is a much better paper than it used to be.” He looked at his son. “So, did you spend the weekend here, or at Hogwarts?”

“Here; that was alright, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah, sure,” Harry said, gratefully accepting a coffee from Mitty. “I was about to be cheeky and ask if you’d seen or heard anything about Samantha Donnelly.”

“Laura hasn’t been staying at the castle over the holidays, but she went back to give her condolences. She said that Donnelly was practically – well, not saying anything at all. Her husband spoke more for her – doing the niceties,” Albus gave his father a look. Their own bereavement was still raw enough that they knew how it felt to deal with other people’s grief or attempts to comfort.

“I’m going to go to the funeral this afternoon,” Harry said.

Albus nodded. “You’ll:-” he waved a hand over himself in a weird motion, to indicate invisibility.

Harry laughed at it. “Of course.”

Nanette came into the kitchen, and they wished each other good morning as Mitty bustled about getting her coffee and breakfast.

“Did you say you’re going to a funeral?” Nanette asked, sounding a little puzzled. “I am very sorry for your loss -”
“No need to be sorry,” Albus said. “This chap probably blew up the Ministry, and might have killed our Mum.”

Her hand was over her mouth.

“Actually,” Harry said, “I think you know him, Nanette. Peter Stubbins.”

“Oh!” She actually started up, knocking the cup Mitty was bringing out of her hand. “Oh Mitty, I am sorry! Is Allie alright?”

There were several moments of apologies from both, before Nanette turned again to Harry and Albus.

“You – but – he was kind to me,” she said. She looked at Harry. “Is this why – why Monsieur Malfoy wanted to know - people? In France?”

Albus and Harry looked at each other.

“I – I do not like those people,” she whispered. “I will not betray your kindness.”

“We just don’t want to put you into an even more difficult position than you are now,” Harry said. “Your father is allied with them, I’m afraid – “

She nodded. “Not – not with the young people though. Artur’s friends,” she said.

Harry and Albus exchanged another glance.

“It is difficult for you to have me here,” she said. “I will make other arrangements – “

“You’re very welcome here,” Harry contradicted, “and safe. That’s important to me.”

He said nothing for a moment, and she sat quietly, eyes downcast.

“I didn’t even let Scorpius know that his grandfather was spying for us until last weekend,” he said gently. “Information can hurt people. I have no wish for either of them to come to harm.”

She looked up, startled. “But – I don’t really understand. Monsieur Malfoy was your enemy, was he not?”

“Thirty years ago, he was,” Harry nodded. “I – we’re all capable of change. “

“You think Monsieur Malfoy has changed?”

“I think we’re all capable of it,” Harry repeated. “I know I’ve changed. Lucius has acted in ways that have surprised me.”

“He has been good to me,” she said simply.

“Yes,” Harry nodded.

“Peter was also kind to me. He allowed me to talk to him, to practice my English. Actually, he did not speak very good French, so I would try to translate. There was another Englishman too – Daniel. Daniel Poulteur, or something.”

“Daniel Poulter.”
“You know him?” she said, surprised.

“I know of him,” Harry said. “Can you tell me what you know of him?”

“I haven’t seen him for a long time,” she shrugged, reaching across and picking up the new coffee Mitty had carefully placed in front of her. “He was very clever. They were all in awe of him. Even Artur did not mess with him. It was as if he could read your thoughts: scary. Artur said he gave him nightmares.”

Harry nodded. He didn’t want to reveal too much and frighten her off. “What sort of things did you translate for Peter?”

“Oh, they were always foolish, all of them. Plotting about getting Purebloods into positions of power. Artur and Léonie would boast about how our – the French Ministry – was far in advance of yours, about how many Purebloods were holding important roles.”

“Did they mention names?” Harry asked.

She nodded. “I can write them down for you. But it can’t be a secret that they are Pureblood, non? Everyone knows who everyone’s families are.”

“Yes,” Harry nodded, “but some Purebloods are accepting of half-bloods and others are not so. The people they’re talking about are the last type, I imagine.”

She nodded. “My father also talked like that,” she said slowly.

“And do you agree with him?” Harry asked.

“I – I told Lucius that my best friend from school was a half-blood,” she admitted, “and Lucius says you are the most powerful wizard he knows.” She looked at him speculatively.

“comes in a small package, though, eh?” Albus grinned, picking his bowl up and taking it to the sink.

“It’s true: I’m the runt of the family,” Harry smiled.

“You’re powerful because – because you killed the Dark Lord?” she asked.

“I hope not!” Harry snorted.

“I thought – maybe you gained his power, or something. That maybe that was why wizards killed other wizards?”

“No, there’s definitely no transfer of power like that,” Harry said. “Can you tell me anything more about Peter Stubbins?”

She looked at him.

“Nobody can hurt him,” he said. “He’s dead. Daniel Poulter has been tortured out of his mind, and is unlikely ever to leave the mental ward at the hospital. Whoever killed them isn’t likely to stop.”

Once again her hands were over her face. “But that’s terrible! Daniel Poulter too?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have much sympathy for him,” Harry said. “He was definitely one of three people who killed my wife. We’re trying to find out if Peter Stubbins was one of the others.”
“It’s – it’s hard to think that someone who was nice to you could do something so horrible,” she whispered.

Harry thought of Lucius, and said nothing.

“You’re right,” Albus said, sitting down again opposite her. “But it seems they do. Did Peter mention any other names? Any English ones?”

“Hmm,” she said. “Nothing that comes to mind. I’m sorry – “

“That’s alright,” Harry said. “You’re supposed to be eating your breakfast, not being grilled yourself.”

“Dad,” Albus groaned. “That was dreadful.”

“Pardon?” Nanette’s brows were twisting together.

“Just an awful play on words,” Albus smiled at her.

“Ah, you English are famous for that, non?”

“Famous for being bad at it,” Albus said, grinning.

“What is that called?” she asked.

“A pun,” Harry said.

“A pun. Yes. I remember Peter making one, and explaining that.” She shrugged. “I can’t remember what about.”

“No problem,” Harry said. “Thanks for everything, and if you remember anything else that you might have translated, or heard, however silly it seems, perhaps you’ll tell us, or Lucius?”

“I will,” she nodded.

The funeral was a very sombre affair. It was a pyre funeral, held in the field behind Phillip Stubbins’ house.

Phillip Stubbins himself looked grey.

There were a smattering of young people there – old school friends, no doubt, who’d come despite the rumours circulating about what Peter had done.

Interestingly, Peter Brown had turned up too. But so then, had Minerva. Harry saw Laura Hart slipping in at the back.

There were a handful of quidditch players that must have been old team-mates, but surprisingly few.

Samantha Donnelly arrived with her husband, almost at the last moment, and went forward to stand beside Phillip Stubbins at the coffin, turning towards him.
He refused to even look at her.

Donnelly seemed to curl even more into herself.

Harry couldn’t help feeling sorry for her – was there anything worse than the death of one’s child? And yet…

The ceremony was brief. The officiating wizard seemed uncertain of what to say, and so recounted a childhood anecdote, with no mention of more recent events, before moving towards the finale. Phillip Stubbins lit the pyre on which the coffin lay.

Donnelly gasped, and collapsed to her knees.

Adrian Donnelly rushed forward to help her up, looking to Phillip Stubbins to assist. Stubbins rammed the torch into the the carefully constructed framework, then stood as if carved from stone, looking straight ahead, and ignored the little drama.

The tension in the little gathering rose and spread, like the fire on the pyre.

As the coffin began to catch, Stubbins turned away from the flames, and walked towards the house, his movements stiff.

Donnelly turned to follow him.

He swung back. “You are not welcome in my home,” he said clearly.

“How then – ” Adrian Donnelly began, “we’re all a bit upset – ”

“Upset? Upset?” Stubbins roared.

Harry felt himself flinch from the unexpected intensity of it.

“She got Peter into this! Her stupid ideas! She got him killed! How you can look at her at night I don’t know,” he glared at Adrian, “but I never, ever, want to see her face again. Get out!”

The horrified silence was broken by the sound of a large crack! from the pyre. Everyone jumped.

“I – I didn’t – ” Samantha Donnelly began.

“No? Are you going to tell me you didn’t fill his head with this Pureblood rubbish? That you didn’t encourage him to – to meet up with the wrong sort? He told me! He was full of all the things he was going to do to ‘change our world’, Stubbins sneered. “ ‘Bring back the old traditions’, he said. Nothing I said made any difference: he was right under your thumb. You made my son into a murderer!”

“He was a martyr!” she screamed. “In years to come, people will honour his name – “

“Honour his name? My name?” he hissed. “For destroying the seat of our government? For attempting to kill dozens and dozens of – “

“They were all half-bloods and Muggles!”

“Merlin, you knew,” he said. “You actually sent our son to his death, didn’t you?” he strode back to her, grabbing her arms.
All around, everyone was staring, horrified. Harry was just hoping that some of the people were Kingsley’s team.

“Of course I didn’t!”

“Our son,” he spat in her face, “wasn’t very bright, you stupid woman. He barely scraped through his OWLS; he couldn’t have planned it on his own: hell, he was so incompetent that what did he achieve? He managed to kill two Purebloods and himself! I’m sure that’ll make him go down in the history books!”

“If Harry Potter – ”

“What are you saying now? If Harry Potter hadn’t saved all those people Peter would be a hero? You – ” he shook her. “Killing people? Is that what you wanted a son for? Is that why we poured love and care into bringing him up? You killed him! Don’t you understand? You killed my son: you poisoned his mind, you killed his body, and you ruined his reputation.” He took a gasping breath. “I loved him,” his face started to crumple, “I loved him. You don’t even know the meaning of the word.”

“I loved you.”

He shook his head.

“Until that bitch took you away from me – ”

Stubbins looked at her, seemed to pull himself together, and turned to walk through the gap in the hedge towards his house.

“Don’t you turn your back on me!” she screamed.

She had her wand out, pointing at him.

There was a collective gasp.

Harry saw a number of people reaching for theirs.

“Kill me if you wish,” he said. “I don’t care.” And he kept walking.

“I killed her, you know,” she yelled after him.

Harry’s heart seemed to stop for a fraction, before leaping to life once more.

A hush had fallen.

“Sam, you’re distraught: of course you haven’t killed anyone,” Adrian reached towards her, but she rounded on him too.

“Don’t come near me! I killed that bitch Potter!”

Adrian looked to Phillip Stubbins, who’d halted, and was standing there, hands at his sides, making no move to defend himself. “She’s – this has affected her mind. She was teaching at Hogwarts – “

“Much you know,” Samantha spat. “My group took care of that.”

“Your group?” Peter Brown had stepped forward.
Harry was interested to see that he had his wand in his hand.

“My little quidditch group,” she laughed.

It sounded hysterical, and Harry was eerily reminded of Bellatrix.

“They were rubbish at quidditch: you don’t think I wasted all that time with them on sport, do you?” she continued.

“You used pupils,” Adrian Donnelly said, white as a sheet, “to help you murder Mrs Potter?”

“They covered for me: Polyjuice. Peter got it for me.”

“I can’t believe they would do such a thing,” Brown said. “I fear you must be feeling very unwell, Mrs Donnelly.”

“Oh, definitely unwell! I’m going to die,” she cackled. “She’d – “

Samantha Donnelly keeled over.

She lay on the floor, jerking, in a spasm.

People rushed forward, and then halted, uncertain what to do.

No-one seemed to want to touch her.

Harry stared round. He hadn’t seen anyone aim at her.

He looked at her. It was as if she was under Cruciatus. A keening sound was coming from her throat.

Dear God: had she taken a vow of loyalty, as Malfoy had done, to Atkins? She’d said, “She’d,” and then that had been it.

Surely the spell should stop: unless Donnelly was determined still to speak, and the spell wouldn’t let up its hold of her?

At her side now was a witch; she tried to stop the spell, without success. “You want to say something?” she said, sharply. “You said, ‘She’d’ – who is she? What would she do?”

“Do –Do – Do -”

The spell seemed to tighten. She screamed, flailing. It seemed to ease a little. She gasped tiny breaths.

“Is that the first name? Nod,” the witch commanded.

It was hard to tell, with the terrible shaking that had set in.

“Try the second name,” the witch said.

“A –A- A- Ahhh….,” The sound contorted into a high pitched scream.

Adrian had fallen to his feet, trying to hold her, but her body was spasming.

“Sam,” he whispered.
“At –At-At-At-At-“

She sounded like a Muggle child impersonating a machine gun, Harry thought.

But now her throat was clenching. Her whole body had stretched out, stiff but shaking. Her husband looked awkward trying to hold her.

Blood was dribbling from the side of her mouth. Her lips were still making the motion but only a bubbling sound was coming out.

And then she fell still.

“Oh, Merlin, it’s over,” Adrian Donnelly said. “Samantha,” he loosened his grip, a hand reaching for her cheek.

Her body flopped.

The witch leaned forward, and touched her neck, searching for a pulse.

“She’s dead,” she said.

Adrian Donnelly dropped her body.

Phillip Stubbins turned round and walked away.

Harry apparated straight to Ireland.

“Where’s Kingsley?” he said, heading into his office.

Rose looked up from the listening device. “Coming. He’ll be here in a moment.”

The floo came to life a few minutes later, and the witch from the scene walked through.

“You were there?” she asked Harry.

“Kingsley?”

“No,” a blond man said, stepping out of the flames. “I’m Kingsley. This is Fiona.”

“Oh my god, I nearly had a heart attack,” Harry said. He looked at Fiona. “You did well. Pity she couldn’t speak clearly.”

“I couldn’t stop the spell,” she said sadly.

Two other men came through.

“The hour’s nearly up,” Kingsley said, looking at his watch, and a moment later, they’d all transformed.

“That’s seriously weird,” Harry said.

“Come through,” Kingsley led the way into his office, and poured them all a coffee.
“Well, a confession to Ginny’s murder,” he said.

Harry nodded.

It felt so odd.

To know at last.

She was dead, and there would be no court case.

He was glad of that.

But witnessing that scene had been pretty shocking.

“She didn’t tell us who else was involved, and that was a dreadful spell on her,” he said.

Kingsley nodded. “I’m thinking a loyalty spell like Lucius’, except this one cast the *Cruciatus*, rather than took her magic.”

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” one of the men said. “I – I’ve never witnessed *Cruciatus* before. Is – is it always like that?”

“Yes,” Harry said.

They all looked at him.

“The pain is unbelievable. I’m amazed she could say anything.”

“You - ?”

Harry nodded.

“Shit.”

“She – she’d clearly lost her mind,” Fiona said. “I don’t know if what she said will stand up.”

There was a knock on the door.

“Come,” Kingsley called.

A head peered around the door. “Draco Malfoy on the floo asking if he can see you, Sir.”

“Tell him to come through,” Kingsley said.

A moment later, Draco joined them.

“Harry! Were you there?”

Harry nodded.

“Is it true? Did she confess to killing Ginny?”

“She did,” Kingsley said.

Draco grabbed the back of a chair, and then sat down shakily. His hand passed over his face.

Harry looked at Kingsley, and then went and sat next to Draco, just waiting.
Everyone sipped their coffee quietly.

“Sorry,” Draco said after a moment. “I know she’s been a suspect, but – I – I was just remembering – it happening.”

Harry nodded. “She was vicious. If she was the one that did the worst of it, which I suspect she was.”

Draco nodded.

Someone poured him coffee and handed it to him.

Eventually he took a sip, and looked up. “Sorry,” he said again. “We had a reporter at the funeral, obviously. We can’t not put that in the paper.”

“No, you’ve got to go with it,” Kingsley agreed.

“The reporter had a quick-quotes quill going when she was talking,” Draco said. “I just had the quickest of glances. She was trying to accuse someone else?”

Kingsley nodded. “Yes, Fiona here tried to help her get it out, but it wasn’t anything that’ll stand up.”

“Begins with Do – and last name begins A – or At- ” Fiona said. “So close, but nothing we can use.”

“I thought the funeral would shake her up, but I never expected this,” Harry said, apropos of nothing.

“It was Phillip Stubbins, really,” Kingsley agreed. “I think she might have held herself together if he hadn’t refused to acknowledge her, and then laid into her when she started.”

“We’ve got nothing now on Atkins,” Fiona said.

“One thing at a time,” Kingsley shrugged. “We now know who two of the three were who killed Ginny.”

“It’ll just seem like her personal vendetta,” one of the others said.

“I suspect, for her, it almost entirely was: the pretence of it being part of a bigger cause just gave her a reason to do it,” Draco said.

Kingsley nodded. “Yes, but Daniel Poulter didn’t have any personal reason that we know of, and there’s a third person.”

Draco stood up. “I’d better get back. Just wanted to check – “

Kingsley nodded. Harry reached out and touched his arm as he passed.

Draco stopped and looked at him, then nodded.

It was an acknowledgement that they were both entitled to have feelings about it.

“I’d better go too,” Harry said, standing up. “I need to tell the children.”

“I’ll see you to the floo,” Kingsley said.
Once they were alone, his arm slid round Harry’s back. “Are you alright?”

Harry nodded. “I feel – weird. I felt sorry for her, at first, and then – I suppose I should have felt sorry for her suffering, but I just wanted her to fight past it and spill the beans.”

“There’s no shame in that,” Kingsley said. “I’ve got to debrief the team. I’ll get Severus to come over. We all ought to meet tonight, too.”

“Yes,” Harry said, but he suddenly felt very tired. “I’ll be fine without Severus. I’ll see you both this evening.”

Harry was even more tired later. He’d told the children, calling James to come from work, and catching Albus before he set off for his.

Everyone had come round; there had been lots of discussion back and forward about the implications, and about Atkins, when the doorbell rang.

Everyone fell silent.

“Are you expecting anyone?” Severus asked.

“Who knocks on the door?” Harry raised a brow. “No. It could be a neighbour, though. I’ll go check.”

Snape followed Harry out of the room and up the stairs. By the front door, Harry waved his hand. Through the spell, they could see three Aurors waiting on the steps.

“Ron!” Harry called.

Ron took the stairs two at a time

“It’s Dowling,” he said. “The chap who took over from Felton as Head of the Auror Division.”

“Tell the others downstairs to keep quiet,” Harry said. “I can amplify the sound from the parlour so you can follow what’s going on.”

“Got it,” Ron said, and loped back down again.

Harry looked at Snape. They both slipped their wands into their palms. Harry opened the door.

“Mr Potter, I’m Auror Dowling. I’m sorry to disturb your evening, but I have some news. May we come in?”

“It takes three of you to tell me some news?” Harry raised a brow.

Dowling turned and nodded to the other two, who stepped back.

Harry held the door open, and Dowling entered.

“Professor Snape,” he said, startled.

“Master Snape: it’s many years since I taught,” Snape said coolly, giving no explanation for his
presence.

Harry’s lips twitched.

Harry led the way into the parlour. Kingsley was sitting there, reading a book, as if he’d been there all evening.

“You remember Kingsley Shacklebolt, I’m sure,” Harry said. “Kingsley, Head Auror Dowling.”

Kingsley looked at him over his reading glasses, and carefully put the book aside. “Good evening,” he said.

“Mr Shacklebolt,” Dowling swallowed.

“Do take a seat,” Harry invited.

“I – er – I’m sorry to disturb you, as I said. Umm, might I possibly have a word in private?”

“I don’t have secrets from Kingsley or Severus,” Harry said, sitting down. “Do go ahead.”

“Very well,” Dowling nodded. He paused, gathering himself. “I’ve come to tell you –”

“Dad!” Lily said, bursting in, “listen!” She had a portable wizarding radio in her hand.

“Lily – “

“It’s about Mum!”

“….and thank you for the introduction,” the voice said.

“It’s Mrs Atkins, Head of the MLE,” Lily interjected. “The newscaster said she had an announcement about Mum!”


“Shsh!” they all said.

“…It is with great satisfaction that I can confirm that the MLE have identified all three of Ginevra Potter’s attackers, and I can assure the public that there is no longer any risk of danger to others. Moreover, we have also identified the person who caused the fire at the Ministry. I am aware that several people have placed suspicion on Mr Harry Potter, due to the extraordinary feats he achieved on that night, which of course, far exceeded the capabilities of normal wizards. His actions make it quite clear that the security systems at the Ministry need a great deal of upgrading, and we will be making all necessary adjustments as we rebuild the Ministry. But it is also clear that Mr Potter was not involved at all in the damage caused to the Ministry, at least, not directly.”

“What on earth is she saying?” Lily asked.

James and Albus had also appeared to follow the broadcast, each propping up a door jamb.

“I’m sure many of our listeners are wondering quite what you mean, Mrs Atkins,” the presenter was saying. “Was Mr Potter involved, or not?”

“This afternoon, at her son’s funeral, Professor Samantha Donnelly of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry revealed that she had killed Mrs Potter in retaliation for the theft of her then husband, the international quidditch player Phillip Stubbins. Mrs Donnelly appeared to suffer
from a seizure, perhaps brought about by the shock of her son’s death and by the accusations from her ex-husband. We did not wish to cause offence during their grief, but there were very serious concerns about Peter Stubbins, and the fire at the Ministry. As has been reported previously, Peter Stubbins’ body was found in the wreckage of the building. He worked in the Potions laboratories and his body was found on that floor. In their diligent search through Peter Stubbins’ possessions, I can confirm that our officers found a suicide note, in which he makes clear that he joined his mother in murdering Mrs Potter. This action obviously had a profound affect on his mind, and he wrote of his intention to take his own life. There is no indication that he intended to damage the Ministry.”

“Are you saying, Mrs Atkins, that he destroyed the Ministry unintentionally?”

“The Ministry is not destroyed,” Mrs Atkins said sharply. “We have teams working on it twenty-four hours a day, and I can assure you, we will be implementing a number of measures to increase security…”

“I’m a little confused. If Mr Stubbins set a fire to kill himself, how was it that he was found without burns? That is the case, is it not, Mrs Atkins? Mr Stubbins was found with the other bodies that came out through the Veil?”

“We’re working on the theory that Mr Stubbins sought a faster method to speed his demise, and discovered the Death Room,” she said. “We hope to clear all the details at a later date, but we wanted to reassure the public at this time that their security is safe in our hands.”

“Returning to the murder of Ginny Potter, Mrs Atkins. There was a third accomplice, was there not? You haven’t mentioned - “

“Ah yes. The third suspect is a wizard called Daniel Poulter, a school-friend of Peter Stubbins. I’m afraid he has serious mental health issues, and is currently under the care of our mediwizards. Should he ever be fit enough to do so, he will, of course, stand trial, but at present, all I can say is that we have a convincing case against him, and we are no longer looking for any other suspects.”

“Forgive me, Mrs Atkins, but wasn’t Mr Poulter mentioned by Professor Longbottom at Harry Potter’s trial? Professor Longbottom lied about his own culpability and Mr Potter’s, didn’t he? Can you feel sure that you have the right people this time?”

Atkins gave a tinkling laugh. “Oh yes, we’re very sure. And I would like to thank my officers for their sterling work on closing these distressing cases.”

“And thank you, Mrs Atkins,” the presenter said. “And now it’s time for a song from our old favourite, Celestina – “

Lily turned off the radio.

There was complete silence.

“I’m sorry you had to find out like that,” Dowling apologised. “I had hoped to get to you before any announcement was made – “

“This confession,” Kingsley said. “It was found this afternoon? I’m sure you would have spoken to Harry sooner, had you known?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what happened,” Dowling said with relief. “Obviously we’ve continued to work on the case, Mr Potter. I know you won’t have the satisfaction of seeing those responsible brought to trial – “
“You can’t really believe that there’s any satisfaction in that?” James growled.

Dowling looked up, shocked into silence. “I’m sorry?”

“Nothing will bring our mother back,” Albus said. “I think that’s the point my brother is making.”

“No. I’m sorry,” Dowling said.

Harry looked to Kingsley, but Lily beat him to it.

“Did you suspect Stubbins before?”

“I beg your pardon, Miss?”

“Was Peter Stubbins on your list of suspects?”

“Well now, does that matter? We have a long list –”

“Don’t you think it was rather convenient?” she asked, quietly.

Dowling opened his mouth, and shut it again.

“I think that’s a fair question,” Kingsley said. “I’ve been in your position, and we’ve both been Aurors on the work-face. I have to say, that if the letter was only discovered this afternoon, I’m very surprised that this statement has been made so swiftly. Testing must have improved tremendously since I was in the service, if you’ve already been able to confirm its authenticity.”

“I appreciate your concerns,” Dowling said, after a moment, “but I can assure you, that all necessary actions have been taken. We regard the case as closed now, and I just wanted to come and tell you in person.” He stood up.

They all did.

Dowling walked to the door. He nodded at everyone, and walked out and along the corridor.

At the front door, he turned. “Well, goodbye, Mr Potter,” and he extended his hand.

Harry ignored it, and opened the door. “Thank you for calling, Auror Dowling,” he said.

Dowling’s hand dropped. He gave a glance at Harry’s face, dipped his head, and left.

They all retreated to the kitchen.

“Well,” Ron said, “she is a clever bitch, isn’t she?”

Harry snorted. He was so angry, and so grateful to Ron for his down-to-earth approach.

“You think the letter is a fake?” Gloria asked.

“Almost a hundred percent likely, I would think,” Ron agreed. “There’s been no processing, no time to be sure about it – no mention of it before, and I can’t believe they only decided to go through his things today, and not anytime in the last week, since his body was found and all the querying started.”
“What did you think of Dowling’s reaction?” Severus asked Kingsley.

“Oh, he knows there’s something dodgy about it, I don’t doubt – even if he thinks the letter is real, he would have pressed for more time – I mean, she didn’t even give him enough to talk to the family before announcing it on the radio – that’s seriously bad form. She was forcing his hand.”

“She’s done rather a good job for herself,” Minerva said, her lips pinched. “She’s taken all the credit for catching the murderers, and the investigation as to what happened at the Ministry, with absolutely no work put into it.”

“Yes, and blocked the likelihood of further investigation at the Ministry,” George nodded.

“And whilst giving an image of clearing Harry of suspicion, she carefully managed to link Harry’s name to the cause of it,” Hermione said. “Very good work for one night.”

There was a heavy silence.

“So, how are we going to get her?” Lily asked.

“And whoever the third person is who killed Mum,” James said.

“So, our suspects are, potentially, Atkins and Nott?” Albus asked. “Do we think Atkins herself might have killed Mum?”

People looked at each other.

“She’s too clever for that,” Hermione said. “I think we might have to come at her from a different angle.”

“What do you have in mind, Hermione?” Minerva asked.

“She’s got herself so well-protected,” Hermione said, “and she’s obviously working on building her reputation now. I think we need to do all we can to undermine it. To undermine her credibility.”

“Playing dirty?” A smile played about George’s mouth.

“Playing her at her own game,” Hermione corrected.

“But above board,” Harry said.

Hermione turned a sweet smile on him. “Of course. We’re not going to make anything up. But I’m going to look over her old cases, dig deep. See if there’s anything of use there. Just to shake her foundations a little.”

“We need to look into Nott more,” Draco said. “I’ll see what I can find out.”

“Are you alright doing that?” Minerva asked sharply. “He was your room-mate, was he not?”

“And we suspect he may have cold-bloodedly killed the woman I wanted to marry,” Draco said.

“Aye, well, there is that,” Minerva nodded. “But you’ve not kept in touch, I take it?”

“No,” Draco said, “but I can ask around without causing too much of a stir.”

“You could do an article,” Andy said. “You know, something light-hearted after all the Ministry angst. Take three or four people from each house and see what they’ve been doing with themselves
since they left Hogwarts; who were their friends then; who they’re still in contact with. If you did it for people who left one year ago, then five, then ten, and twenty and thirty…”

“That’s a cool idea,” Lily said, turning a smile on Andy.

“It is,” Draco said. “But I’d be worried about alerting him. It would be good for another time, though.”

“I hope Lucius is seeing Atkins tonight,” Gloria said suddenly.

They all turned to look at her.

“Why’s that?” Harry asked.

“Because she’ll be vulnerable tonight.”

“She didn’t sound vulnerable,” Draco said.

Harry was interested to see that Draco didn’t have a problem with disagreeing with Gloria.

“No. But we’re pretty sure she’s lying, which will raise her blood pressure, if she has the tiniest hint of humanity in her bones,” she said. “Make her a bit – wiffy.”

“Wiffy?” Andy leant his head round.

“Not a hundred percent sure of herself,” Gloria said. “A bit high on getting away with a whopping lie. You know how that feels.”

“You think I do?” Andy’s eyes widened. “Why?”

“Chicken, everyone lies,” she said. “You must’ve told your mama a lie when you were a kid, at the very least, hmm? And felt that thrill to get away with it?”

There were a few chuckles around the table.

“Well yeah, but even so,” Andy said, “I’d be tight, trying to make sure I didn’t contradict myself, not likely to spill.”

“Yup, wound right up,” Gloria nodded. “But on top of that, she’s just lost a comrade – a woman she was at school with. Who was going to betray her. Her own spell killed her. That’s got to have some impact, one way or another. Lucius might be able to get under her skin, if he knows how to wiggle right.”

“I’ll contact him,” Harry said, getting up.

Later that night, Harry lay in bed. Severus lay behind him with his arm around him, Kingsley’s hand reaching over both of them.

“You – I mean – if you want to do anything – I mean, I don’t feel – not tonight – but if you want to sleep in the other room – “

“Good lord,” Severus said, his hand smoothing over Harry’s hip, “that was the worst attempt at a
sentence I think I’ve ever heard.”

Harry gave a little snort.

Severus’ hand kept stroking.

“Just go to sleep, Harry,” Kingsley said.

“I’m stopping you – “

“We don’t have a routine,” Kingsley said. “We make love when we feel like it. Right now, we just feel like being here for you.”

“I thought I’d fall asleep straight away. I feel wiped out. And now I can’t sleep.” He shifted round. Severus turned a little, so that Harry could lie in the curve of his arm. Harry sniffed.

“Are you smelling me?” Snape chuckled.

“I – I like the smell of your armpits,” Harry said, burying his face against Snape’s chest.

“Manly pong,” Kingsley’s voice was warm.

“It doesn’t smell bad,” Harry said quickly.

“I should hope not,” Severus said. “I spent a number of months creating that deodorant.”

“You made it yourself? I use a Muggle one. From Boots,” Harry said in surprise.

“I can smell the chemicals.”

“You don’t like it? Why didn’t you say?” he raised up on his arm.


Harry nodded. “I don’t really understand why. I feel – flat. And I don’t like myself, I suppose. I watched her being tortured by that spell and I didn’t do anything.”

“Did you know anything you could have done?”

“No, but I didn’t even try.”

“We both watched Fiona trying, and failing,” Kingsley said. “I suspect that you would have stepped up and tried, had she not.”

“I – I don’t feel guilty,” Harry said, very quietly.

“Why should you?” Severus asked, a hand steady on Harry’s hip. “You didn’t place the spell on her, and you had absolutely nothing to do with the statement she was trying to make, which set the spell off. Do not blame yourself because you disliked her: you were in no way responsible.”

Harry nodded.

There was silence for a bit, though they were all awake.

“I – I could get lost in giving you a blow-job, but I really need to think,” Harry said.

Kingsley snorted. “Now there’s a back-handed offer! Which of us are you depriving?”
“Both?” Harry quirked a grin over Severus’ side.

“I’ll look forward to that another day, then,” he said.

Harry stretched a hand past Severus, and stroked down Kingsley’s ribs.

Kingsley picked it up and lightly sucked his fingers, before returning the hand. “What else are you thinking about?”

Harry settled back. “It feels like so much is sorted, but there’s so much to do. And I think that Ginny has got lost somewhere in the bigger picture.”

There was silence for a moment. “That’s all true,” Kingsley said.

“I can’t – I just keep thinking of how Ginny looked when I got here,” Harry said. “That she was murdered in that room through there.” A shiver ran through him. Snape pulled the duvet over his shoulders.

“And - how did three people, three ordinary people that went about ordinary lives, who everyone thought of as respectable, how could they have done what they did?”

“Donnelly was obviously fuelled by hate, and jealousy, all set off with sadism and a hint of madness, I think,” Kingsley said after a moment. “You can’t see what she did to Ginny in a vacuum, because look at what she did to those school-kids.”

“That’s true,” Harry said. “And they hadn’t done anything against her.”

“She obviously enjoyed power and control over others,” Severus said quietly. “And abused it. And them.”

“That shouldn’t make me feel better, but it does, a bit,” Harry said.

“As for Poulter, I don’t suppose he had any idea what he was letting himself in for when he came to this house,” Severus continued. “I suspect beforehand he was focussed entirely on the skill and technicalities of the mind-work he needed to perform on Draco, without giving much thought to the fact that he would be participating in the murder itself. I suspect bravado carried him through.”

“I don’t want to,” Harry said, “but I think we ought to look at the VeritaSerox memory again. With Draco. Now that we know the identity of two of them, we can focus on the other. See if we can pick up any clues, or if we’ve missed anything.”

“That’s a good idea,” Kingsley said.

They were all silent, thinking their own thoughts.

“Thanks,” Harry said, turning back round and wriggling himself comfortable.

“We’re here through the bad and the good,” Kingsley said quietly. “Hopefully there’ll be a lot more good to come.”

“In a minute,” Snape said, “you’ll be saying ‘One for all, and all for one.’”

Harry sniggered, and stuck his arm up, as if pointing a sword to the ceiling.

He laughed more when the other two did the same.
“I love that film,” Harry chuckled.

“You have the film? I’ve only read the book. Right, fish that out for tomorrow night, then,” Kingsley said cheerfully.

“Dear heaven, what’ve I started now?” Snape complained. A heartbeat. “I hope it’s the Oliver Reed version.”

“Oliver Reed? He was in Gladiator, not the Three Musketeers. It’s Oliver Platt. He’s brilliant! And that chap whose name I can’t remember shouting ‘D’Artagnan!’” Harry mimicked the voice.

“I’m in bed with a Philistine,” Snape said.

“You’ll love it,” Harry smiled into Snape’s arm.

“Hmmph,” Snape said.

They slept.
Lucius had placed himself in the arm-chair opposite the floo, watching for the moment that Atkins returned. He saw the slump of her shoulders, the sigh of relief, before she realised that someone was there.

“Good evening, Dorothy,” he said, rising to his feet. “A glass of champagne?” He turned to the ice bucket sitting on a tray beside him, with two flute glasses at the ready.

“Lucius,” she said, throwing off her summer cloak. “What are you doing here?”

He opened the bottle, poured, and handed her a glass. “To success,” he said.

She looked at him, and after a moment, returned the toast. “To success.”

Lucius waved her to a seat.

“Do make yourself at home,” she said.

He noted that her sarcasm lacked bite.

“Thank you, you’re most generous,” he inclined his head, as he too sat.

She sipped the wine. “Should I bother asking how you got in?”

“Your elf saw no reason to prevent me: I’ve returned you home on many occasions, have I not?”

“Nevertheless, I didn’t invite you.”

“Would you like me to leave?”

She sighed. “This is good,” she said, holding up the glass, by way of answer.

“One of the advantages of French connections is knowing the best vineyards, and which wines are worth laying down,” he acknowledged.

“What are we celebrating?”

“My dear Dorothy: I heard the announcement on the radio this evening. You must be relieved that the matter is closed at last, and for myself –” he paused.

She looked at him expectantly.

“I must admit, that I am glad that the matter is resolved. Although my son was cleared, previously, I felt – “

“What?” she prompted, as he hesitated again.

“I suppose I felt that there was something – a barrier of some sort – between us, which has now been removed.”

“You didn’t trust me to deal with the matter?”

“Don’t take offence,” he said mildly. “A serious mistake had been made with regard to my son. There is little love lost between us, but still – he is a Malfoy. I don’t need to tell you how important
the family name is to a Pureblood, regardless of one’s feelings.”

She inclined her head. “You feel I hadn’t done my job?”

“I realise you have minions working for you, but a General is responsible for his troops.”

“And you’ve been holding this against me? You didn’t show it.”

“Our joint endeavours are more important, but that doesn’t mean that – I forget.”

She had finished her glass. He rose, and refilled it.

“Are you trying to get me drunk?”

“I’m sure a witch of your common sense has a sobering solution in her bathroom cabinet,” he said.

She leant her head back on the chair. “I feel like getting drunk,” she admitted.

“You need not fear for your honour if you do so,” he said, sitting back down and crossing one ankle over the other languidly.

“Why, don’t you fancy me?”

He looked down his nose. “I am not a man to abuse a woman when she shows a moment of weakness,” he said. “I prefer my partners to be active participants, not merely - willing.”

“I’ve offended you.”

“You’re forgiven,” he responded lightly. “We all say foolish things when we’re upset.”

She sat upright, the contents of her glass slopping dangerously close to the rim.

“Why should I be upset?”

“Please don’t take me for an idiot. I appreciate the victory today, but I also understand that it can’t be easy when a good friend has died, and you can’t even acknowledge it publicly.”

“What on earth are you talking about?”

He waited a moment.

“You must know that I investigated your background before – getting into bed with you – as they say,” he said. “I do know that you have been friends with Mrs Donnelly since you shared a dorm at Hogwarts.”

“You – you had me investigated?” she spluttered.

“As I’m sure you did me,” he said coolly, sipping his drink.

“I admit I knew her,” she said, after a minute.

Lucius said nothing.

After two more minutes, he got up, and put his glass down. He had only drunk an inch.

“What – you’re going?”
“It’s quite obvious you still don’t trust me,” he sighed. “Whilst I appreciate and admire a cautious ally, you either take me for a fool, if you think I do not know that she was much more of a friend than that –”

She stood up, and swayed slightly as the alcohol hit.

He looked at her, and murmured, “or perhaps you’re fooling yourself? Do you have many friends, Dorothy?”

She opened her mouth, and shut it again.

“Ah. You cannot admit even to yourself that she was your friend.” He looked her up and down. “You’re strong, and ambitious, and clever. I suspect few people have matched up to you, hmm?”

“There is nothing wrong with being fussy about the company we keep,” she said tightly.

“Oh, I agree,” he said, moving to stand in front of her. “But you know, just because someone is not our intellectual equal, does not mean that they might not offer other qualities.”

She swallowed. “We worked together at school sometimes. She was good to me when – when my husband died.”

“There. Was that so painful to admit?”

“I don’t see you surrounding yourself with a huge circle of friends,” she snapped, reaching down to pick up her glass.

Lucius strolled across for the bottle and topped her up.

“No, you’re right,” he said. “But then, many of my old friends are dead too.”

She sat herself down again, cradling the glass.

“I never thought of her as a friend,” she said.

Lucius too returned to his seat.

“I suppose she was,” she admitted.

“It must have been painful to realise that she could have done something so awful,” Lucius said. “Given your position.”

“My position?”

“In upholding the law,” he said. “To realise that a friend had succumbed to such – well, not irrational behaviour, because she had a reason. But such – emotional folly.”

“Yes. Exactly.” She drank some more.

“I’m surprised that her son would have been involved,” he mused.

“Ginevra Potter broke up his parents’ marriage!”

Lucius nodded slowly. “Perhaps. But – in a grown man – such a close association to his mother – perhaps their relationship was rather - unconventional?”
“What are you implying?” she said shrilly.

“Perhaps his feelings for his mother were rather - Oedipal?”

“That’s disgusting!”

Lucius held up his hands. “I didn’t know them, of course. It’s sad to think that he might have done that for love – however appropriate or inappropriate – of his mother, and then felt so guilty that he killed himself.”

“Don’t be ridiculous!”

Lucius looked at her. “I’m sorry, I obviously misunderstood. You’ve seen the suicide note, of course. I’m only making inferences from your statement….”

“Is that what you thought?”

“Me and the rest of the Wizarding World, no doubt.” He shook his head. “If it was otherwise, perhaps you ought to clarify. It doesn’t speak well of Purebloods, you know. The outsiders think us incestuous enough without – well, incest.”

“There was no incest!” she struggled to her feet. “Get out! I don’t want to talk about this!”

Lucius stood up again and came and stood in front of her. “Do not scream at me like a hag,” he said coldly.

“You don’t know anything – “

“I know as much as anyone else who listens to the radio and reads the papers,” he said acerbically. “Since I’ve come into your orbit, Purebloods are dying left, right and centre. I don’t think you have the guts to do anything. You’re all talk and no action - ”

“Who the hell do you think destroyed the Ministry?” she screeched.

Lucius felt his heart thump, but he kept his face impassive. “A boy with a suicide wish, according to you.”

“You obviously don’t believe that.”

“Stubbins deliberately set about destroying the Ministry?”

“It was his task,” she said.

“Was he supposed to kill himself?”

“Of course not!”

“So, he destroyed the seat of government and killed himself and two other Purebloods in the process.”

“If Potter hadn’t interfered, he would have wiped out the Minister and several dozen half-bloods. It was Centennial Lift Maintenance Day: there shouldn’t have been any Purebloods in the building.”

Lucius moved away, straightening his cuffs. “If that was the purpose, it failed spectacularly, wouldn’t you say?”
“Who could have known that Potter would have such power? He has to be stopped.”

“You don’t think it was an oversight to leave such an important task in the hands of a boy?”

“You don’t think I left him to handle it alone, do you?” she snarled.

“Whoever was with him was hardly any better,” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

Atkins stepped away.

Lucius had pushed her far enough.

“We need to rethink whether our paths are heading in the same direction,” he said. “I suggest we think on it for a day or two. I’ll take my leave.”

She nodded. “I’ll owl you.”

He walked towards the floo, turning to look at her. “Will you? We shall see, I expect. Goodnight.”

And with a slight inclination of his head, he stepped into the flames.

Dorothy Atkins thought about taking the sobering solution, but she was glad of the alcohol. She didn’t let her hair down often, but she needed it.

She picked up the bottle and refilled her glass, then took both into the bathroom.

As she lay soaking, an hour later, she allowed her thoughts to wander back to the conversation.

Lucius was an annoying, condescending bastard, she thought, as she tilted her glass back and drank the last mouthful.

But also, far too often, unnervingly perspicacious.

Her life had been driven by ambition: ambition to be the best student, ambition to be the best prosecutor, ambition to be Chief Mugwamp. She wasn’t the most powerful witch, but she had brains. And she knew how to manipulate people.

She was used to succeeding.

She was used to the knocks along the way. She knew to turn every setback around, to make something of it.

She had done so earlier, when she had used Sam’s death to tie up the Potter woman business. She was satisfied that she’d made the best of a bad job. And yet…

Lucius was right. She’d never really understood having friends. Oh, she’d seen other girls at Hogwarts, living in each others’ pockets. She’d always looked down on them. But in the fourth year, she didn’t know why even now, she’d started spending time with Sam Dawson. They hadn’t had much to do with each other before, and there was no reason that they should have got on: Sam was athletic, and fast becoming a leading light in the House quidditch team: she herself hated the game, hated sitting in the cold watching, hated the moronic cheering rhymes. She supposed it had started when their Arithmancy teacher had forced her to help Sam. It had been quite – heady – to have a popular member of the House happy to follow her every word.
She supposed, looking back, that it had been a friendship after all.

But now Sam was dead.

Sam was dead and her spell had killed her.

Sam was dead and her spell had killed her, because Sam believed that she had betrayed her.

She was angry that Sam hadn’t known her better – she thought Sam had trusted her completely. Sam should have trusted her completely. She always had before.

She’d only included Sam in that stupid vow because of the others.

If she was honest, it hurt that Sam could have thought that she’d have harmed her son. She’d got him the damn job in the Ministry, despite his lack of qualifications!

She stood up, and reached for her towel.

She was rather horrified to think that she would miss Sam.

Although they’d not seen each other much after school, Sam had continued to write to her, telling her what she was up to, through the years. It was only when there had been that business with her husband, that Sam had really reappeared in her life. Sam’d been – she’d wanted to be supportive. And she supposed she had been, she realised in some astonishment. Not that they’d talked about what had happened. Sam had been the sort to take things at face value: Charles had died unexpectedly, and she’d turned up offering consolation.

At the time, it had been very useful, and she’d just accepted the woman’s presence, her willingness to do anything she’d asked of her. That was how it had always been.

But somehow, it had cemented something between them. They’d talked more, discovered that they shared views about wizarding society.

Not that Sam had ever been a particularly deep thinker. She’d always been ruled by her emotions. It had been no surprise to find that she’d become almost completely irrational when she’d found out that her husband had had an affair.

She’d taken advantage of that, of course, and of Sam’s ridiculous belief that Draco Malfoy was responsible for the downturn in her career.

Sam always – had always – had a thing for seeing the worst of the situation. She’d remained bitter about giving up professional quidditch, despite getting what most people would regard as an excellent position at Hogwarts – and she’d found a new husband there to boot.

She’d never seemed to value him that much.

She herself had seen how useful it might be to have someone who had the ear of the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

It was an uncomfortable feeling to realise that Sam’s absence would leave a hole in her life.

She was pretty sure who was to blame for Peter going into the Veil: yet she couldn’t afford to lose anyone else.

Lucius has been right about that too.
He was a man who commanded respect. His years in Azkaban had not left him bowed at all.

She’d revealed more to him than perhaps she’d meant to, but again, he’d hit the nail on the head: they’d reached the point where she needed to take him into her confidence if she was going to be able to get him to help her.

She still had the option of returning him to Azkaban if he set off her alarm bells, after all, not to mention that rather effective spell of loyalty.

His standing as Voldemort’s right-hand man was going to be useful. The others would respect him; fear him. That was good. She needed to bring a certain person into line.

The next day, Harry, Severus, Kingsley and Draco looked at the memories again.

Harry came out, feeling shaken, but also – “I’d forgotten about the masks,” he said. “How can I have forgotten that?”

“I was thinking about the spell,” Draco said.

“Yes?” Snape asked.

“They knew Sectumsempra.”

“We looked into this earlier,” Harry said. “Hogwarts records all spells used within it. It would have been an absolute pain to search it out, but Donnelly could have got access to the record. It was one of the things Hermione could have used against her in court.”

“Or alternatively, Nott knew it,” Draco said.

“You’re sure about that?” Snape asked, leaning forward.

“I remember being in the infirmary. Vince and Greg were visiting. Nott came in with a cut finger – he’d obviously done it on purpose so he could see why I was in there. I – you know what I was like back then,” he said, rubbing a hand over his face. “Even though I didn’t trust him, I – well, I boasted. About my injuries.”

“And you’re positive you used the name of the spell?”

Draco nodded. “Vince was saying how terrible it was, but Nott said it sounded like a cool spell.”

“Well, that’s definitely interesting, but with the records, not conclusive,” Kingsley said. “As for the masks – yes. I haven’t seen them used on the continent for a while. I’m wondering why not.”

“Maybe there hasn’t been any – bad stuff – going on?” Harry suggested.

“Benoit?” Kingsley said.

“You’ve found his body?”

Kingsley nodded. “He was discovered yesterday. In a stream, as Artur foresaw, which, unless he murdered him, makes it more than likely that he is indeed a Seer.”

“Father can look after himself,” he said, with a shrug.

“You aren’t worried?” Harry asked in surprise.

Draco sighed. “Of course I am! But there isn’t anything I can do about it, is there?”

“I could pull him out,” Harry said.

“I’d really prefer you didn’t,” Kingsley said. “The information he got last night was outstanding. Confirmation that Atkins was involved in destroying the Ministry? I never thought she’d admit that to anyone.”

“You can’t use it though, can you?” Draco said. “Father being an ex-Death Eater and all.”

“No, I don’t suppose it would hold much weight in court, even with our recording – and a decent lawyer could play with the words she used, or argue that she was just trying to find out what your father was up to. But it gives us a basis for working on, rather than floundering with too many theories.”

Kingsley had given them a report of Lucius’ meeting before they’d started, having listened to the recording himself earlier that morning.

“We definitely know from it that she had someone else involved,” Kingsley said, “which is useful.”

“It’s the next step for Lucius, though, isn’t it?” Harry said. “She’s given him some information. She either takes him into her confidence fully, or pulls back and perhaps acts against him.”

“I’d agree with that assessment,” Severus said. “And I don’t believe she told Lucius what she did just because she’d had a glass or two of wine. She’s too astute for that. I think she was testing the waters.”

Harry looked back to Draco. “So; back to the question: do you want me to pull him out?”

“He wouldn’t thank me for interfering.”

“He wouldn’t have to know.”

Draco looked at Harry for a moment. “Surprising as it may seem, I think – you spoke to me a while back, about Father – I think – I hope – he is changing. And you led him there. I don’t want to stop it.”

“Even though the risks are getting greater?”

“Maybe the risk is all part of helping him change,” Draco said. “I don’t know. But he apologised to Scorpius. I don’t think you appreciate how big that is. For him. For Scorpius.”

“For you, too, I imagine,” Harry said. “It can’t have been easy being between the two.”

“It was easy,” Draco said, getting up. “My loyalty has always been with my son.”

“You’ve certainly done a good job of being a parent,” Harry said.

Draco’s eyes widened.
“Don’t look so shocked,” Harry said. “I’ve always thought so. Back to the recording: anyone think of anything else?”

“I’m assuming the smallest person – the one they thought was you, during your trial – was Donnelly,” Snape said. “She was the most vicious attacker. We were all fooled on our previous viewing: we believed them all to be men.”

“She’d probably had a lot of practice with Polyjuice,” Kingsley said.

Snape nodded. “She was masked as well; in theory, it wasn’t essential to use Polyjuice. The question is, whether they each knew who the others were.”

“Not that it matters,” Harry said. “Neither she nor Poulter can tell tales.”

“I’m just thinking of how the organisation works,” Snape said. “The French group all know each other – it was Atkins coming in who used Polyjuice. I’m thinking that the Death Eaters wore masks, but we did know each other. If Nott’s involved in this organization, he’s got to be high-ranking: his family line is strong, he’s vastly intelligent – he’s not a pawn. If he was the third man, I would think he was there to see things went through properly, that they didn’t slip up. I can’t see Atkins killing him too – he’s too valuable.”

“It doesn’t seem very good management to be bumping off all your staff,” Harry said.

“I expect she sees it more like an army,” Draco said. “She expects casualties.”

“But she’s doing the killing!”

“Ah,” said Snape. “Interesting point.”

“What?” Harry said. “What did I say?”

“Poulter wasn’t killed.”

“He was nearly tortured to death!”

“Yes, but that’s a very different thing,” Snape said.

“I agree: it points to a different perpetrator,” Kingsley said. “We know Donnelly enjoyed inflicting pain, not just from what she did to Ginny, but from what she did with those kids: I wouldn’t be the least surprised if she was responsible for that. And talking of Donnelly, I’m going to go and visit Hogwarts: I want to talk to her husband, and given his wife has admitted the murder, which makes her one of the mask wearers, the international angle is explicit, and I can get in there.”

“You have to be careful not to tread on toes at the Ministry?” Draco asked.

“Well, I’ve always tried to, long before I knew about Atkins, which is turning out to be fortunate. I could have been giving her information about what we knew about her own organisation. What a cock-up that would have been! I liaise directly with Benningdean now.”

“Going straight to the top.”

Kingsley shrugged easily.

He was hardly usurping ranks. He’d been Minister himself, after all.

“Talking of which,” he said, “he took a Muggle fire investigator into the Ministry.”
“He did? Really?”

“He did? Really?”

“Yup. The investigator came out with one of the fire engines on the night: he’s a squib, so knew pretty much what was really going on. He offered to come back and go over it with Benningdean. Report should be in shortly.”

“Well, that should be interesting. I take it repairs are well underway now?”

“Actually, there’s problems with that.”

“Yeah? What’s up?”

“The goblins have refused to come back on site. Without the lift system, the Ministry is up the creek.”

“That’s been kept quiet,” Draco said. “We hadn’t got a whiff of that at The Prophet.”

Kingsley nodded.

“I don’t blame them,” Harry said. “Has anyone checked whether they were all dead?”

“I don’t know,” Kingsley said, getting up. He looked at his watch. “Sorry, but I really need to go.”

“Are you going to see the Headmaster?” Severus asked. “If so, I think Minerva and I ought to accompany you. Or go on our own. As two living ex-Headteachers, it would not be inappropriate for us to – express our concern and offer our support. The Governors, if they’ve woken up at all, will be calling for his explanation of how he came to appoint a murderer on staff.”

“Don’t you think it’s interesting that Atkins didn’t make any claims about her in relation to Neville and Hugo?” Harry asked.

“She’s probably holding that back for a second press announcement,” Draco said. “Keeping her name in the news.”

“That’s cynical,” Harry said.

“True, no doubt,” Snape nodded.

“Yeah, I realise that,” Harry agreed. “She is such a – ” he bit his tongue. “She makes me sick.”

“I think you speak for us all there,” Draco said. “Right, well I need to go and get some articles underway. We’ve got profiles of Samantha Donnelly to work up: any objection to me mentioning that she was in the same House in the same year as Atkins?”

“No, that sounds worth getting out,” Kingsley said.

“Just want to start undermining the bitch,” Draco said. “We’re going to run a ‘why didn’t they foresee it?’ article too. The link could be useful to have in people’s minds.”

“Go for it,” Kingsley said. “Harry? What are your plans?”

“Well, maybe I ought to see the goblins? But I’m also due to be doing a bit of house-adaptations in Spain,” he said. “I’ve only done a couple since we decided it would be good for me, and I’d agreed today with the Ruiz family.”

“Excellent,” Kingsley said. He was standing, still paused to go.
His robe was open, and Harry was horribly aware of Kingsley’s crotch on his eye level, the faded denim hugging his flesh. The urge to reach out and trace the shape of him -

“Miguel’s sister is moving in with them?” Kingsley continued, and from the warmth in his voice, and the slight shift in his stance, Harry knew he’d been caught.

He glanced up, seeing the quick flare of heat and welcome in Kingsley’s eyes. He swallowed, and nodded.

“I suspect the Ministry will be asking you to help out now that your name is totally cleared,” Draco said. “You willing to work for them?”

“At the moment? No. I’m too pissed off, and Atkins is still there.” Harry said, looking away from Kingsley with relief.

“Well, thank Merlin for that,” Draco said. Harry raised an eyebrow.

“If you’d said yes, I’d just think ‘Bloody Saint Potter’. After all they’ve done to you, how can you even consider it? I wouldn’t lift a finger.”

“The Ministry isn’t all about Atkins,” Kingsley said.

“It will be if she gets away with this,” Draco said.

The next morning, they were eating breakfast. Severus had already left – he and Kingsley had stayed the night, but Severus had a long day of brewing ahead. Kingsley was munching his way through some toast. Albus had worked the evening shift at The Leaky and was having a lie-in. Lily was still in her pyjamas, but Nanette, as usual, was neatly dressed. The papers were spread out all over the table. They’d pulled apart The Prophet, reading different articles.

Nanette was going over one with her finger.

“No, I am understanding it, thank you,” Nanette said, “but – forgive me, is this date correct, or a – a –?”

“Misprint?” Lily suggested, looking over. “2nd March. No, that’s definitely the day Mum died.” She swallowed. “Why?”

“Peter Stubbins was in France on March 2nd,” she said.

They all looked at her.

“Are you sure about that?” Kingsley asked. “Why would you remember the date?”

“It’s Artur’s birthday,” she said. “He had a party.”

“And Peter Stubbins was there? You’re sure?”
“Certainement. I talked to him much that day.”

“Hold on,” Kingsley said. “Let’s back up. What time was this?”

“Artur likes to drink…”

“Yes?”

“He wanted the day to be a big event. “We had planned to go ice-skating – “

“In March? It was cold enough?”

“In the Alps? Of course. A port-key had been arranged and everything. Artur did not turn up – “

“What time was this? And was Stubbins there?”

“We were due to meet at 10.30 in the morning. Peter was there. And Léonie, François, about ten of us. Yes, ten exactly,” she said, thinking. “Artur didn’t show till 11.45. We all waited because it was his birthday, otherwise everyone would have gone without him. The port-key people said that we’d have to wait until 2.30 for the next one, so we went to Chez Albert. We had aperitifs – but Artur had already been drinking – yes, he said he’d had a champagne breakfast – and then lunch. When it was time for the port-key, Artur said he had a bad- ” she patted her stomach, “– he was drunk, of course. Everyone was fed up. Peter had a potion though, and he gave it to Artur – it made him - what is the word?”

“Sober up?” Harry suggested.

“Oui, merci. Sober up,” she tried the words. “So everyone cheered Peter, and we just made it in time for the port-key, and then we went ice-skating till – oh, about five? And then we joined the après-ski crowd in a bar and had another meal. It was a long day.”

“And Peter was there all the time?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “We all took another port-key back at one in the morning. All ten of us were there, and lots of people were asking Peter for the sober-up potion.”

“And you don’t think he could have slipped away at any point?”

“Well, he must have gone to the - to the WCs,” she said shyly.

“But if he had been missing for half an hour – “

“He was with me nearly all of the time. Because I was happy to speak English with him.”


“Why would they accuse him of this?” she asked. “If he set light to the Ministry, that was bad enough, but hard to believe, non? He never seemed very clever: he always took ages to learn any phrases, and he was very clumsy. Could it not have been an accident?”

“It’s possible, but unlikely,” Harry said gently. “There wasn’t any reason for him to be in the building that day. Did you invite him to your wedding?” he asked, suddenly. “It was the same day.”

“I don’t know,” she said, and at their surprised looks, explained, “I refused to have anything to do with the arrangements. My aunt was cross, but I’d told them I didn’t want to marry – “
“Would you have expected him to be on the list?” Kingsley asked.

“I can find out from my aunt whether he was,” she said. “That is, I could ask for the list so that I can thank people for presents – I ought to be doing that,” she said, suddenly thinking of it – “but I don’t want – ” she looked at Harry. “I don’t know what I should do.”

Harry looked at Kingsley. “If she doesn’t send thank-you’s, people will begin to ask questions.”

“I don’t think she should have to send thank-yous!” Lily said. “It’s ridiculous! Send it all back.”

“Then people will know – “

“Well, I would’ve thought you’d be glad they knew that you didn’t want to be married to that toad,” Lily said.

“Yes, but my father will be embarrassed – ”

“Your father is hopefully regretting being such a twit as to force you into it,” Lily said, leaning back and crossing her arms. “Sorry to say nasty things about your Dad,” she added. “I think you ought to ask Lucius,” she said, and watched at the light that flickered to life in Nanette’s eyes.

“What do you think, Harry?” Nanette asked.

“I think I can’t think of anything worse than writing thank-you letters for presents I did want, let alone ones I didn’t,” he grinned.

Nanette smiled, and Lily batted his arm.

“Seriously,” he continued, “and speaking as a father, and one who often gets it wrong himself, I don’t think you owe your Dad anything on this one. I’d leave the presents in a heap and just return them when your divorce, or annulment, comes through. People will know something is up, both from the ceremony, and from when they fail to see you with Artur. But I think Lily’s right too: Lucius knows a lot more about etiquette than I ever will, not to mention French customs, so I think it would be wise to ask his advice.”

“Yes, thank you. If you could ask Lucius to give me a moment or two when he next comes?”

“Sure.” He stood up. “Right, I’m off. House to finish,” he smiled. “Thanks for the information, Nanette. It was very important.”

“It means that one of the killers is still out there, non?”

“Exactly,” Harry said. He looked at Kingsley.

“We’ll get him,” Kingsley said. “Patience.”

Harry nodded.

Patience was much called for.

Harry stopped to say hello to Ron as he passed through The Leaky. It was strange to see his friend so at home behind the counter. Somehow, something of Molly’s hospitality exuded from him,
allied with her practical approach, and yet Ron’s history as an Auror was well known, and meant that there was also an air of safety and control.

It was funny how Ron’s new career had come on him out of the blue, and yet seemed to fit him so well. Ron was gregarious, and loved the chat and company.

Harry made his way along Diagon Alley. It was crowded, and it took Harry several moments to realise that many of the people were workers from the Ministry, who seemed to have been farmed out to make do in every previously empty room above the shops. People bustled out of one door, rushing across the road carrying papers, and memos flew through the air overhead, hurtling out of upstairs windows and diving into others. Harry knew that the British and Irish Quidditch League Headquarters was housed in The Leaky Cauldron at the moment, as was the Department of Magical Transportation. Ron had been overjoyed to offer accommodation to the former, and had taken the latter not only because of his interest in the workings of the Broom Regulatory Control Division, but because he’d realised it might be useful to get to know and keep his eye on all those who might have control about travel within and outside the wizarding world.

Harry wondered what Atkins plan had been. Had she intended that the Ministry be totally destroyed? Had she not had contingency plans, in that case, or had she wanted there to be total chaos?

He arrived at the steps of Gringotts. The goblin on the door recognised him at once.

“Mr Potter! Welcome!” he said, opening the door.

Harry’s step faltered. Goblins were famed for their curt manners. “Thank you,” he said. “I don’t know your name.”

“Baldroon at your service, Mr Potter,” the goblin bowed low.

“I wanted to enquire about the goblins I brought here,” he said quietly. “Who should I see?”

“If you will come this way, Mr Potter, I will fetch Ragnok to you.”

Harry waited in a small office.

“I am sorry to keep you waiting, Mr Potter,” the goblin said, walking in.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been sooner,” Harry said, standing. He looked down at the goblin, towering over the small creature. “Forgive my bluntness, but – did any of them survive? I wasn’t able to tell if they were unconscious or – “

“Dead?”

Harry nodded.

“Do sit down,” Ragnok said, striding round his desk with the curiously rolling gait that seemed common to all goblins. “Are you here because we’ve refused to return to the Ministry?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“There has been no mention of the deaths of our people in the press,” Ragnok said. “Their murders are considered beneath the notice of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. We have no voice in the Wizengamot. Our refusal to return to the Ministry is perhaps one of the few ways in which we can – express our disapproval.”
“They’re dead?” Harry sat down slowly, “I’m so sorry.”

Ragnok linked his fingers and stared down his long nose at Harry. “You mean it.”

“Of course I do!” Harry said. “Would – would they have lived if I’d got to them sooner?”

“Broben, Frolok and Wingan died at once.”

“And the fourth?” Harry asked. “If I had found him earlier, could I have saved him?”

Ragnok continued to look at him. “You did save him.”

“He’s alive?” Harry leant forward eagerly.

Ragnok nodded. “He is still recovering.”

“Oh, thank Merlin!” Harry said.

“I suppose you want him to tell you who did it?”

“What? Well, of course that would be helpful – ” Harry caught the look on Ragnok’s face. He stood up. “If you think my only concern is to find out who did it,” he snapped, “I’ll take my leave. Please send him my best wishes – “

“What about the Ministry?” Ragnok was leaning forward

“Whether you continue to work for the Ministry is your business, not mine,” Harry said. “I didn’t come on their behalf, and if you’ve read the news at all recently, you’ll know that I’ve not been too well treated by the Ministry myself. I’ve no intention of being their messenger boy. I merely came to enquire after the health of your colleagues. I’m sorry I could not have done more – “

Ragnok was on his feet. “Please sit down again, Mr Potter. I believe I have offended you.”

Harry remained standing, and looked at him. “I dislike having my motives derided,” he agreed.

“Forbin’s family are most grateful to you, and indeed, wished to contact you to make their thanks in person.”

“And you prevented that?” Harry said, realising.

“I persuaded them to bide their time a little. Forbin can thank you himself when he is a little better.”

“Is there anyway that I can help him?” Harry asked. “Potions Master Severus Snape is a good friend: I am sure he would be willing to make any potions that might aid Forbin’s recovery.”

“We have our own medical helpers.”

“I’m sure,” Harry said, “but I believe Master Snape helped goblins in a mining disaster before, which suggests he must be familiar with your anatomy. But I mean no offence.” Harry shrugged. “Well, thank you for your time, Sir. I’m glad that at least Forbin has survived, and I’m sorry for your loss. Please give my condolences to the other families.” Harry headed to the door.

“Forbin would consider it a kindness if you would visit him,” Ragnok said, as he reached it. “He has been keen to thank you in person, but he has not yet been allowed to leave his bed.”
“Then I would be honoured to call on him at his convenience,” Harry said, looking carefully at the older goblin.

“If you are free…?”

And so Harry visited Forbin at home, talked to his family and the healer-goblin, promised to bring Severus to visit, and took his leave.

Ragnok had accompanied him, staying in the background and talking to Forbin’s grandfather.

Forbin had been saved, it seemed, because he fell on the bodies of his colleagues. They had been hit by a spell like a blast-wave, which had swept them all into the lift shaft, the tallest unbroken run in the Ministry. Forbin had been behind his fellow workers, and as such the spell itself had injured his back, but his fall had been cushioned somewhat by the fact that he had been unconscious as he fell. He had come round to feel his mates underneath him. He had slipped in and out of consciousness. He didn’t know who had cast the spell, only that it had the feel of a wizard.

Harry had offered sympathy, and his promise to try and find the culprit, and to get justice for the deaths of his friends.

On their way back, Ragnok spoke at last. “I did not want to like you,” he said, voice low.

“Well, there’s no obligation,” Harry said, easily. “Though I’m at a loss to know how I could have offended you so sincerely.”

“Then you have a short memory,” the goblin snapped.

Harry looked down. “Are you – are you thinking back to when I broke into Gringotts?”

“What else?” Ragnok growled.

“Oh,” Harry said. He kept walking. “I – I know I should be sorry – but it was necessary.”

“Fat lot of good it’s done you,” the goblin grumbled.

Harry opened his mouth. He didn’t know how long goblins lived, but even in wizard terms, thirty years of peace wasn’t much.

“It was better than not doing it,” he said. “Voldemort was mad as well as bad.”

“Your current adversaries are not,” the goblin said. “That can be more dangerous.”

“You know who they are?” Harry turned in surprise. “I thought Forbin had no idea -?”

“He does not. You have to think of other ways of knowing. I’m sure you have ideas. We too have our suspicions.”

“Are you willing to share them?” Harry asked, turning to face the goblin. “I know you’ve no reason to trust wizards, but I assure you, I want to find out who is responsible.”

“Who is responsible for the destruction of the Ministry, or for the death of the Maintenance Team?”

“Both,” Harry said, without hesitation. “How can you think that I wouldn’t care about them?”

“Because your kind doesn’t.”
“I beg to differ. Not all wizards are alike.”

They were once again within Ragnok’s office, having returned via a maze of tunnels which linked Gringotts to the homes of the goblins.

“The papers said that you rescued the house-elves.”

“Yes. And it was Minister Benningdean who reminded me of them. Then they were kind enough to assist in the recovery of others.”

Ragnok sat down, and indicated that Harry do the same. He pulled a bottle and two glasses out of a desk drawer. Harry accepted the delicate glass of violet liquid.

“You were able to overcome the wards preventing apparition,” Ragnok said.

Harry nodded. Truth seemed the best way forward, and there was no reason to deny it.

“You speak to the earth too, do you not?”

“Er,” Harry said.

“You have an affinity with the natural world. I have sensed it in you. It helps explain how you managed to steal from us.”

Harry didn’t think he’d had any such affinity back then, but who was he to make judgements on what Ragnok could sense? “I’ve no intention of breaking into Gringotts,” he said, “if that helps at all.”

Ragnok laughed. It was a strange sound, rather like metal scraping over stone.

“Perhaps you’d consider working for us,” Ragnok said, tipping his head to one side.

Taken aback, Harry said, “I already have a job, thanks.”

“We are bound on our honour, of course, not to reveal clients’ private information, which they entrust to us,” Ragnok went on, as if Harry hadn’t spoken.

“You have things in your vaults that might be of – interest?” Harry said, after a moment.

“A prospective employee would need to know that certain clients prefer to keep valuable items within their own homes,” Ragnok said, watching Harry carefully.

“I see,” Harry said. “And in what way would you be involved in that?”

“We provide mining services to some clients,” he said. At Harry’s look, he continued, “underground facilities where clients can store their own valuable possessions.”

“And as an employee you could tell me about them?”

“Let us assume that you are a potential employee: I have, perhaps, told you as much as you need to know. Such vaults are often protected by the owners’ warding, if they are capable of doing so.”

“And – ” Harry thought what he wanted to ask. “Have you created any such vaults recently?”

“We have done so for centuries, and continue to respond to client’s requests.”
It was hard work reading through the subtext of Ragnok’s utterances, but Harry thought he’d been pretty helpful, considering.

“I’ll bear that in mind,” he said, and bowed.

After the stifling sense of enclosure he’d felt in the goblin’s home, it was a relief to get to Spain and work out in the open air. Harry revelled in the warmth of the sun and of the people, and regretted only that Severus was far away in Scotland.

The meetings at Hogwarts had proved useful, in that Adrian Donnelly, while having Pureblood status and a great deal of pride in it, apparently had no connection or knowledge of what his wife had been involved in. He had had no influence on the teaching of history in the school – indeed, he was interested only in the administration, and was rather taken aback by the question.

Severus and Minerva had had a very interesting talk with Peter Brown, who’d been on the point of handing in his resignation. He felt that he’d let the school down.

Minerva, who’d made no contact with the school after her retirement, for fear of treading on toes, had offered, by the end of the interview, to mentor the young man.

“He has promise,” she’d said to Snape, in some embarrassment, as they’d debriefed back at her cottage.

“Yes. He’s made some positive decisions, but I’m concerned that he’s been so easily swayed. And unaware of what’s been going on under his nose.”

“Well, I don’t think it will do the school any good to have any more upheaval at this point,” she said. “Neville’s gone, Kingsley’s replacement for him will no doubt go too, now that Donnelly is out of the way. And as well as the vacancy for Donnelly’s position, I suspect her husband will be leaving soon. I’m interested that you didn’t tell Peter to dump the Dark Arts teacher: I thought that was where you were going, with the insistence on sterling teaching there so that private clubs weren’t necessary.” She looked at him with a twinkle. “I thought you might be volunteering to teach again yoursel’.”


“Oh aye?”

“Laura Hart is Albus Potter’s – lady-friend.”

“Is she now?” she laughed. “Oh dear,” she shook her head at him, “worried about upsetting the step-children, were you?”

Severus bit his lip.

“Ach, don’t look like that, Severus,” she said, offering him another scone.

“Her exam classes have done reasonably well,” he said, stiffly.
“Aye, but they could do better, and we both know it,” she said.

They’d actually spent hours with Brown, looking over all the exam results, discussing the process for applying for upgrades for borderline students who were affected, potentially, by the events in the school year, looking at the curriculum, extra activities, changes Brown had made whilst at the school, the outcomes from them, where he wanted to take the school, and so on.

“I was thinking that I might – offer to help, as you are doing for Brown,” he said.

“Give her a bit of mentoring? That’s generous of you.”

“It could be enjoyable. I do not wish to offend her in the process.”

“And thus offend Albus?”

“I am not used to tip-toeing around people’s feelings,” he said, tight-lipped.

“You do yourself down,” Minerva said. “You’ve always been acerbic, but you’ve also been political. There’s no shame in it.”

“We have sessions with the youngsters – advanced Defence, really. Before the meetings.”

“And you enjoy that?”

“I’ve always enjoyed teaching those who’re receptive to learning.”

“Aye, that’s the crux of it for all teachers, isn’t it? Most youngsters never appreciate how lucky they are to have the opportunity to learn. Well,” she said, sipping her tea, “that sounds a very good way to go about it. Or are you worried she’ll feel she ought to be a teacher, when she’s in fact a pupil? You’ll have to overcome that – none of us ever stop learning, after all.”

“That’s true,” Snape nodded. “I was hoping that she might be attracted by the prospect of training with Harry.”

“Making bait of your man already? Och, don’t take offence! How can she not be? And Ron is there, an Auror, and Kingsley, as well as yousel’ – she’d be daft to refuse. And if you drop the appropriate hint, and she isn’t too slow on the uptake, she’ll ask you after a bit to look over her teaching plans, and there you are! Sorted!”

He laughed.

“Of course, the school could really do with a mentorship scheme for all the newer staff,” she added, as they settled. “Maybe that’s something that I could suggest to Peter. The school’s reputation has taken a bit of a bashing – we could, perhaps, get distinguished people from all the subject fields to agree to mentor new staff – make sure they’re from every background, Muggle or Pureblood or whatever – it would stop the school being so insular, and help pull it into society a bit more.”

“That’s an excellent suggestion,” Snape said. “I’m surprised you didn’t implement anything like that when you were Headmistress,” he said, raising a brow.

“The trouble is,” she said, “and you might agree with me, given the awful time it was when you had the job, but you get so taken up with the day-to-day, it’s easy to lose the bigger picture. And if the Governors aren’t pulling their weight too – well. And I got old,” she said. “I should have stopped earlier.”
“You certainly look much better now than you did when you were running things,” Snape said diplomatically.

“Aye. I feel rejuvenated, but I know my limits.” She sat back in her chair, and said, “so the book hadn’t been consulted. That points to Nott, then, I take it?”

Brown had been astonished to hear that there was a book that recorded every spell used in the school. When Minerva pulled it from the bookcase in the Headmaster’s study to show him, it was quite clear that no-one else had looked at it in some time. Snape had performed a spell on it to show when it had last been opened, and it dated back fifteen years.

“It does,” Snape agreed. “I suppose we can’t rule out Goyle, but he’s an unlikely candidate. He had barely two brain cells to rub together then, so I can’t see Atkins having any patience with him.”

“Also, he went to live in America twenty years ago.”

“Really?”

Minerva nodded. “Married an American heiress who didn’t care about his past or that he was stupid, just liked his accent. And of course, he’s got money himself.”

“Well, that does make it more interesting. I’ve no idea how old Nott fathered someone with the brains of Theodore,” he mused.

“His mother was very clever,” Minerva conceded. “Merlin’s beard,” she exclaimed, leaning forward. “She was in the same year as Atkins and Donnelly! Not the same house, mind you, she was a Ravenclaw, but still – “

“But still, indeed. You’re sure, Minerva?”

“Oh yes. I never felt they liked each other. Nott’s mother - Freya Hinch, she was then - all through school she was practically joined at the hip with a Muggle boy - another Ravenclaw, he was - David something. Now what was it?” She paused, her face screwing into even more lines as she tried to recall. She sighed when it wouldn’t come to her. “Anyway,” she continued, “she had an arranged marriage. Albus and I often joked, when Theodore came along, that she must have done the dirty with David before she married Nott.”

“You never mentioned anything to me. And he looks like Nott.”

“Well, it was just us two oldies gossiping. We liked to do that, Albus and I, over a wee dram now and then. David – Waterman, that was his name – he had black hair too. It was only gossip,” she said again. “I always thought it was Freya’s influence that stopped Theodore getting caught up in things. You know, not becoming a Death Eater like his father.”

“I don’t think so. He was as willing to bait Muggleborns as much as the next idiot: he was just better at not getting caught. It’s worth checking out, isn’t it? If he is up to his armpits in a Pureblood takeover, it’s going to be relevant if he’s actually a half-blood.”

Harry, when they discussed it later, though, wasn’t happy.

“What are we doing here?” he asked, to the mix of people around the table. “Digging up dirt on
people? Looking for where Atkins has slipped up, and Nott’s heritage? He can’t help who he is - ”

“That’s the entire point, Harry,” Hermione said. “None of us can help where we come from, so an organisation that predicates itself on birth is completely stupid. And if he is a half-blood, nothing is going to make it clearer to him.”

“Oh. I see your point,” he said. “Alright, I’m an idiot.”

People laughed, but Lucius, who only attended when he wasn’t committed to Atkins, was rather shocked by the argument. He had never imagined how he would feel if he was a half-blood. What if his mother had had an affair with a – a - Muggle? Would he feel – less validated? That he had less right to belong to society?

It was an astonishingly simple thought, and yet profoundly shocking.

“How can we establish whether he is, or isn’t?” he asked. “I know there is a birthright potion, but I imagine he’d be unlikely to consent to take it.”

Hermione looked at him with a twinkle in her eye.

“Mrs Weasley? You have an idea?” he prompted.

“I was just thinking that you could suggest to Mrs Atkins that everyone in your organisation took the potion.”

There was a rumble of interest around the table.

“On what basis?” he asked. “We’re accustomed to taking each-other’s word. We all have family trees – “

“You could merely mention,” Hermione cut across him, “that having served one man who turned out to be a half-blood, you have no intention of serving with another.”

There was a stunned silence, and then George clapped his hands. “I don’t know how you managed to snab such a brilliant woman, bro, but thank Merlin you did!”

Ron grinned happily.

“You’d need an occasion to get everyone together,” Snape said, thoughtfully.

“Atkins birthday is coming up,” Lucius said slowly. “If she takes the bait and decides to deal properly with me, I could host a party for her. It would be the ideal opportunity to meet the other British players, and if she takes me into her confidence, that’s the next step. ”

“I can’t see that being much of a party,” James said. “You know, ‘hi everyone, have a swig of this to prove you’re my sort of man’.”

There was a moment’s silence. “You might want to rephrase that,” Albus said, with a twinkle.

Everyone held their breath for the explosion.

“Yeah, yeah,” James said, “we all know I’m never going down that route. Move it on, twat.”

There was an almost audible choice not to take a big intake of breath.

“How does that potion work?” Hermione asked. “Wouldn’t you need to have a sample from the
father?"

“You can’t do it anyway,” Gloria said.

They all looked at her.

“If Nott took that – publicly or otherwise – and it proved his father was this Waterman guy, he’d know his mother had slept with another man, and a Muggle to boot. You can’t out her like that, now can you? She’s kept it quiet for half a century, near enough, eh? That’s not your secret to spill.”

“You’re right,” Hermione sighed. “You could put her in terrible danger, not to mention from a backlash from society.”

“It would be worth knowing, though, wouldn’t it?” Hugo asked, after a moment.

“We could get a DNA test done,” Hermione said.

“A what?”

“It’s a Muggle way of showing heritage,” she explained. “You’d need something he’d touched and something of his father’s.”

“Well, the first part’s easy,” Ron said.

They all looked at him in surprise.

“If he’s just had to touch it. I mean, he drinks in The Leaky now and then. Easy to get a glass he’s drunk from.”

All eyes turned to Harry.

“I don’t even know if there’ll be anything left of him!” he said. The thought of diving down to pick over Nott’s remains was – urgh!

“I’ll come with you,” Snape said.

“But you won’t use this information if it will endanger his mother,” Gloria said firmly.

“No,” Harry agreed. “Can we find out his mother’s situation?”

“I’ll see to that,” Kingsley nodded.

“How about having a big party for Atkins anyway?” George said.

“To what purpose?” Lucius asked.

“I think you ought to use Atkins birthday as an excuse, and ask every Pureblood you even vaguely know, plus the French lot. And see what happens. See who chooses to come.”

“It might be a lot of expense and trouble for little outcome,” Lucius said.

“It might,” Harry agreed, “but at some point, the ones who’re interested are going to have to put their heads over the parapet. A party for a respected member of the community will be an occasion in which they can do that easily, without too much risk.”
“What about the risk to – to Grandfather?” Scorpius asked, avoiding looking at him. “He’ll be publicly allying himself with – that lot.”

“Not all of them are going to be pricks,” Draco said. “I suspect a lot of them will just be curious.”

“Curious?” Hermione asked.

“If I’m correct, Father hasn’t entertained at Malfoy Manor since – since the Dark Lord was in residence.” He looked to his father, who nodded in agreement.

“If you’re inviting younger wizards and witches, there’ll be those who’ve never seen the house. The Manor and grounds were pretty famous in their day. Others will be curious about Father: whether he’s really entering the political arena after all these years, or whether his interest is merely a personal one in Dorothy Atkins. The fact that Atkins has been raising her profile will also provoke interest. And we’re talking just about the people who have no idea what she’s up to. And we’re relying on that, because it will mean the others might turn out. Gauge what’s going on. “

“Is Nott likely to turn up?”

“He might, if he knows that almost the entirety of Pureblood society will be there. Whether we’ll be able to see if he knows Atkins is another matter.”

“Will you attend?” Lucius looked to Draco.

People glanced from one to the other, and away.

“It would be an indication of...moving on, that people are looking for, I believe,” Lucius said, “and your position as owner of The Prophet is a powerful one. Not to mention the Harpies, which will be of more interest to others. Perhaps some of your players could come.”

“I’ll think about it,” Draco said after a moment.

“I think you should invite Nanette,” Harry said.

“At the same time as - as her husband?” Albus asked. “I don’t understand.”

“Much as Nanette is welcome here,” Harry said, “she can’t remain a prisoner in this house. It’s not fair on her. If she shows up at the party, people will see that she’s accepted, and that she has friends. Powerful friends, and that means safety for her.”

“I don’t think it would be appropriate if I was seen as…sponsoring her,” Lucius said stiffly. “At present, only her close family and Artur’s are aware of my involvement.”

“Her Highness Princess Gloria of Mtebeland might be a suitable sponsor, if you’d be so kind as to invite me,” Gloria said.

Draco’s head whipped around.

“Is that a good idea?” Ron asked. “I mean, obviously in theory it would be ideal for you to be taking a young girl under your wing, Gloria, but will the spell protect you? Surely some people will know your relationship to Kingsley?”

“Why, it’s amazing how effective the spell is, you know,” she said, easily. “And on top of that, it’s a very long time since I was Mrs Shacklebolt, or my maiden name, and before marrying the Prince, I never used to move in the sort of circles that will be at Malfoy Manor. I’ve lived abroad for such
a long time too. I don’t think you need to worry, bless you, child.”

“Forgive me if I raise another delicate matter, then,” Lucius said. “How is it that I am supposed to be acquainted with you?”

There was a moment’s silence round the table, with everyone desperately trying not to look at anyone else.

“Gloria will be with me,” Draco said quietly.

A proverbial pin dropping would have been a relief to all.

“Then I shall be delighted to welcome you both home,” Lucius said, after the briefest pause. “And I shall be very grateful for your support for Nanette, Your Highness.”

“Would anyone have any objection to me bringing Nanette in?” Harry said. “I think most of you have met her already anyway, and she’s actually given us some very useful information.”

There were general murmurs of consent.

“I think Nanette would enjoy coming to the Tuesday sessions,” Lily said. “She could do with learning a little more defence.”

Severus’ eyes met Minerva’s across the table.

“I wonder if we could also invite Miss Hart?” he asked, making Albus jump, and swivel round to look at him. “As you know, Minerva and I visited the Headmaster. A mentorship programme for new staff is now going to be implemented. I feel that it could be very beneficial for us and for Miss Hart if she could experience the teaching and learning that we engage in here.”

“Sounds a good idea,” Harry said, after a second. “I’m sure there’s lots of things she can teach us. You know, having learnt her skills elsewhere. The more diverse input the better, I’d have thought, if she’d be willing to join us. Will you ask her, Albus?”

“I’m sure she’d love to,” Albus said. “I’ll ask.”

“Can we go back to the party idea?” Draco said, suddenly. “I’ve no desire to go to a party in honour of a woman who may’ve had a hand in killing Ginny.”

“Well said,” Bill nodded.

“I don’t – well, I do – mind, if she’s there, but that’s the point, obviously. But if we changed the focus – “

“What do you have in mind?” Hermione asked.

“I’d suggest a benefit gala,” Draco said. He looked around the table. “To raise funds for rebuilding The Ministry. That would be very high profile, something we could cover in the paper, and something which might garner a different set of participants, but one in which people can opt to buy tickets, rather than just those invited. Obviously, the older families, will, I suspect, want to have a hand in it, if it’s seen as a fresh start and a chance to shape the future, which is what Atkins lot are after, and if it’s held at the Manor, it will be – more attractive, perhaps – to some of the old families.”

“Ex Death-Eaters,” Percy said.
“Yes. But it also opens it up to others.”

“Then it wouldn’t be a purely Pureblood thing,” Hermione said.

“No,” Draco agreed, “but that might make it easier for some of them to venture a foot forward.”

“And it would make it better for Lucius in the long run,” Gloria said. “An excellent idea, Draco.”

“Kingsley? What do you think?” Andy asked.

“I think it would be a very good idea,” he nodded slowly. “No-one can have any objection to it; Lucius can get the word out that it will be an opportunity for like-minded souls to talk if they wish, the Ministry will hopefully benefit, which, given the costs involved, is going to be a good thing… yes, it sounds an excellent idea.”

“There’s no reason the French lot will come,” Severus said.

“Agreed. That doesn’t really worry me at this point. We know who they are: it’s our home-grown ones we want to find out about.”

“I’ll make the preparations,” Lucius said.

“I’ll make a big splash about it in The Prophet,” Draco said.

“Well,” Gloria said cheerfully, “this should prove interesting.”
“Hold on a moment,” Hermione said.

She’d been reading through the fire report while Ron was regaling the others with a tale about a contraband magic carpet that had been confiscated by the Department of Magical Transportation, which several of them had tested out that night through the corridors of The Leaky. Ron was showing them the bruise on his elbow where he’d clipped it on a door frame taken at speed.

They fell silent, looking at her.

Ron rubbed his elbow, gave Hermione a smile, and pulled his chair a bit closer to look over his wife’s shoulder.

“It says here,” she traced a finger along the lines, “that the fire started in the labs, as we thought – ”

“We’ve been over that already,” Ron said, giving her a quizzical look.

“Yes,” Hermione said, “but it talks about the charring of the wood and crumpling of metal and how they could pinpoint the epicentre of the explosion from them….”

“Yes?” Kingsley said. “You don’t agree?”

“Oh, it’s not that,” she said, flicking over the pages. “The fire damage on every floor has been investigated. Level of charring, smoke damage, damaged metals and glass – “

“Yes?” Harry said.

Hermione looked up. “It suggests that the rooms in the Department of Mysteries were practically empty. There’s six lines to cover them all. Charred wood. That’s it.”

“Well, who knows what was down there?” Gloria asked. “We’d have to ask the Unspeakables, wouldn’t we?”

Ron had jumped straight to the point. “Are you suggesting the rooms were cleared out before the fire?”

“That’s what I’m wondering,” Hermione nodded. “There should be glass residue, from those brain tanks, Ron, the mechanisms from the Time Room, tissue remains from the brains – “

“Ugh! Lily said. “Are you saying there were pickled brains in jars down there?”

Ron looked at Hermione and Harry. “Well, there used to be live brains, with sort of tentacles down there – “

“You’re kidding!” Scorpius said.

“I wish I was,” Ron shuddered. “I had a rather unpleasant experience with them.” He glanced quickly at Lucius. It had been the night they had been under attack from the Death Eaters. From Lucius Malfoy.

“We should go and see,” Harry said, looking to Kingsley. “Is it too late?”

“All that stuff can’t have been swept away by the water?” George asked
Hermione checked back in the report. “It’s like the Death Room: at least two of them were locked, despite the fire and the water, so the contents should still have been there…”

“You’re saying someone must have stolen the contents?” James said. “How would they do that?”

“If they had a large vanishing cabinet,” Draco said, after a moment or two, “they could have got in that way, out that way, stolen what they liked…the fire would be an excellent way to hide the loss…”

“Why would anyone want to steal – brains, and stuff?” Andy shuddered.

“Could this be the real motive for the destruction of the Ministry?” Gloria asked. “Is Lucius wasting his time on that woman?”

“If Nott and Atkins are working together, it would be like killing two birds with one stone,” Ron said.

Everyone looked at him. “He worked in the Department of Mysteries. Stuff has gone conveniently missing from that Department. It was right next to where the fire started. The man we suspect of starting the fire has died in the Department of Mysteries. We know Stubbins would have known Atkins through his mother, but we don’t, at present, know any connection that he had with Nott, except that they worked on the same floor, and may – I say may – have shared the same ideals. To me, the likelihood of them working together, rather than two people acting independently, seems a more logical conclusion.”

“What do we do with this?” Minerva asked. “You haven’t any evidence….”

“I’ll raise it with Benningdean,” Kingsley said. “They’ll need to recheck the Department of Mysteries, but I’d be surprised if the elves hadn’t cleared everything by now – “

“The elves are back helping?” Lily asked in astonishment.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “I know. You think they might’ve given the Ministry a hard time, like the goblins, but they just wanted to get back in there and make it all nice again. We just about managed to persuade the pregnant ones, and the ones with young children, to stay out of it for the safety of the elflings, and we only managed that by suggesting that all the people working in places around Diagon Alley would need their help.”

“Talking of the goblins,” Harry said, “one of them lived, but he doesn’t know who killed the others. But they also said that they build private vaults for people. Seems rather pertinent, doesn’t it?”

“Will they tell you where?” Kingsley asked.

“I don’t think so,” Harry shook his head.

“They’d lose all credibility if they did so,” Lucius said.

“Even if it would help get whoever killed their own?” George asked, surprised.

“I think telling me that private vaults existed was a step more than they’d normally be prepared to take,” Harry said.

“Well, that doesn’t make much sense,” Gloria sniffed. “No offence, Harry,” she added, “but if people don’t know they provide a service, how can they ask for it?”
“So you think he wasn’t giving me much?”

“I think he was giving you enough to allow you to push him, if it was relevant,” Snape said.

“I’m stupid, then?” Harry asked.

“Don’t be daft,” Kingsley said easily, “it just sounds as if they might be having ideas along the same lines as we are.”

“I still wouldn’t expect them to help you much farther,” Lucius commented. “It would be breaking faith – “

“I think they think we’ve already broken it – “

“Because one wizard has killed some of theirs?” Ron asked.

Harry shook his head. “Because the rest of us haven’t taken their deaths seriously: there’s no hunt for whoever murdered them. They’re furious.”

Hermione nodded. “Well, they’re absolutely right; it’s just like with the elves: wizards don’t have any regard for them. There won’t be a trial, not for killing the goblins, even if we find out who did it.”

“But that’s just wrong!” Harry and Albus said together.

“I know,” she nodded.

“Can you do something about that? How do you change the law?” Harry asked.

“You know how hard it was to get anything done for the elves,” Hermione sighed.

“Yes, but they didn’t want it,” Harry pointed out. “The goblins do. Blimey, they’ve fought wars with us over goblin rights in the past, haven’t they? I remember that much from old Binns. But – I mean – they’re right, aren’t they? Either we should treat them with the same respect and rights as any wizard, or we should allow wizards to be tried in their courts. If they have them,” his brow furrowed. “I don’t really know anything about them.”

“Do you have any idea how radical that is?” Draco asked.

“It might sound it, but it isn’t really, is it?” Harry asked. “We live in the same community, work together – it’s only right that they should have the same rights.”

“You’re opening a can of worms,” Draco said.

“Why? Don’t you think they should have equal rights?” Harry demanded.

Draco opened his mouth. And shut it again. “I’ve never really thought about it.”

“Well, perhaps it’s time you did,” Harry said harshly. He looked round the table, and got his irritation under control. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to snap,” he looked back at Draco. “I have a hard job understanding why different elements of our society are treated differently. And maybe it’s something we all need to think about, even if it’s for self-serving reasons, because the goblins aren’t going to go back into the Ministry and sort out the lifts until their dead are given some respect.”

There was a silence.
“I agree with you entirely, Harry,” Minerva said.

“I’ll get some reporters to work on it,” Draco said, with a curt nod.

Harry rested back.

“Are we all done for the night?” Kingsley asked, looking around the table. “I’ll talk to Benningdean tomorrow about the potential thefts.”

“Do – do you really think Nott stole brains and stuff?” James asked.

“It makes me even more certain he had a hand in it,” Snape said quietly. “I found him once experimenting on a rodent at Hogwarts; he had no concern for the animal’s suffering. I can imagine him wanting to conduct experiments that are not considered acceptable by his Ministry colleagues.”

“Ugh, that’s creepy,” Lily shuddered.

“Yes,” Snape nodded.

“Well, on that morbid note, I’m off,” Ron said, getting up and holding out his hand to Hermione. “You’ll keep us informed of Benningdean’s plans?”

“I will,” Kingsley nodded.

People began getting up.

“Mind if some of us put in a film, Dad?” Lily came over and asked her father.

“Sure,” Harry said. Maybe he’d go and work out a bit in their training room: he liked films, but young people needed to be with each other, without him lurking around.

“Why don’t you go over to the villa?” she said. “It’s still early-ish. You look like you could do with a glass of wine under the vines.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” Harry quirked a smile at her.

“No; just an idea.” She was standing close to him, smiling up at him.

Harry was tempted. He’d love an evening with Severus and Kingsley, if they were free – he glanced over, and saw them both looking at him.

Waiting for him.

Accepting of his choice.

“Who’ll be here?” he asked.


“What’re you watching?” James asked, coming over. “I’m not doing anything tonight.”

“Can I stay?” Rose asked. “Haven’t seen a film in ages. But not if it’s a horror one! Got anything funny?”

There were plenty of them, Harry thought, to look after each other, but…
“Dad,” Albus said, “you’ve been teaching us for ages. Isn’t it time to trust that we’ve learnt something?”

Harry nodded. He had a fleeting moment of wondering whether Lucius would feel that he wasn’t being responsible enough if he weren’t there looking after Nanette, and then thought how ridiculous that was: if he trusted his own kids to be safe…and he didn’t want them feeling that they were living in fear of their lives at every minute.

He looked across at Severus and Kingsley. “Are you busy tonight, or can I come over for a bit?”

Albus snorted.

Lily stuck an elbow in Albus’ ribs.

“Hey!” Harry blushed, “Get your minds out of the gutter!”

“I’ve got a potion to attend to briefly,” Snape said, “but I could do with stretching my legs – ”

Scorpius sniggered.

“Good lord,” Kingsley said, “you can all come with us and walk round the vineyard if you like.”

“No, no,” Andy grinned, “we youngsters are far too lazy. Thanks for letting us watch your TV, Harry. Come on, everyone,” and he started leading the way out of the kitchen.

“They’re all expecting us to go back and shag!” Harry burst out, as the last left the room.

Scorpius peeked back around the door. “You do know that ‘a walk around the vineyard’ is going into the vocabulary, don’t you?” he grinned cheekily.

“Oh my god,” Harry groaned, covering his face, “I’m not a randy teenager, you know.”

Scorpius’ eyes ran over him. “No, but you look pretty fit to me.” He glanced at Kingsley and Snape. “All of you. I hope I’ve still got the stamina at your age.”

“Hey! I’m not ancient, either, you cheeky - !”

They heard him heading up the stairs, laughing.

“Bloody hell,” Harry said, “where did all that come from?”

“Acceptance, I think,” Snape said. “Including a distinct lack of protest from your oldest.”

“That’s true,” Harry said happily. “So – I didn’t mean to foist myself on you – “

“Harry,” Kingsley said, coming up beside him, a hand stroking down his back, “we meant it: we want you to see our home as home. You never have to ask.”

Harry looked at the two of them: Snape still standing with his usual reserve, Kingsley so close. “Well, can we get back then? The thought of a glass of your wine out on the terrace is making my mouth water.”

Kingsley laughed, and they turned to head up the stairs to the floo. “Only the wine? And I was really fancying that walk in the vineyard.”

Albus, who was heading down the upper stairs, snorted.
Later, Harry lay on the bed that they had made of the sunloungers underneath the bougainvillea on the terrace. The evening air was cooling down, with gentle breezes ruffling the foliage. Scents permeated the air, whilst a spell kept the insects at bay.

Sweat cooled on his body, and he turned his head slightly, pressing a kiss to Snape’s chest. Kingsley’s hand stroked soothingly down his flank.

“Alright?” Severus asked.

“Very,” Harry said, turning in the curve of his arm to smile at Kingsley. “You alright?” he asked.

“Definitely very,” Kingsley said.

Harry wiggled down between them, then jerked a little.

“Are you in pain?” Snape asked sharply.

“I – just – maybe a little,” Harry said, flushing. One look at Snape had been enough to convince him not to lie.

Snape got up. “Kingsley, look after him,” he said, and was gone.

“It’s nothing – ” Harry began.

“Severus doesn’t want you to have any negative feelings from your first time,” Kingsley said.

“But – it was great,” Harry blushed.

“You liked it?” Kingsley put his hand under his chin, looking at him carefully.

“I was a bit scared,” Harry admitted. “I don’t think I could have done it at all if I hadn’t seen you two doing it together.”

“Even after you’d seen how much I enjoyed having you in me?”

“I – I’m smaller than you and Severus,” Harry said quietly.

Kingsley laughed, and then sobered. “Does this – frighten you?” he asked, waving a hand over his genitals, now lying soft and quiescent.

“You’re even bigger than Severus,” he swallowed. “Fatter, anyway.”

“Who’re you calling fat?” Snape said, returning, a blanket in one hand and a pot in the other.

“My cock,” Kingsley grinned.

“Well, it is!” Harry protested.

“It is a bit intimidating,” Snape agreed. “I was apprehensive the first time.”

“Really?”

“I was. Turn over.”
“What?”
“I’ve got some ointment to soothe away any discomfort.”

Harry flipped over and knelt on all fours.

Kingsley groaned.

Harry’s head turned.

“What? This is what you meant, isn’t it?” he asked Snape over his shoulder.

“Well, simply lying on your side with your leg raised would have been sufficient, but I wouldn’t like to spoil Kingsley’s pleasure,” Snape said, kneeling behind him and carefully applying the ointment.

Harry knew he ought to be embarrassed, but after all they’d done, he’d thrown embarrassment out of the window and decided it wasn’t coming back in. He glanced at Kingsley as he jerked as the cool ointment hit his skin.

Kingsley’s eyes were riveted, and his cock was filling again.

Harry arched his body a little as Severus applied a little more. “Feels good,” Harry said, voice low.

“God, you’re killing me here,” Kingsley said, a hand drifting to touch himself. “Do you have any idea how incredible you two look together?”

“He’s too sore,” Snape said, his voice forbidding.

“I am,” Harry admitted, straightening as Snape screwed the lid back on the pot. “My mouth’s fine though,” he looked deliberately at Kingsley’s groin.

Snape laughed.

“Can I?”

“My turn to watch? Excellent,” Snape said, settling back.

Harry slid between the two and set to work.

Later still, he sighed, stretching under the blanket. “I suppose I ought to go.”

“Yes,” Snape said.

“You’ll stay here tonight?”

“If you don’t mind?”

“No. I mean, I like sleeping with you both, but it makes sense. I wish this was all over. That I could just stay here with you.”

Kingsley hugged him tighter
“That would be alright?” Harry said.
“I haven’t changed my mind. Severus?”
“It seems to work very well,” Snape said, stretching too. “You’re surprisingly unirritating.”
Harry laughed. “Good.” He got up, climbing out of the makeshift bed.
“Ow!” Snape bit out. “Still bloody clumsy, though.”
Harry bent and pressed a kiss against the ankle that he’d stumbled over. “Sorry. I am, I know.”
He made the tiniest motion, and was dressed.
Snape rolled his eyes at the ease of use of magic.
“You need to be careful in public with that,” Kingsley said, seriously.
“I am,” Harry nodded.
Kingsley rolled off the lounger, all bulging muscles, and sat himself, completely naked, on the wall. “People are still a bit spooked about the Ministry.”
“I know,” Harry said. “I had to save those people, though.”
“Of course you did.”
“The Minister should know how to drop the wards,” he said. “Or they should de-activate if life is at risk, or something. There needs to be more safety measures. Flooding measures, fire measures – I can’t believe there was nothing.”
“People rely on magic – “
“Much good it did them,” Harry said, shoving his hands into his jeans’ pockets.
“I agree. We just need to make sure that Atkins isn’t putting in a lot of – unwelcome – restrictions.”
“God, I hadn’t even thought of that!”
“Well, don’t think of it now,” Snape said, getting up too. “Go and get a good night’s sleep, hmm?”
He stood in front of Harry.
Harry nodded, and leant up, brushing his lips over Snape’s. It was the sort of movement that he was almost nervous to make, and yet, Snape responded positively, a hand sliding into Harry’s hair as he took the kiss and returned it with a much deeper one.
“Thank you,” Harry said, against his mouth.
Behind them, watching, Kingsley laughed.
Harry turned to him and grinned, then back to Snape. “Yes. I - I liked it.”
“Good,” Snape turned him, walking them both over to Kingsley.
Another kiss ensued, and Harry pulled away reluctantly. “I really meant for the ointment,” he said, making them both laugh.

Kingsley planted a smack on his arse, pushing him towards the house. “Begone, tease! We’ll see you tomorrow.”

Harry was still grinning as he stepped out of the floo.

“Oh my god!” Albus said, coming to check who was there. “You’re smiling! That must’ve been a bloody good walk in the vineyard!”

Harry faked a limp.

Albus’ eyes nearly bugged out of his head, before Harry straightened, and cuffed his son.

“Risky business, this walking,” he said, slinging his arm over his shoulder. “Who’s still here?”

He ended up watching a last film with them all.

The next two weeks sped past.

Harry was slightly embarrassed that he felt so happy. He spent many hours working on houses, which he found immensely satisfying, had time with his family, and nights with Severus and Kingsley, discovering how much pleasure it was possible to give and to receive.

Soon, though, Lily would be returning to France, and to everyone’s delight, Albus had secured a place at a teaching hospital in India.

Harry realised that he would actually be living, not with Severus and Kingsley, but with Nanette.

Nanette had realised the situation too.

“You have been very kind, Harry,” she said one morning at breakfast, in her careful English, “but I think it is time I found my own home.”

“I’m still worried for your safety,” Harry said. “I know you might not feel it appropriate to stay here with me – “

“It’s not that,” she said. “Gloria has been kind enough to offer me a room in her home, but you know, I think it is time I grew up and looked after myself for a bit.”

It was a sentiment that, in other circumstances, Harry would have applauded. “Have you discussed this with Lucius?” he asked.

“It is not Monsieur Malfoy’s concern,” she said stiffly.

Harry looked at her. “Really?” he said gently. “I rather thought that he’d gone to a lot of trouble to see that you were safe.”

“Yes, he has, of course,” she said, blushing. “Please do not think me ungrateful! But I do not want to be a - a weight - on him in any way. He has his own life – “
“I hope you don’t think that Mrs Atkins is anyone important to him,” Harry said. “His relationship with her is work only.”

If anything, Nanette’s cheeks flushed further. “I – it is of no matter. Lu – Monsieur Malfoy will want a woman of – of – elegance, and – and - and a clever person. It is to be expected, of course.”

Harry watched her. “And what about you?”

“Me? I am married already, am I not?”

“But hopefully not for long,” Harry said. “And then the world will be your oyster. I am sure there will be plenty of young men at your feet.”

“You forget,” she said quietly, sipping her coffee. “Nothing has changed. I am still – ” she waved her hand over her stomach, “I do not know the word. I cannot have a baby.”

Harry had forgotten for a moment. “No,” he agreed. “But you know, it’s only Purebloods who have this thing about inheritance going on – ”

“I think most men like to have children,” she said. “You wanted them, did you not?”

It was true. His children meant the world to him. “I don’t think all men are the same,” Harry said, “and even if that was the case, there are men who already have families, ready to find happiness with a new wife. Would you find a widower, or a divorced man, unacceptable?”

“A widower can no more help his state than I,” she said.

“True,” Harry said. He picked up his cup, and said casually, “Most of them are older, of course. You might not like that.”

“Older men tend to be very gallant,” she said swiftly. “I like that very much.”

“Nanette – forgive me my bluntness, but I can’t help thinking that you have some feelings for Lucius?”

Her hands went up to her cheeks. “Oh!” she said, blushing prettily. “Is it so obvious?”

It was, Harry thought, but…”Your behaviour is always perfectly respectable,” he said.

“I – I wouldn’t embarrass Monsieur Malfoy for the world!”

“Of course you wouldn’t,” Harry said. “And you don’t.”

“It is just that he has been so kind to me – “

“Is that all it is?” Harry asked softly.

Her eyes darted to his and away again. She wrung her hands.

“I didn’t mean to upset you,” Harry said.

“I – I’ve tried not to love him,” she said at last, her words rushing out. “But – I can’t! So – so I’ve tried instead to – to tuck it in. To hide it,” she went on, her fist over her heart. “That is not bad of me, is it? If I hide it away? I can’t help how I feel!”

“Of course you can’t,” Harry nodded, patting her hand. “Feelings do what they want, don’t they?”
She sniffed a little laugh, and nodded.

“I know you will not like me saying this,” Harry said, “because I know Lucius treats you with courtesy and respect, and I do believe he will continue to do so. But I’ve known him for a long time, and he’s not all gallantry, Nanette. He is – can be – a very dangerous man.”

To Harry’s surprise, Nanette nodded. “I know.”

“I don’t think you do – “

“I have read everything I could get my hands on about your war,” she said simply. “I know he was at Voldemort’s side, and that he did bad things. That he went to prison. But he’s – what is it you say? - served his time. Has he been bad since?”

“I don’t know,” Harry said, taken aback.

“There is not much point in prison if we don’t believe people should be able to start – new - afterwards, is there?” she asked.

Harry opened his mouth and shut it again.

“We have to believe people change, non?” she asked. “I have changed. I’m not the simple girl I was a year ago.”

Harry nodded. He could understand that.

“So you see, I will always respect him and hold him in the highest regard,” she said. “And I need to make it so that he does not feel that I am a - a nuisance to him.”

“I don’t think he finds you a nuisance,” Harry said, honestly. “And I think you’ve helped him find a more human side – “

“He is very human!” she flashed.

Harry nodded. “Yes. Perhaps I meant a kinder side.”

“Then – then I am pleased that I have been able to do something small for him in return.”

Harry looked at her. He didn’t think she appreciated the enormity of what she had achieved, but it probably wasn’t wise to tell her.

“Do you think there are any other ways that I could thank him?” she asked quietly. “He has done so much for me.”

“I don’t think I’m the right person to ask,” Harry said. Thinking of nice things to do for Lucius Malfoy hardly featured on his agenda.

“No? Then who? He barely talks to his son or his grandson, I think.”

“No. There’s been a long history there,” Harry acknowledged.

“Perhaps that is my answer, then,” she said, smiling. “Merci, Harry.”

Harry opened his mouth to warn her off, and once again shut it.

If anyone could work a miracle with regard to Lucius Malfoy, he was pretty sure it was Nanette.
In Paris, Artur stared at the article in *Paris Soir* and drummed his fingers.

There was a picture of Lucius Malfoy, that Atkins woman hanging on his arm, smiling up at him. Fury built in his stomach, and he took another gulp of his wine.

“What do you think?” Albert was saying. “I for one would like to see the famous Malfoy Manor.” He bent forward, whispering gleefully, “They say the Dark Lord tortured people there. Do you think there are bloodstains on the table? In the dungeons? Does an English Manor have dungeons, or is that only castles?”

“I think his house-elves would be inept if they haven’t cleaned it up by now,” Léonie raised an eyebrow. “That was years ago.”

“Yes, but he always struck me as the sort,” Albert said. “I imagine he likes inflicting pain. Maybe when he’s having sex; with a whip, and – ”

“Enough!” Artur roared, furious at the thought of Malfoy having sex at all after what he had done to him. As for inflicting pain – Malfoy was more subtle than a whip-wielding dungeon-master, wasn’t he? He had made him suffer. His cock was as quiescent as an infant’s, a thing useful only for pissing. No matter what he did to it, no matter who sucked it, or banged his prostate, there was fucking nothing going on there! Nothing! And that bastard expected him to apologise before anything was going to change?

Well, he did not know Artur Sebastien Brouchard!

“I’m going,” Artur said.

“You are?” Léonie looked surprised. “I thought you didn’t like Malfoy?”

“I don’t,” he snarled. “Know your enemy.”

She laughed. “And will you take Nanette with you? I always thought she had a tenderness for Lucius: I shouldn’t leave them alone, if I were you,” she tittered.

Artur ground his teeth. He had not yet told his friends of Nanette’s disappearance – and that was Malfoy’s fault too. What if she were there with him? But then, he always had that Atkins woman on his arm.

“My wife is a bore,” he said. “If she wants to go, she can get her own ticket.” That would cover if she was there, he thought.

“But surely your ticket is bought with her money too?” Léonie smirked. “I’m sure it took a rather nice dowry for you to take on someone who ‘bores’ you already?”

Artur allowed Léonie the pleasure of her sarcasm. “You’re right, as always, Mam’selle Laval. I think we’ll have a bottle of something vintage – at her expense – to toast her with.”

He turned and snapped his fingers at a waiter as they laughed.
Harry stepped out of the floo at Malfoy Manor, trying to tamp down the feelings that were squirming in his stomach.

The last time he’d been in the property he’d been seventeen, and terrified. Malfoy had been almost crazy. In retrospect, Harry wondered how much of that had been due to fear for his family, and the terror of having the Dark Lord permanently in his house. Harry had found his visits in his brain bad enough: the thought of Voldemort’s physical presence twenty four hours a day was horrifying.

Harry wondered at what point the Malfoys had realised he was completely barking. Draco had been beside himself the time when Harry had found him in the girls’ bathroom crying.

He had responded by using *Sectumsempra* on him.

How bizarre was it that one’s past should come back to haunt one so badly.

If he had done things differently then…

But he hadn’t.

He had been a boy himself, way out of his depth.

He wasn’t going to allow himself to feel overwhelmed now.

This house, in theory, was his.

“Mr Potter,” Lucius said, coming towards him. He was looking elegant, as ever, in a deep blue robe. “Forgive me for not being prepared to receive you.”

“I expect I should ask your forgiveness for arriving unannounced,” Harry said, “but let’s not play games.”

Lucius stiffened. “Would you like me to show you around the Manor? You will want to see the nature of your assets, of course –”

“Don’t be silly,” Harry said abruptly. “I came because of the ticket sales.”

“Yes?”

“Artur and some of his gang have bought tickets. Nanette’s father too.”

“Do come through,” Lucius said. “You may wish to see the ballroom and the preparations at least, whilst you are here. Hetty!”

The elf appeared, bowing first to Harry and then to Malfoy. “What can Hetty be getting the Masters?”

“Refreshments, please, on the terrace.”

Harry opened his mouth to decline, and realised that the terrace was perhaps the best place of all to talk. The house itself made him itch with the desire to get out of it. Was Lucius being tactful?

“Tea would be lovely, thank you, Hetty,” he nodded at the elf, who bobbed a curtsey and
disappeared with a clap.

“She obeys you, of course.”

“Yes,” Harry said. “And actually, although I don’t want a tour of the house, or to offend you, I have a belated obligation to Hetty that I’ve been rather remiss about. If you would allow me to see her quarters and make any changes, after we’ve spoken?”

Lucius stopped and turned, leaning on his cane. “You want to make changes to my house-elf quarters?”

“I’ve no idea. They might be perfectly glorious. Have you seen them recently?”

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“I thought not. I hadn’t looked at mine either. Hetty helped me make arrangements for the arrival of an elfling and the baby’s father. It’s appropriate for me to ensure that all elves for whom I have a responsibility are living in conditions that meet their needs. Hetty isn’t as young as she was, I suspect – “

“Are you attempting to soften your actions so as not to offend me? You need not, I assure you.”

“Good,” Harry said, determined not to take offence in return. “I’ll see her after we’ve talked, then.”

They didn’t speak again until they were sitting on the terrace on ornate ironwork chairs, at a table now laden with not only a tea tray but a small feast of tiny sandwiches and cakes.

Harry noticed that there were two pots.

“It seems Hetty is aware your taste differs from mine,” Lucius said, lifting a lid and sniffing.

“She helped deliver my elfling too,” Harry said.

“Everyone falls at your feet, do they not?”

“Not quite, no,” Harry said tightly.

Lucius poured. Harry helped himself to a sandwich.

“I invited Henri Odont,” Lucius said. “I know Nanette misses him, and I thought it was a – controlled environment – for them to meet.”

“That was a good idea,” Harry agreed, after a moment. “Does Nanette know?”

“Not yet. I haven’t seen her for a couple of days.”

“She’s planning on moving into her own home,” Harry said, and was rather satisfied to see the momentary flash of Lucius’ eyes.

“She is unhappy in yours?”

“I hope not,” Harry said, “but Lily’ll be returning to school soon, and Nanette really doesn’t feel it appropriate to be living with a single man alone.”

There was a second’s pause. “I didn’t think you lived alone,” Lucius murmured. “Or are you getting rid of Nanette to make your own ménage-a-trois easier?”
Harry looked at Lucius, cup paused on the way to his mouth.

“You brought Nanette into my care, Lucius. I don’t believe that I have shirked my responsibility towards her in any way. Not since failing to stop her marriage, at least.”

“I apologise,” Lucius said, shocking Harry. “I was – I had not thought of her living alone. It’s not safe.”

“Well, she’s quite determined. Gloria offered her a room, but she wants to be independent.”

“Gloria –” Lucius said faintly.

Harry held back a grin. “Nanette is determined to ‘grow up’, I think is her view,” he said.

“She’s just a girl!” Lucius said sharply.

“She’s a married woman. But I know what you’re saying,” Harry said, gentling his tone. “I think we need to ensure her home, wherever she chooses to go, is as thoroughly warded as possible. And we need to keep an eye on Artur at the benefit. I can’t imagine that he’s chosen to come for the sake of improving Anglo-French relations.”

“He may be taking the opportunity to apologise,” Lucius said, after a moment.

Harry raised an eyebrow.

“You were otherwise engaged when I saw him after the wedding. He was about to rape Nanette; then he suggested we both have her. He’d used a potion to get an erection; I relieved him of it. Permanently, or until he apologises, as a starting point,” Lucius said.

“I didn’t know that,” Harry nodded. “I’m sorry I left you to deal with it on your own.”

“I’m glad you did,” Lucius said.

“Yeah?”

“You may have been more merciful. He didn’t deserve it.”

“No,” Harry agreed. He reached for the pot, and poured himself more tea. “He’s going to be pissed, though.”

“Oh yes. But if he’s got any sense, he’ll know he has to behave himself if he wants to resume his activities.”

“Yes, but has he got sense?” Harry mused.

Lucius’ face tightened.

“I’ll ask Kingsley to provide some protection for her.”

Lucius stood up. He walked across to the balustrade, staring out over the land that was no longer his.

“I did not think to put her at greater risk from my actions,” he said.

Harry crossed a leg over his knee. “What were your alternatives?” he asked.
Lucius glanced a look back at him.

“Exactly,” Harry said. “But if you’d killed him – you’d be back in Azkaban, or worse.”

“She would have been safe.”

Harry remained quiet. Did Lucius know what he’d revealed? That he’d give his own life and liberty for Nanette?

“Had I killed him, there would have been consequences for you,” Lucius said, turning to face Harry.

“Hold on,” Harry stood up, frowning. “Are you saying you didn’t because of me?”

“You have been honourable in your treatment of me,” Lucius said haughtily. “I hoped that I could avert Nanette’s difficulties without – but I must warn you, that if I think her to be in danger, I will kill Artur.”

“You killed Balcon,” Harry said, still confused.

Lucius looked at him. “And I expected that I might lose my life because of it. But it would not have reflected badly on you: it was –”

“Merciful?”

Lucius inclined his head.

“And killing Artur would not be. Yes, I see.”

“Nanette was there, too, of course. And it would have caused - a scandal.”

Harry choked a laugh. “Yes, just a little. So, do you think he’s coming to – apologise? Not that I expect him to mean it, but I can see why he’d go through the motions.”

“It would be easier to do that privately,” Lucius said.

“So we can expect trouble,” Harry sighed.

“‘I don’t think Nanette should come,” Lucius said abruptly. “I can arrange for her to see her father elsewhere –”

“I suspect it’s you Artur’s going to tackle, rather than Nanette,” Harry said.

“It’s too dangerous for her,” Lucius snapped.

“I don’t think it would be fair to stop her doing things because of the stupidity of others,” Harry said quietly.

“You don’t understand –”

“Of course I do,” Harry cut across him. “I have a daughter, don’t I? But if anything, your experience with Mrs Atkins – not to mention Bellatrix, back in the day – should be enough to tell you it’s foolish to underestimate witches.”

“Nanette is not like them,” Lucius said.
“I know. I agree. But she’s had men ordering her life about too much already. I think we should tell her about Artur; if she chooses not to come, that’s fine. But if she wants to – ”

“We allow her to walk into danger?” Lucius snarled.

“It isn’t about us allowing her,” Harry said. “If she feels she would rather confront Artur – when she has the protection of friends – ”

“I cannot be at her side every minute,” Lucius said. “It would give the wrong impression – damage her reputation – ”

“You are not her only friend,” Harry said firmly. “But if she wants to come, I think it might be a good idea for you to show her around beforehand, so that she’s familiar with your house.”

Lucius raised a puzzled eyebrow.

“It will give her an advantage over Artur, should anything go wrong. If you have a safe room that she could seek out – ”

“Yes, I see. Thank you,” Lucius nodded.

“What does Atkins think about the benefit?” Harry changed the subject. “Has she made any comments?”

“She’s furious that Benningdean has set up a committee to decide how best to spend the proceeds. She’s hoping to increase the size of the Auror force, on the principal that if the Ministry can be attacked, then we need more protection. And she thinks you’re dangerous.”

Harry nodded. “I am, to her, I suppose.”

“Of course. But she hopes to convince others too. Your power has been used for good, but people are fickle. She’ll try to exploit that.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Harry agreed.

“You’re allowing people to think that I’m funding the entire event, with all the ticket revenue going to the Ministry Fund. It would have been better for you if people knew it was your money,” Lucius said, leaning his derriere on the balustrade, and still managing to look elegant.

“It’s your vaults it’s coming from,” Harry said.

“Which belong to you.”

“Yes, but I don’t need or want your money. But I don’t mind spending some on – reparations,” Harry said, looking directly at Lucius.

“She could so easily turn the Wizarding World against you,” Lucius said. “Doesn’t that bother you? Why should you fund anything in it?”

“Because I’m a wizard, and glad to be one,” Harry said.

“You could have so much power,” Lucius suggested after a moment.

Harry looked him straight in the eye. “I have power.”

Lucius’ lips twisted. “So you do. Don’t you wish to have power over people? You could, so
Harry tucked in the chair. “I find the responsibility of power over one person,” he looked at Lucius, “more than enough.”

Lucius laughed.

“Right, I’ve things to do. If I might go and see Hetty?”

Lucius nodded his acquiescence, and Harry spent an informative hour or two in the heart of Malfoy Manor.

“Of course I wish to go,” Nanette said, her fierce tone belying her pale face. “Who knows what Artur will try to do to Monsieur Malfoy if I am not there?”

“Well, Lucius is worried for you, rather than himself,” Harry said.

Behind Nanette’s head, Lily was grinning at him.

“Perhaps you could teach me some – some nasty spells?” Nanette looked hopefully at Harry.

“Dad never teaches us nasty spells,” Lily said, leaning forward. “Only defensive ones. You have to ask George for those,” she whispered the last, loud enough for Harry to hear.

“You can teach me, then? What George has taught you?” Nanette asked Lily.

“You both need to be careful,” Harry said sharply. “Don’t ever use a spell that you don’t fully understand, alright? I’ve done that, and it’s not a good idea.”

“But anything else is okay?” Lily raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, if you don’t mind being arrested and sent to Azkaban,” Harry agreed.

“Oh. Damn, I should have known there was a catch,” his daughter rolled her eyes.

“But if you use a spell in self-defence?” Nanette asked.

“That’s why I teach defensive spells,” Harry said. “They’re automatically acceptable, and there’s no question about prosecution. Ask Ron: he was an Auror,” he added in explanation.

“No one’s going to hurt anyone at a party, are they?” Lily looked at her father. “Who’s going to be there, anyway, Dad?”

“Anyone willing to cough up the ticket price to help rebuild the Ministry,” Harry shrugged. “The handy thing about having to pay is that we’ve actually got the list of people going, give or take a bit of Polyjuice use.”

“How much profit will it make?” Lily asked. “After all the expenses?”

“It’s all profit: Lucius is paying for everything.”

“But that’s –” Lily stopped, glanced at Nanette, and went red.
“I know your father owns Lucius,” Nanette said quietly. “He told me.”

“I don’t think anyone could really own Lucius,” Harry said, “but it seemed a good use of the money.”

“Really?” Lily continued, trying to move the subject on from the awkwardness she had created. “What’s going to come out of it? I mean, it’s not just Purebloods that are going to go, is it?”

“I hope not,” Harry said. “As far as I can see, unless Purebloods, Muggleborns and everything in between start mixing, start finding some common ground, things are never going to get better.”

“Did I miss something at one of the meetings?” Lily’s brow furrowed.

Harry shook his head. “I know we started off thinking about getting Nott and Atkins in the same room, and flushing out some conspirators, but I’ve been watching the names roll in. There are just as many Muggleborns and non-Purebloods wanting to put the Ministry back together, to have a part in it. It’s quite heart-warming really, and it makes me have hope for the future.”

“So: shall I come then?” Lily asked. “I didn’t think before – ”

“If you’d like to, that would be good, yes,” Harry nodded.

“Oh good,” Nanette smiled at Lily.

“We’ll both ask George,” Lily grinned.

“I think I’d better come and see what he’s teaching you,” Harry shook his head at the pair of them.

Harry talked to Kingsley and Severus in bed that night. They’d made love, and Harry was lying facing Severus, who had his back tucked against Kingsley’s front.

“It’s an interesting idea,” Kingsley said, over Snape’s shoulder. “Crush the rebellion by defeating the need for it.”

“People haven’t really had a reason to mix before,” Harry said. “It sort of breeds fear, and dislike, doesn’t it? If they all have a common cause, and find each other actually nice people – ”

“You might be wishing for a bit much there,” Kingsley snorted.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I think it’s the way forward. Look at Lucius.”

“In bed? Do I have to?” Severus sighed dramatically.

Harry grinned, and Kingsley gave him a squeeze. “I always wondered if you’d had a thing for him. You know, in the past. In the ranks.”

Harry could hear the real curiosity in Kingsley’s tone.

“Please,” Snape said, turning a bit to look Kingsley in the eye. “Are you serious? Lucius? He’s so – pale.”

Harry laughed.
Kingsley grinned. “You like them dark-skinned or dark-haired?” He smiled across at Harry.

“I like them not into the Dark Arts, at the least,” Snape said. “ Seriously?” He looked at Kingsley again. “All these years and you wondered if I’d had a thing for Malfoy? Whatever made you even consider it?”

Kingsley shrugged. “You knew the family well. You took that vow with his wife. Kept your eye on Draco – ”

“And you deduced from that that I fancied Lucius?”

“Well, I didn’t think it was Narcissa.”

“Or Draco, I hope,” Harry shuddered. “He was your pupil.”

“You were my pupil,” Snape retorted.

“Yeah, but you didn’t fancy me then.”

Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry shot up in bed. “You did not!”

Snape looked him over.

Harry stared at him open-mouthed.

“Of course I didn’t,” Snape smirked at last. “Don’t be so gullible.”

“Oh my god,” Harry said, settling back again. “You bastard.”

“I thought you looked quite handsome then,” Kingsley said.

“He was scrawny,” Snape objected.

“Yes, but I liked your hair. Still do,” Kingsley reached across and ruffled it.

Harry grinned. “This is weird. Isn’t it?”

“Weird is Draco and my mother,” Kingsley said. “Puts everything else into perspective. We’re positively boringly ordinary.”

“Apart from the gay thing,” Harry smiled.

“Well, there is that,” Kingsley agreed, smoothing a hand over Snape’s stomach.

“It bothers you?” Harry asked, watching that hand.

“Not really,” Kingsley sighed. “Mum knows what she’s doing.”

“Having sex with a fit young thing,” Snape said. “Quite understandable.” His eyes perused Harry.

“You’re both fit,” Harry said. “I like watching you together.”

“Good,” Kingsley said, bending over and kissing Snape thoroughly.

“I’ll get all horny again,” Harry said, feeling himself stirring already.
“What a dreadful pity,” Snape said, sliding a hand towards Harry and tweaking a nipple.

Harry groaned.

“What was that about Lucius?” Kingsley asked.

“Now?” Harry complained.

“Mmm.” Kingsley had taken Severus’ cock into his hand.

“I’ve forgotten what I was saying,” Harry said. He shifted his own hips forward, and Kingsley took hold of them both in his large hand. “Nnngh,” Harry groaned, reaching up to kiss Kingsley over Snape’s shoulder.

“I suspect,” Snape said, as they pulled apart, “that you were going to say that Lucius is a lot easier to bear when you know him. I would advise caution, none the less. And now, let’s not mention him in this bed again, hmm?”

“Agreed,” Harry gasped, as their mouths met together, and everything else was forgotten.
Harry had been right about the Benefit Gala. Half of the wizarding world appeared to have turned up: Purebloods, Muggleborns, the politically committed, the incurably curious.

Henri Odont appeared early; Lucius provided a private room for Nanette to talk to him in.

“I don’t know what to say,” Henri Odont said, sitting forward and wringing his hands.

Nanette regarded her father. Ever since she had been taken out of school, she had seen him every day, day in, day out. Until she had come to England.

It was – odd – to see him with fresh eyes. He’d lost a little weight, and the skin around his jowls seemed loose.

“I never meant you to be unhappy,” he said. “I thought it was for the best…”

“I told you I did not wish to marry him,” Nanette said, astonishing herself by the firmness of her voice.

“Yes, but – ”

“But what, Papa? What else did you need to know?”

“I needed to assure your future – ”

“I wouldn’t have had a future with Artur. I would have killed myself, or him, rather than let that slimy toad rape me.”

“But don’t you see? The fact that he wanted to – I mean, there’s hope that he’s – normal. That you could have a normal relationship – ”

Nanette stood up. “Didn’t you hear me? He was going to rape me. He hit me.” Her hand unconsciously touched her cheek. “On our wedding night. You expect me to – to accept that? And you seem to forget: if Artur were capable of normal relations with a woman, he wouldn’t have married me.” She took a step or two away, then turned back. “I - it hurts that you care so little for me – that you’re still thinking of this from his point of view! I – I really don’t think we have anything else to say – ” she walked with quick steps towards the door -

“Nanette – ” Henri too stood, reaching out a hand. “I - I changed my will! Like Malfoy suggested! You have nothing to fear from Artur now – ”

Her head whipped round. “You think I should be – satisfied - that my husband has no motive to kill me? You think that I could have a happy marriage, then? That that solves everything?” She pulled herself up. “You led me to believe that you loved my mother. All these years, I thought you knew what love was.” She shook her head. “I was a fool.”

“No – ”

“I’m sorry, Papa, I don’t feel I can talk to you civilly at the moment. Thank you for coming to England, but you need have no concern: I have no intention of returning to France. I will not be an embarrassment to you, if that’s what you’re worrying about.”
“How can you think – what will you do? You cannot live alone –”

“How can you think – what will you do? You cannot live alone –”

“Of course I can! I’m a married woman after all, and had I had any sense, I would’ve realised that even as a single woman, I could’ve done the same.”

“But – you have no support – you cannot live with Mr Malfoy, surely –”

“Of course I do not live with Mr Malfoy!” she snapped. She took a breath. “Surprising as it may seem, and despite everything I’d been told to the contrary, the English are a very warm and kind people. I have many friends here, and many offers of a home. But you know, Mother left me her fortune, and I am perfectly capable of looking after myself. I have a job, and –”

“A job? Doing what?”

“Your confidence in me is inspiring,” she said, horrified to realise how helpless her father believed her to be.

How useless.

How she had let him believe she was.

How she had thought she was.

“Something I enjoy,” she said abruptly. “Good evening, Papa. Enjoy the party.”

She exited the room with all the grace that she could muster. She blinked away tears as she bustled down the hall.

Lucius appeared.

“Ah, Nanette,” he said, cutting off Lily who was also heading towards her. “I wonder if I could ask your advice?”

“Monsieur?” she queried, confused and unable to think straight.

Lucius opened a door, and scooped her inside.

“It went badly?” he asked quietly, handing her a fine lawn handkerchief.

She strode across the room. “I – I’m sorry –”

“What have you to be sorry for?” he said gently.

“I’m so angry!” she burst out, turning her back to him, looking out of the window over the manicured lawns, and the laughing groups enjoying themselves.

“I’m pleased to hear it,” he said, coming to stand beside her.

“You – you’re not – disgusted? A daughter should not be angry with her father, should she?”

“Not if her father treats her properly, no.”

She was silent, pulling the hanky between her fingers.

“He – it – it was wrong of him. Not to listen to me, when I said no. Wasn’t it?” she asked.

“It was,” he agreed.
Another couple of minutes passed.

“I – I’d hoped that he would apologise, and that I would forgive him, and that we would be happy again,” she admitted.

“I can understand that it must hurt,” he said. “I’m sorry that I cannot ease your burden.”

“It’s not your fault,” she shrugged, “you’ve shown me nothing but kindness. I’ve not thanked you enough –”

“Shshh. I do not need thanking for doing what any gentleman would do.”

“I wish that the latter were true,” she said. “I always thought my father was the perfect gentleman.”

“It’s hard to be disappointed in one’s own father,” he said, then stopped abruptly.

“Mons - Lucius?”

His gaze returned to her. “A passing thought.”

She kept looking at him.

“I’ve disappointed my own son,” he admitted.

“Do you think – do you think things can ever be what they were?” she whispered.

He looked out of the window.

“I don’t think we can turn back the clock,” he said, voice devoid of emotion.

“But – but maybe in time – things can be right again? I can’t face looking at my father just now, but – but he’s my father,” she swallowed. “It means something.”

“Only if you want it to,” he said.

When the idea had first been proposed, it hadn’t occurred to Harry that he would be present in person, rather than invisible, or that his family would all be there, making themselves at ease in the grounds of Malfoy Manor.

Somehow, being there, with people all around, enjoying the place, chatting gaily, eased away the lingering horrors of the place.

Hermione and Ron had decided not to come. Harry could understand that. Scorpius and Andy were also absent. Harry didn’t know whether to be glad of that or not. They still needed the Pureblood conspirators to feel that Lucius was their man, and a potential leader for them. Having non-Purebloods in his home as part of the benefit could be seen as a political move; but his history with his family was well known. The fact that his son was present was perhaps enough of a revelation for one day, and might suggest to them that Lucius might be able to sway his son, and the newspaper he owned, in their favour.

Harry had bought a whole clutch of tickets, though, and thrown them on the table at one of the meetings, so that anyone who wanted to come could: money was not to be an issue.
His own presence was not unexpected, given his role at the fire, and several of the Muggleborns he’d saved had also bought tickets, and taken the opportunity to thank him again.

He’d seen Theodore Nott, with a woman he presumed was his wife, but as yet their orbits hadn’t crossed.

He’d spent some time chatting to George, the only Weasley present.

Benningdean was there, of course, convivial and working the crowd.

Kingsley was monitoring things from his office, but to Harry’s surprise, Severus had come.

Severus’ known links with the Death Eaters and Malfoy, and yet his spying, would undoubtedly raise eyebrows, even among those who did not know of his preference for men or relationship with Kingsley.

People would know that he was a brilliant Potions’ Master, that he had been involved in helping those at the Ministry fire.

And that it was his invention that had saved the life of Lucius Malfoy’s son in court.

It was an astonishingly interesting mix of people, and could have been fraught with tension.

Instead, the sound of strings floated over the garden from the musicians ensconced on the terrace. Late roses were blooming, scenting the air. The conversations sounded jolly.

People seemed to be happy celebrating life, rather than thinking of those who had died in the fire. In deference to them, the event had been kept low-key – as low-key as a grand gala at Malfoy Manor could be. There was no formal dinner, nor speeches, nor dancing, but drinks and canapés and conversation in the beauty of an English garden. Within an hour, though, one of the relatives of the gobstones players had started dancing a waltz to the music, and encouraged others to do the same, declaring that Declan, who had died, had loved a good knees-up and would hate to see them being all sombre on his account.

Now, several couples danced gaily on the lawn in front of the terrace, and the musicians had moved on to some of the more lively material from their repertoire.

Harry saw Nott talking to Thomas Wilkes, and held back a smirk.

It seemed that Harry and Ron had become something in the nature of heroes among house-elves everywhere, following the rescue at the Ministry. Ron had suggested asking if Toaster might be willing to replace one of Wilkes’ robe buttons with one of George’s, and so it was that Wilkes was transmitting even now.

Atkins was there, of course, staying close to Lucius as if she were the chatelaine of the Manor, or had, in any way, been responsible for the event.

There was no sign of Artur, though, and Harry could see that Gloria had Nanette under her wing. He moved closer as he saw Henri Odont striding up to them.

“…if I could have another word, Nanette -”

“Papa,” he heard Nanette say, her tone one of enforced patience.
“Ah, you are Nanette’s father, are you?” Gloria’s tone was chilly as she raked her eyes over Henri.

Henri pulled in his stomach. “I don’t believe I have the pleasure…” he faltered, taking in the glory that was Gloria.

She was wearing vermilion silk, with a swirling pattern of greens and magenta. A matching headdress was adorned with the most enormous emerald in the centre, her cleavage was enhanced by a dazzling emerald and diamond necklace, set in ornate gold, several gold hoops were fixed in her ears, looped together by gold chains, and her arms jangled with every movement from dozens of bracelets. She wore no rings, but instead, each finger nail was carefully painted, and appeared to have a small emerald magically fixed to its centre.

“Papa, may I present Her Highness Princess Gloria of Mtebeland,” Nanette said. “Gloria, this is my father, Henri Odont.”

Harry wanted to laugh at the look on Odont’s face. He was obviously struggling to credit that his daughter knew this vision, who was an actual princess. What’s more, she was on first name terms with her.

“I – I am honoured to make your acquaintance,” he stuttered, bowing low.

Gloria fanned herself with a peacock-feather fan, and inclined her head regally, as if she were used to such fawning.

Perhaps she had been, Harry thought, though it was a very different persona she presented than the relaxed and amusing one that had them shocked and in stitches around the table in the evening.

“Your daughter is a delight,” she said, in fluent French, patting Nanette’s arm.

Harry threw up a quick translation spell.

“I’ve asked her to stay a while with me, but alas!”

Nanette smiled at her. “You’re very kind, but – ”

A hand brushed Harry. He turned round, seeing Lily going to join the fray.

“Nanette!” she said. “Your Highness,” she curtsied.

Harry almost choked.

Henri didn’t seem to know what to do with his hands, and bowed a little again himself.

“Forgive me interrupting you,” Lily flashed a smile between them, “I just wanted to check whether Nanette was able to give me another lesson tomorrow. I’ll be returning to school this week, and it’s been such a help.”

“Of course, Lily,” Nanette took up the ruse. “You’ll be fine. Her French is excellent, n’est-ce pas, Papa? Oh, do let me introduce you! Lily, this is my father, Henri Odont. Papa, Miss Lily Potter.”

“How interesting to meet you,” Lily did not hold out her hand. “How fortunate for us that you care so much for our Ministry.”

“Pardon, Mademoiselle?” Odont said in confusion.

“Why, to buy a ticket to this benefit. I didn’t expect interest from other countries.”
“I came to see my daughter,” Odont said, brows drawing together.

“Oh. Really? Gosh, how lucky I am that my father and I are so close,” Lily shrugged. “I can’t imagine not seeing my father whenever I wanted,” she smiled over to Harry.

Odont followed her glance.

Harry straightened, and came over. “Lils. Nanette, good to see you again. Gloria, you’re looking stunning, as ever,” he smiled.

Gloria pulled him forward and kissed him on both cheeks.

Harry turned to Odont, and raised a quizzical eye.

“Henri Odont, Monsieur,” the man gave a nod. “And you are – Monsieur Potter, yes?” he glanced at Lily.

“This is Mr Harry Potter, Papa,” Nanette said, enunciating the name clearly.

Again, Odont’s eyes widened as he realised that this was the Harry Potter. And his daughter was teaching his child!

“It’s been a pleasure to make the acquaintance of your daughter,” Harry said, as if he didn’t take breakfast with her every day. “She is a most special woman.”

“I – indeed,” Odont said.

“Nanette is an excellent addition to British society,” Gloria beamed. “Your loss is our gain,” she said, to Odont. “I hope you will stay in England for many years, my dear,” she patted Nanette’s arm, holding her so that Nanette was nestled against her ample side.

Draco strolled up. “Here we are,” he said, holding three glasses of champagne. He handed one to Gloria, the second to Nanette, and then offered the third to Lily: “Would you like one too, Miss Potter? I didn’t know you were here.”

“I just wanted a word with Nanette, thanks,” she refused. “I’m just going to have a word with my brother, if you’ll excuse me,” and she was gone.

Draco moved into position on the other side of Gloria. Nanette stood between Gloria and Harry.

Draco nodded at Harry, then looked at Odont.

“May I present my father, Henri Odont, Mr Malfoy?” Nanette asked. “Father, this is Mr Draco Malfoy.”

Draco did not extend his hand. His glance over Odont could rival his father’s for disdain. “Monsieur Odont,” he acknowledged blandly.

“I – your grounds here are quite amazing,” Odont said, trying to find something to say.

Draco looked around. “I suppose they are. We had white peacocks when I was a child. Horrid beasts,” he said.

Odont laughed awkwardly.

“Just admit it, dear,” Gloria said, “you hate the place.”
Draco shrugged laconically. “Hate? Perhaps that’s too strong a word. It’s the first time I’ve seen it in over thirty years, and I won’t care if it’s as many years again.”

“You – you don’t visit your father?” Odont queried.

“Family relationships can be over-rated, I find,” Draco said coolly. “One of my reporters is writing an article on arranged marriages, for example. Perhaps you would care to be interviewed? I understand you arranged your daughter’s. So unusual these days to not allow women to choose their own destiny. Perhaps you’d like to give the father’s viewpoint? And is that your son-in-law I see?” he asked, gesturing with a hand towards Artur, who was walking along one of the gravel paths, accompanied by Léonie Laval and two other young men.

Nanette tensed. Odont looked wildly around, but Artur, noticing them, turned along a different path.

“Ah, cowardice,” Draco yawned. “I know thee well.”

“You’re a braver man than you think,” Gloria said, and kissed him on the lips.

Odont stared, transfixed.

“Would you like to dance?” Draco asked Nanette. “I see a number of couples have started up, and Potter always bores me.”

The implication that her father’s company was no reason to tarry was implicit.

Odont looked from Draco to Harry, unsure what to make of such behaviour, then swallowed, evidently steeling himself. “Perhaps you’d care to take a turn with me, Your Highness?” he offered his arm.

There was a moment of silence.

“No, I would not,” Gloria said, bluntly. “Harry? Would you escort me inside?”

And with that, they all departed, leaving Odont standing in the middle of the lawn, alone, staring after them.

“Let’s see what Artur is up to,” Gloria whispered, sailing along beside Harry.

“My thought entirely,” Harry nodded.

“We’ll dance. Be very public,” Draco said to Nanette.

“Should I not -?” Nanette began.

“You look after my Draco,” Gloria said. “If you would, please, dear.”

“You –”

“We’re not fobbing you off,” Harry leant across to say to her, “but we don’t know what mood Artur is in. Did you want to see him?”

“No!”

“Well, then: let us deal with him. He may have come to get the spell removed.”
“My father cast a spell on him?” Draco asked.

Harry nodded.

“Something unpleasant, I assume. Is Father likely to remove it?”

“I hope not,” Harry said.

Harry and Gloria found Artur in the Long Gallery, where tables had been set out and older people were taking tea in the cool shadow of generations of Malfoy portraits.

Lucius and Atkins were sitting at a table with several other witches and wizards. Artur and his gaggle were standing.

It was immediately obvious that there was a silencing spell on the table, but even so, the occupants of the other tables were watching.

It was all in the body language, Harry thought.

Artur was clearly making demands of Lucius, whilst Lucius and the others on the table were taking the young people with a pinch of salt.

Eventually, Artur turned and stormed away, the group heading towards them.

Harry quickly pulled out a chair for Gloria, and she seated herself promptly.

Harry could see, though, that she had her wand at the ready, incorporated as it was into her fan.

He stood behind her chair, allowing the young people to sweep past.

“Bloody English wankers!” Artur was saying, in French, as he strode past.

One of the others grabbed a sandwich from their table as he passed.

“Ah,” said the elderly wizard who was already seated at the large table they had joined. “Young and French. That explains everything!”

Gloria turned an amused eye on him. “You sound forgiving, Sir?”

“Oh, the passion, the passion!” His eyes twinkled. “I had a little fling with a French mademoiselle in my youth.”

“Fond memories?” she smiled.

“She was always jealous of everyone: tried to kill me nearly every night,” he said, beaming happily. “I never felt so alive!”

Gloria laughed, and with a glance at Harry, nodded dismissal of him.

Harry gave her a smile, inclined his head at the wizard, and left them to it.

Back out in the garden, he could see that the French contingent had found themselves a table, and had already had a first delivery of drinks and canapés from one of the elves.
James came strolling up, and they both leant against the plinth of a giant urn.

Urns and statues of Greek deities alternated, forming avenues at each side of the lawn, the pitted marble standing out against the dark green of the clipped yew hedge behind.

“He’s one of that French lot, is he?” he asked Harry, nodding at them.

“Yes. Artur’s the one with the ponytail and silver robe,” Harry said.

“Looks a git,” James said.

“Yup.”

“Isn’t that the girl you used to see?” Harry asked, nodding at a young woman laughing at a table next to the French party.

“Yeah,” James said, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“It didn’t work out?”

James thought of the awful remarks Millie’d made about his father, his family. “No,” he said, gritting his teeth.

Harry glanced at him. “Interesting that she’s here. Not that many young ones.”

“I think she might be interested in this supremacy crap,” James said.

“Oh.”

Silence.

“That why you broke up?”

“Partly,” James shrugged.

“You – you didn’t share her views?”

“Jesus, Dad!” James expostulated.

Harry held up his hands. “Sorry. I’ve assumed things – maybe too often.”

“I’m not a Pureblood, am I? Why would I agree with it?”

“You’re – close,” Harry turned and grinned at him.

James snorted, the tension going. He picked up the orange juice he’d stuck behind him on the plinth. “Sucks not having a drink,” he said, raising the glass.

“You miss it?”

“Not as much as I thought,” James said honestly. “It’s a bit weird being with your mates and seeing the daft things they say. You know, things you wouldn’t have blinked an eye about if you’d been drunk too.”

Harry nodded. “At least Malfoy has orange,” he said. “You can have a bit too much pumkin juice.”

“Freshly squeezed as well,” James licked his lips. “He’s stinking rich, isn’t he? Look at all this! Or
rather, we are.”

“Don’t get your hopes up about owning it,” Harry said seriously, looking around to make sure they weren’t being overheard, despite the speech protection he’d automatically put up earlier.

James turned to look at him. “You don’t want me to have it?”

“No, I don’t,” Harry said.

“Scorpius should get it, shouldn’t he?” James said after a moment. “Whatever his grandfather thinks.”

“Draco first, whether he wants it or not,” Harry said, relieved at the ease of James’ tone when mentioning Scorpius.

“Doesn’t he like it? I don’t either,” James shrugged. “It doesn’t feel like a home, does it?”

“Not to me,” Harry agreed.

Harry’s eyes scanned the crowds. Many people had settled down now, sitting at the large tables that were scattered across the lawn, rather than standing and mingling.

Severus was sitting with Albus and Laura, another witch and a couple of other wizards.

It was hard to control the smile that tugged at his face, just looking at him. He looked resplendent in his black robe, crisp white cuffs and collar showing. Harry held back a gurgle, thinking he looked rather like a vicar.

James glanced at him. “Laura seems nice,” he said, assuming Harry was looking at Albus, who was in the process of wiping a smear of something from Laura’s cheek.

“Yes,” Harry said.

“I wonder if they’ll keep up the relationship once Albus is in India? I expect he will. He’s the sort who likes a bit of languishing and difficulty.”

“Rather than ‘wham, bam, thank you ma’am’?” Harry raised an eyebrow at his son.

James’ lips curled. “Is that what you think of me?”

“Not really,” Harry said, after a moment. “It’s the image you like to project, though, isn’t it?”

“Love ‘em and leave ‘em? Maybe. Maybe I just haven’t found the right girl.”

“Oh, I’m sure you haven’t,” Harry said, standing up. “Shall we join them?”

“Shouldn’t we be doing something useful?”

“I’m watching Artur and his gang,” Harry said. “I’ll be able to see them from there. Nanette’s safety is my greatest worry today.”

“I’m going to go and talk to Miles. He’s one of my customers,” James said, nodding at a wizard at one of the other tables.

Harry went and sat next to Snape. It was the first time, he realised, that they had been anywhere public in each other’s company. It was funny. It wasn’t as if you needed to touch a partner, but
there was just something about knowing that they were your partner that leant an intimacy to just sitting beside someone.

It felt brilliant to know that Snape was his. To know that later, he’d be held in those arms, would feel Snape inside him, or might be inside Snape, would be able to smell him, rub his cheek against the faint shadow that he could already see forming on his jaw…and Kingsley would be there, solid and relaxed and –

Snape was leaning towards him.

His body curved forward -

“Artur,” Snape said, and Harry realised with horror that he’d allowed his mind to wander, that Artur was making his way between the tables –

“He’s gone for a leak,” Albus leant in, “I heard him say so, and Merlin knows, he’s been drinking enough.”

“Nanette is dancing with George,” Laura said. “Opposite direction.”

“There are enough people watching him,” Snape said. “No need to follow.”

Harry knew that. He knew that it wasn’t his task to keep watch over Artur. But when the Frenchman hadn’t returned minutes later, he got up.

Snape too.

“Nanette’s safe,” Harry said thankfully, glancing over at where she was now sitting with Gloria.

As if feeling his gaze, Gloria turned, and nodded at them both.

“Lucius,” Harry said to Snape, and they both moved.

Albus stood.

“You and Laura – go and sit with Nanette, will you?” Harry jerked his head.

“Yup,” Albus said, pulling out Laura’s chair as she got up.

Harry and Snape strode into the house. Snape spoke quietly, as much for Kingsley to hear at the other end of the button he was wearing, explaining.

They headed to the Long Gallery, steps slowing as they reached the entrance. Lucius was still there, talking to Peter Brown, the Headmaster. His eyes turned to them at once, and making his excuses, he rose.

“Gentlemen,” he said, drawing closer. “You appear to be looking for someone. May I be of assistance?”

Harry glanced round. People at the nearest table were watching them with interest.

“We were just looking for a friend’s husband,” Harry said. “He’s obviously not –“

There was a shout from the hall, the sound of running feet.

As one, they all turned and raced towards the noise.
Even as they ran, they could see two men in defensive pose, wands out, pointing upwards.

They too all had their wands in their hands, but they slowed their steps.

“Where is he?” A voice shouted. “Où est Malfoy?”

Harry reached out, grabbing Malfoy’s arm, but Lucius shook it off, and stepped forward. Harry stepped out behind him.

Already, people were gathering, lurking in the doorways.

Artur stood on the grand marble staircase that dominated the hall. It was the sort of staircase for women to swish down in full skirts, fluttering the hearts of men waiting below, and no doubt they had in the past.

Currently, however, Artur stood two thirds of the way up, with his wand to Dorothy Atkins’ throat.

“You’ve started attacking strange women now, as well as your wife, have you, Brouchard?” Lucius said, looking up at the pair of them.

“She’s no stranger!” Artur shouted.

“Kill him!” Atkins screeched, eyes darting to the two men, who were obviously her guard.

“The oh-so-clever Mrs Atkins,” Artur jeered in her ear. “She’s your woman, n’est-ce pas?” he looked at Lucius, his grip tightening on the woman in front of him, his human shield. “You took mine, so I’m taking yours!”

“You seem to be suffering under a misapprehension,” Lucius said, standing calmly at the bottom of the stairs, ignoring everyone except Artur. His arms were at his sides, his wand against his leg. “Mrs Atkins is not ‘my woman’, any more than she is yours, and given your interest in men, I fail to see why you would be so desirous of retribution because your wife has left you.”

“You know why!”

“I know that I told you you’d have to behave if you wished me to reverse that little spell,” Lucius agreed. “To be frank, I don’t find making a scene on my staircase to be fitting the bill.”

“I’ll kill her,” Artur prodded his wand into Atkins neck, “then where will you be?”

“Well, standing in my hallway staring at two corpses, no doubt,” Lucius said, “as these men will undoubtedly kill you in return.” He indicated the Aurors.

One of the young men who’d accompanied Artur sidled up to Lucius. “M’sieur, I think – don’t kill him! - he took something – he is just a little out of his head – ”

“Oh, I’m sure Artur is ‘out of his head’, ” Lucius agreed, his eyes staying on Artur, “but – ”

“Oh, mais non!” Nanette suddenly appeared. “Oh, mon dieu! Artur, what are you doing?” She’d pushed her way through the crowded doorway, and now made her way to the bottom of the stairs.

“Stand away!” Lucius snapped at her.

Nanette startled, looking from Lucius to the two on the stairs. “Let her go, Artur. What are you thinking? Come, there is no need for this – ” She put a foot on the first step.
Lucius took a step towards her, hand out to pull her back -

“Don’t move!” Artur tightened his grip on Atkins, transferring his wand to point straight at Nanette.

Lucius stood stock still.

On the stairs, Artur started to laugh. “Mordieu, you – you want her for yourself! Hah! You’ve been stringing this interfering old cow along, hoping she’ll make you – ”

Atkins struggled, elbowing him in the ribs. “Aim, you stupid bastards!” she yelled, but Artur was strong and had her held against him once more, this time with one hand under her chin from behind, fingers pressing into her jugular.

“Take aim if you like,” he laughed. “You won’t care if they kill her by mistake, will you?” he grinned at Lucius, then, quick as a flash, his wand was pointing towards Nanette. “Well, you’ll be sorry for cursing me! Avada Ked – “

Someone threw themselves in front of Nanette; at the same time, a body hurtled at Atkins and Artur from behind; bodies tumbled down the stairs; a flurry of spells ensued. Screams echoed. The crowding watchers stampeded to get out.

“Silence!” Snape roared, in his best school-master tone.

Instantly, silence fell.

He stepped forward, wand out. “Nobody move.”

He reached the bottom of the stairs.

Harry was standing, wand out, a foot from where Atkins and Artur had stood.

In a heap half way down, were three bodies piled together.

Lucius was lying across the steps further down, his body over Nanette’s.

He turned his head slowly to look at Snape, who nodded at him.

Snape glanced at the two Aurors. Slowly, Harry, Snape, and the Aurors moved towards the heap. It looked like some strange creature, with too many arms and legs.

“Get me out of here,” a sharp voice said from underneath.

Harry and Snape glanced at each other.

A rotund body lay with his back to them on the top.

“Levitate it,” Snape ordered the Aurors. “We’ll cover.”

The Aurors glanced at each other, decided it was a sensible move, and did so, whilst Snape and Harry kept their wands trained on Artur underneath.

His body shifted, and both their wands twitched in response, but it was Atkins, beneath him, who was doing the shoving.

“Get him off me!” she screeched.
Snape leant forward, wand still out, and put his fingers to the pulse point in Artur’s neck, but it was obvious from the stillness of his eyes that Artur was dead.

Harry flicked his wand and levitated him, moving the body away from Atkins and the third figure, walking down the stairs until he’d lowered him to lie on the marble of the hall floor.

He nodded to Lucius, who at last moved, allowing Nanette out of the protective cover of his body.

“Is he - is he - ?” Nanette stuttered, sitting up, her hair askew, looking down at the body of her husband.

A noise on the stairs made her turn, as Atkins stood up awkwardly.

One of the two Aurors around the other body moved across to help her. “Are you alright, Mrs Atkins?” he asked.

Nanette glanced at her, and then she saw…..her hand fluttered to her mouth. Her eyes were riveted on the rotund figure. “P – Papa?”

She stumbled to her feet. Lucius grasped her elbow. She staggered up the stairs. “Papa!” Both hands were in front of her face, her eyes wild with shock. She fell to her knees beside him.

“It is her father, isn’t it? Where did he appear from?” Harry asked. “I apparated up to stop Artur – ”

“He must have been listening at the top of the stairs,” Snape said. “He threw himself down onto them just as you apparated.”

“What on earth is going on here?” Benningdean appeared at the foot of the staircase.

Suddenly, the silence was broken, and noise echoed around the hall as people began gasping and chattering, creeping forward again to look.

A blond man pushed his way through, and strode over to them.

Harry felt the flash of recognition, but it was a second before it clicked, and he lowered his wand.

“Are you both alright?”

There was no mistaking Kingsley’s voice.

“Perfectly,” Snape said. “Artur and Henri Odont are both dead, however.”

Kingsley looked round.

Gloria, arriving more slowly than her young charge, had now joined her, sitting on the stairs with her arms around Nanette. Even from the distance, the shudders shaking the girl were visible.

Draco, glancing around, flicked his wand. A privacy screen appeared between the stairs and the gawpers below.

Lucius was standing, face paler than ever, over Nanette. He shifted slightly, his arm moving discreetly against his hip. He clicked his fingers, and Hetty appeared. Lucius said a few words, then the elf disappeared, reappearing moments later with a pile of blankets. Lucius carefully slipped one around Nanette’s shoulders. He pointed to Artur; the elf trotted down the stairs, and after looking to the Aurors for permission, covered the body.
Lucius stood for a moment holding a blanket by Henri, then laid it at his feet.

Nanette wasn’t ready to see her father’s face disappear.

Lucius looked up, seeming to gird himself, and moved stiffly over to Mrs Atkins, who was now sitting on one of the steps. He dropped the last blanket around her shoulders.

Benningdean squatted on the other side. “Are you alright, Mrs Atkins? I think you should come and sit down properly. A stiff drink, or a cup of tea, perhaps?” He glanced across at Lucius, who nodded.

“Draco,” Lucius called.

Draco reached him at once. “Father. What can I do?”

“Be so kind as to take Mrs Atkins to the morning room, if you would, and get her some tea. I think the shock – ”

“I’m fine,” Atkins said, but her voice wobbled.

“Of course you are, but we’re rather in the way at the moment,” Draco said. “And you may wish to – tidy up,” he added.

Atkins glanced down at herself. A couple of buttons had ripped out of their holes in the fall, and her red underwear was showing. Her face flushed, and she pulled the blanket around her. She stood up, Benningdean helping with a hand under her elbow.

“Do stay with Mrs Atkins and see she is alright,” Lucius said, looking Draco in the eye.

“Of course,” Draco said smoothly. “Take the steps slowly, now,” he said to Atkins. “I’m sure you must be bruised. Shall I call your mediwitch for you?”

Soon they were gone.

Kingsley was organising both the Aurors and his own team.

Snape, Harry noted, was bending over Artur, sniffing him.

Lily had arrived, and was also sitting beside Nanette.

Lucius had gone back to her. He looked round. “Minister?” he called.

Benningdean came over.

“I think it would be sensible to move Monsieur Odont to one of the bedrooms, don’t you?” Lucius asked him, his head indicating Nanette.

“Indeed, yes,” Benningdean said. “One moment if you would: I’ll just check with the Aurors.”

It was done in seconds.

Lucius snapped his fingers for Hetty again. “My cane,” he said.

The elf brought it at once.

“Nanette,” Lucius said, leaning over.
All three women looked up at him.

“I’m going to move your father into one of the bedrooms: you’ll be more comfortable there.”

“What a good idea,” Gloria said, heaving herself to her feet. She held out her hand to Nanette. “Up you come, child.”

Nanette stood. She looked very small next to Gloria.

“Stand back a little, please,” Lucius said.

Harry stepped forward. He’d noticed that Lucius was moving very stiffly. He must have hurt his hip, or something else, in trying to help Nanette.

“If you’d give Nanette your arm to show her the way,” he said to Lucius, “I’ll levitate.”

They made a strange little procession.

When he’d settled the body on the bed, Harry withdrew.

Lily followed him back out of the room.

“What should I do?” she whispered.

“Are you happy to stay with her for a bit? The body doesn’t bother you?”

“No, it’s alright,” she nodded. “I don’t know what to say.”

Harry looked at her. “You know better than anyone that just being there counts,” he said, a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t feel you have to stay if it gets to you. We’ll need to bring her home in a bit.”

“She – she won’t stay here?”

“They’ll have to take the body away, or get someone in to work out cause of death. I can see he’s hit his head, but I don’t know if he died from that, or from a stray shot from one of the Aurors.”

“Oh no! Will – will they get into trouble for that?”

“I hope not,” Harry said. “No-one could’ve envisaged what he did. He saved her life,” he said, and pressed a quick kiss to her forehead.

She gave him a hug, then slipped back into the room.

In the quiet of the corridor, Harry summoned Hetty. “Take some tea in, and some fire-whisky, Hetty, please. And does Master Lucius have a pain potion for his hip?”

She nodded, ears flapping.

“Get it for him, and give it to him discreetly, would you? I think he might have fallen badly protecting Nanette.”

“Yes, Master Harry, Sir,” she nodded, and disappeared with a pop.

Harry headed back to the stairs. He looked down on the scene, now almost cleared. Two Aurors stood by Artur’s body, which Snape and another wizard appeared to be examining. Other Aurors were busy talking to witnesses. Dowling had arrived and seemed to be efficiently organising
“God, what a mess,” Harry said, trotting down till he reached Kingsley and Benningdean.

Kingsley nodded. “Yes. We didn’t expect that.”

“It was just – out of the blue,” Harry said. “He must’ve known they’d kill him if he used Avada.”

Snape walked over. “His friend was correct,” he said. “We don’t doubt he was intoxicated, and with more than alcohol.”

“Something could make him so reckless?” Harry asked, frowning.

Kingsley shrugged. “Aurors see it every day; young people tend to think they’re invincible.”

“The father saved her life, I take it?” Benningdean said.

Harry nodded. “If I was a moment faster – ”

“What?” Kingsley said sharply.

“I could’ve stopped Artur – then he needn’t have acted – ”

“You’re not the only one allowed to be a hero, you know,” Benningdean said, softening his words with his smile. “He was her father: what father wouldn’t give their life for their child?”

None of the three men answered, but Harry couldn’t help thinking that if Odont had been a better father, the situation would never have arisen in the first place.

Benningdean, however, seemed to think that their silence was caused by the childless state of Kingsley and Snape. He glanced from one to the other, blushing.

“Oh! I beg your pardon! I didn’t think - ”

“All of us were children, if not fathers,” Kingsley patted his back easily, “but not all fathers are good ones.”

Benningdean looked confused.

“He’d arranged the marriage against his daughter’s wishes,” Harry said quietly. “Artur was a violent and unpleasant man.”

“Oh! Oh, great heavens! Well, poor girl, all the same. It looks like her father did the right thing in the end. Widowed and orphaned on the same day – or has she a mother?”

Harry shook his head.

“Will she have somewhere to stay?” Benningdean asked, with a practicality that pleased Harry.

“My daughter’s made friends with her recently,” Harry said, not quite sure how much the Minister knew. “We’ll take care of her.”

“Good of you,” Benningdean nodded. “Well. Better go and talk to Mrs Atkins, I suppose. If she’s recovered, she’ll be working her way to blame either me or you for everything, Harry.”

Harry snorted. It was so patently true.
“I’ll go see what’s happening outside,” Kingsley said.

“I think the Malfoy son and Dowling seem to have everything in hand,” Benningdean said. “Such a pity: it was a nice do, I thought, given what these things are usually like.”

“Oh, quite,” Snape said, and rolled his eyes.
Three days later, Harry was sitting in the kitchen with James. The following day, he was due to apparate Henri Odont’s body back to France for his funeral.

It was a rather odd thought to transport a dead body.

Harry wondered what would happen if he let it go.

Where would a body go without a mind to direct it? Would it splinch into a million pieces?

The idea was quite appealing, Harry thought – becoming part of the universe in tiny particles.

On the other hand, you might land on someone’s head and kill them, or on some old witch’s doorstep and give her a horrible fright, neither of which would be a good idea.

“How is she?” James was asking, as he raided the cupboard for a snack. He’d called in on his way back from work.

They weren’t having a meeting that night – they’d already gone over the events of the gala, and Harry felt Nanette, and indeed, his whole family, could do with a bit of peace and quiet, for once. Having said that, Lucius was visiting Nanette, but Harry was glad of that.

After her tears at the gala, Nanette had been totally calm and quiet.

Harry knew from their own reactions that everyone experienced grief in their own way, but he was glad to know Lucius was with her. You could almost see Nanette unstiffen just a fraction whenever he appeared.

However welcome she was in their house, the honest truth was that they didn’t know her that well, nor she them.

He was glad she felt she could relax with Malfoy.

“She’s quiet,” he said to James, getting up as the kettle started to hiss, to make the tea.

“She’s better off without them, really, isn’t she?” James said, his head in the cool cupboard. “I mean, they were both bastards. Can I eat this piece of cheesecake?”

He turned round to check with his father when Harry didn’t answer.

He stood up slowly.

In the doorway, Nanette stood, Lucius behind her.

The look Lucius gave him was glacial.

James’ glance shot from Lucius’ face back down to Nanette’s.

Horrified, he saw her blink rapidly, and the sheen of moisture wash across her eyes.

He took a step forward. “I – I’m so sorry – I didn’t know you were there –”

She nodded, taking out her handkerchief.
“I didn’t mean –”

“You did,” she said. She gave a tight little shrug. “I – I can understand why you would think that. Artur – he was – as you say. I cannot feel anything but relief that I am no longer tied to him, and – and I feel guilty that I do not feel any sadness that he is dead,” she owned.

Lucius’ hand came to rest on her shoulder from behind.

“We can’t help feeling guilt,” Harry said gently, “often when it isn’t appropriate. You didn’t owe him any loyalty or care, because he never showed you any, and you never made any promises to him. His parents will mourn him, and I daresay some friends. But you don’t have to feel you must.”

She looked at him, and sniffed, and gave a little nod.

Lucius threw Harry an approving look.

“Would you like some tea?” Harry asked, picking up the pot in invitation.

“Thank you, yes,” Nanette said, stepping into the room at last.

She came and sat at the table. “I - I wanted to have a word with you, Harry, about tomorrow.”

“I’ll go,” James said, with relief.

“Here,” Harry said, handing him a mug. “Take the cheesecake with you –”

“I didn’t mean to scare you away,” Nanette said quickly. “We can talk to your father later –”

“That’s alright,” James said quickly, heading to the door.

Lucius was still standing in the doorway, and James’ step faltered.

“James,” Nanette said.

His head whipped round to look at her.

“You – you were a little bit right about my father,” she admitted. “He – I was upset with him. But – from what I understand, you and your father have not always been on such good terms. How would you have felt if – if - forgive me, Harry – if anything had happened to him then?”

James’ gaze flicked up to Harry’s.

Nanette had obviously picked up some bits of information while staying in the house.

“I – was cross with him,” she continued, without waiting for an answer, “but I loved him. I – things would have been better in time.”

There was a difficult silence.

Harry came and sat next to her. “I’m sure they would,” he said gently. “And I know it isn’t easy, but – he obviously loved you too. He gave his life to save yours – just as any loving father would,” he said, glancing up at his son. The stillness at the doorway made him aware of Malfoy. “You’re right, James and I haven’t always agreed on everything, even things that are really important to us. But I’d give my life for him, without a moment’s hesitation,” he said, “just like your father did. And if Lucius will forgive me for saying so, things haven’t always been easy between him and Draco either. But when push came to shove, he gave his life for him too. We fathers do care,” he
said. “Sometimes we get things wrong, or sometimes parents and children just have to agree that we have different views. I’m sorry that things ended as they did with your father, but by his last action, he showed he loved you, didn’t he?”

She nodded slowly.

“That’s all any of us can hope for,” Harry said, patting her arm as he stood up. “Now, tea. The English cure-all. Spell the pot, warm, Nanette, would you, while I get cups? James, Lils is in her room with Hugo. Tell them I’ll send Mitty up a fresh pot in a moment, alright?”

James nodded, gave an awkward little bow to Nanette, and once again faced Lucius at the doorway.

Lucius stepped to the side.

Harry hid his grin. “Come and sit down,” he said. “What was it you wanted to ask me?”

Harry stood at the back at Henri Odont’s funeral, next to Lily. He hadn’t known the man, or liked what he’d done to his daughter, but he was there purely for Nanette.

At Malfoy’s request.

Lucius had felt it essential that it was clear that Nanette had support in influential places.

Nanette had felt that Harry’s presence would put Lucius in danger.

Lily had come bounding down, after James had gone upstairs. It was obvious that she and Nanette must have had a conversation about it, at some point.

Lily suggested that, as she’d clearly been seen with Nanette at the gala, they continue the impression that she was the one who knew Nanette well, and that she attend, with her father there ‘to protect her’.

He was therefore known to know Nanette, without implying anything further.

Harry hadn’t wanted to put Lily in any danger, but Lily, looking very like her mother, had just said that they were all in danger in one way or another, and she could do her bit as much as the next person.

Gloria had come to the funeral, her robes more restrained than usual, but still looking awe-inspiring, and had placed herself firmly between Nanette and Tante Sabine. Lucius stood, elegant and statue-like, in the row behind.

There were numerous other mourners, but the Brouchards were notably absent, and most people there seemed to be about Henri’s age, old friends and colleagues.

For some reason, Harry felt shaken.

There were too many funerals.

It reminded him of the Voldemort years. Cedric Diggory, whom he’d not thought of for a long time, Dumbledore, Fred, Sirius, Remus, Tonks…
Not everyone had died in battle, but slowly, insidiously, people had died.

It was happening again.

He felt weary with it, with the need to fight again, that people just couldn’t live in harmony and get on with their lives.

He looked at the straight back of Lucius Malfoy.

It wasn’t as if people couldn’t change.

He thought about the Muggles. Britain wasn’t full of people killing each other to get their way, was it? The last time the seat of government had been blown up in England had been Guy Fawkes, and the Gunpowder Plot, hadn’t it? He didn’t know quite when that was, but it had to have been hundreds of years ago. The guy wore a ruff, didn’t he? Or something? What had been done after, to stop things getting so out of hand?

He thought about the Muggle Parliament. The vote was the obvious thing. All Muggles voted once they were eighteen. They did Jury duty much earlier too, Hermione had told him once. Wizards might live longer, but having to wait until your forties to take a role was daft. It left lots of disenfranchised young people, like Artur. It wasn’t as if young people were thought to be incapable – he’d been expected to sort out Voldemort as a teenager, hadn’t he, he thought sourly, everyone relying on him to get rid of the old bastard.

If there was to be any hope of cutting the feet out from under this mess, there needed to be change.

Hermione was the person to ask about it.

His brow wrinkled.

Something was up with Hermione, he was sure.

Not that she seemed unhappy when he saw her, or that Ron did either.

But – they’d hardly talked, or seen each other.

Something else he needed to sort out.

He couldn’t do things alone.

And although he had Severus and Kingsley now, Hermione and Ron were always – well. Hermione and Ron.

Essential.

Nanette’s aunt had taken charge of arrangements for refreshments back at the Odonts’ home. She stood graciously as hostess as people finally departed.

Eventually, only Harry, Lily and Lucius remained.

“May I show you to the floo?” Tante Sabine prompted haughtily. “I’m sure you appreciate that Nanette needs her rest before Artur’s funeral tomorrow.”
There was a sharp intake of breath. “I’m not going to Artur’s funeral, Tante,” Nanette said firmly.

“Don’t be ridiculous!” Sabine LeClerc snapped. “Of course you’ll go! He was your husband.”

“You would be wise to moderate your tone, Madame,” Lucius said, stepping forward.

“What business is it of yours?” Tante Sabine demanded.

“I could ask you the same question,” Lucius said.

“I am her Aunt! I am all the family she has left. I’m sure Nanette will wish to be guided –”

“No,” Nanette said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You’ve been very kind to me in the past, Aunt, and I thank you for it. But as for guidance – you caused me to be married to a man against my will. You would’ve been happy to allow him to – to – do what he wanted with me, regardless of my wishes –”

“You’re far too young to know your own mind –”

“No, I’m not,” Nanette said firmly. “I may have been weak in the past, but I said clearly that I did not wish to marry him. You chose to ignore that. Do not expect me to look to you for guidance, or anything else, in fact.”

“I was acting for the best –”

“If I hadn’t married him, Papa - and Artur, though I don’t care about him - would still be alive. Do not tell me that what you did was for the best!” Nanette’s voice had risen, and Lucius put a hand on her arm.

Nanette turned to him a little, and took a breath, before turning back. “I don’t blame you for Father’s death. You could not have foreseen what would happen, Tante, but it happened all the same, and I do not wish to see you at present. You do not have any role in my life. Do not feel you can tell me what to do. Is that understood?”

Sabine Le Clerc looked at Nanette, with Lucius standing at one side and Harry Potter on the other. Lily stood tall and straight too, her wand visible in her palm.

She drew herself up. “I see I am no longer welcome in my brother’s house.”

“You are not welcome in my house, no,” Nanette said.

Madame LeClerc’s eyes widened. “You –”

“You organised Papa’s funeral without once consulting me: I only knew you were here because my elf informed me. Out of courtesy, I allowed you to play hostess today. I don’t doubt you loved your brother, and I thank you for seeing to Father’s friends so well. But it is now over.”

Tante Sabine looked at the woman her niece had become. Her gaze flicked again to the men beside her.

Her husband peered around the doorway. “Mordieu, is it over at last? I’ve read every newspaper in the library and I’m fed up of playing cards alone. Can we go home now? Are you ready, Nanette?” He looked to the visitors. “No offence, Mademoiselle, Messieurs, of course.”
Nanette went over, and pressed a kiss against her uncle’s cheek. “I’m sorry the day has been so boring for you, Uncle. Aunt is quite ready to go.”

“Yes, but you’re coming with us, aren’t you?” he looked down on her with a puzzled smile.

“No, our paths part here,” she said.

“Oh? If you say so, my dear,” he said, with a vague affability. “I expect you’ve things to do. Nice young friend, there, eh?” He smiled absently at Lily. “Girls. Want to talk together without us old fogies, I’m sure,” he winked at the two men, assuming consensus, then leant in towards Nanette again. “Sabine always wants to runs everyone’s lives,” he twinkled, “but I’m sure you know what you’re up to, eh?”

Harry and Lucius found themselves exchanging a look of disbelief. Was the man so unaware of what was going on?

“I do,” Nanette patted his arm. “Take Aunt home and open a nice bottle of wine, yes?”

“Excellent idea!” he beamed.

“I have clothes upstairs,” Sabine said frostily.

“Oh, you do need a glass of wine,” Monsieur LeClerc said, coming over and putting his arm around his wife. “Why, you’re as tight-sprung as my old pocket-watch! And of course you are, with your brother in the ground. You’ve done a grand job, dear. Come home now, do. Nanette’s elf with pack for you, eh, Nanette?”

“Of course,” Nanette nodded.

Harry stepped forward and opened the door even wider.

Tante Sabine threw him a fulminating look, another at Lucius, completely ignored Nanette, and swept out.

“She’s upset,” her husband mouthed to them behind her back. “I’ll take care of her,” and with a grimace of apology, they were gone.

Dorothy Atkins sat across the table from Lucius Malfoy, and sipped her wine.

She liked to be in control, and things had been slipping recently.

She had been shocked at the gala, she had to admit.

She had been shocked at the gala, she had to admit.

She had never been physically manhandled before, and she had been surprised by her own reactions.

She’d always thought that she’d be cool and calm, as she had been in court and through all her working life, and yet, even thinking of it now, she could feel the memory of her pulse racing, smell the boozy breath of that madman floating past her ear, feel the fear clutching up her stomach, hear the squawking tone of her own voice.

Even more surprising, the boy had been right: Malfoy cared for the girl. It was blindingly obvious,
in retrospect, and she should have seen it before. But she had given the matter some thought and she was rather pleased that Lucius Malfoy had a weakness.

She had shown him hers, and she had seen his.

And it also meant that they could give up this little pretence at flirtation. It was good to see that he was just like other men – any pretty girl would turn his head. It had been fun, of course, but now they could get down to business. She preferred that.

“Potter was behind you at the bottom of the stairs,” she said.

“Was he?” Lucius said easily. “He and Snape had just come into the Long Gallery: everyone there heard the shout. I’m surprised we didn’t see more heroics from Mr Potter; it’s his style, isn’t it?”

“His daughter was sitting with Madame Brouchard afterwards.”

“I believe she’s been giving her French lessons. Potter sent his daughter to Beauxbatons after the business with his nephew at Hogwarts,” he said.

“You know a lot,” she said, eyes narrowed.

“I make a point of having the odd conversation with Weasley. He’s a useful source,” he smirked. “I think the arrangement might have been made through him, actually,” he said, off-handedly. “Miss Odont was having English lessons with one of his shop-workers, I think.”

“Brouchard seemed to think his wife was living with you. He was holding me because he said you’d taken her from him.”

“Yes, I’m sorry that you were pulled into his delusions,” Lucius said. “I think it was quite clear at the wedding, don’t you, that she didn’t wish to marry him? No wonder she left.”

“And she wasn’t staying at the Manor with you?”

“I’m not sure why that would be your business, Dorothy, but no, I can quite categorically say that she was not. I do not cavort with married women.”

“She’s a widow now,” she said. “That’s convenient.”

Lucius stared at her. “I hope you’re not implying that I had any hand in his death? I met Mademoiselle Odont several times at her father’s house, and with Artur and his cronies – I feel we ought to drop the connection with at least the younger group of French supporters, by the way – they’re unstable, and from what that young man said to me, into drugs as well as over-imbibing. Quite useless to the cause.” He cocked his head looking at her, when she didn’t rise to the distraction. “I certainly admire her. Her manners are reserved and proper. I would have thought any man would be proud to have such a girl as his daughter. But as to arranging the death of her husband – in my own home, to boot – you make me wonder if you’re taking something hallucinogenic yourself.”

It was true, she thought – Lucius had been completely unprepared for what had happened. He’d been remarkably calm moreover, which was something that she could appreciate.

Had appreciated.

“And let’s be honest, shall we, if we are to be throwing accusations around,” Lucius said coolly. “It was you who repeatedly told your Aurors to kill him. I had hoped to talk some sense into him.”
She flushed. It was true.

“You were trying to save your own skin, at the expense of his,” he said bluntly.

“Of course,” she said.

Lucius smiled. “I have no quarrel with ruthlessness,” he said.

She leant forward. “Good. Neither do I. It’s time we moved forward. I’ve no interest in continuing our dilly-dallying, and if you want to chase the widow, I wish you luck. But it’s about time you met some of our other – partners.”

“Oh? Do I see a connection between this meeting and my ruthlessness?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I suppose I should be pleased that you’re so acute.”

“Personally, I prefer to have partners who’re intelligent,” Lucius commented.

“Good,” she said. “One of them is, and he – I think he’ll respect a firm hand.”

Lucius watched her. “Losing your touch?”

Her mouth tightened. “He’s very clever, but also – annoying. I don’t want to have to – lose – him. I think he might accept our authority.”

“Side by side?” he smiled at her, picking up his glass.

“Quite,” she said.

“When do we meet?”

She looked at her watch. “In twenty minutes.”

“You do know your manners leave something to be desired, Dorothy?”

“Is it a problem?”

“Fortunately not.”

“Then stop fussing,” she said, downing the dregs of her glass, and standing up.

Lucius remained seated. “I’m neither your puppy, nor your enforcer,” he said. “I think you’d be wise to remember that.”

She looked at him. “Of course. If you’d be so kind as to accompany me?”

He stood up. “With pleasure, Mrs Atkins. Do lead the way.”

Harry walked through the empty rooms of Grimmauld Place.

He picked up one of Lily’s hair-ties from the sofa, and spotted a sock down behind it. He lifted it up gingerly with the tip of his wand. Albus’ feet were famous for their rankness, and with a flick, the sock flew into the air and Harry banished it to the laundry. There were books and magazines
still lying on the tables, and even a coffee cup that Mitty hadn’t yet whisked away.

If he didn’t know otherwise, it would look like any of the children could just swing around the door and hug him at any moment, throw themselves on the sofa and turn on the TV.

But there were no children there, and the house seemed to know it.

The emptiness pressed in on him.

In the space of four hours, Lily had left for Beauxbatons, Albus for India, and Nanette to her new home.

“They’ll be back,” Snape said, from the doorway.

Harry nodded, not looking at him.

He’d known Lily would be going, of course, and that Nanette would go sometime soon, but he thought he’d have another ten days with Albus. The long-distance owl that should have brought him details of his pre-course orientation had gone astray somewhere, and a floo-call from a sari-clad witch at six o’clock in the morning, demanding to know why he was three and a half-hours late for his first day, had them all panicking, with Albus stuffing clothes and books into a bag and departing within half an hour.

Nanette had taken her leave at nine, so that Harry could see Lily off alone. She’d hugged him as well as Lily, and promised to keep in touch.

Harry knew she’d be safe – she was moving into the flat that Scorpius and Andy were vacating, whilst they’d moved to a two-bedroomed one across the landing. Harry had given her a knowing smile when she’d revealed that, but Nanette had just said, “It’s very convenient for my work,” and Harry had laughed.

Lily had gone happily through the floo, and Harry knew he should feel pleased that she was looking forward to the new term.

And he was.

But…

He looked up at Snape, grateful for his restraint.

“Can I come over to the villa?”

“Why do you think I’m waiting?”

Harry went over, smiling.

“Why don’t we invite Hermione and Ron over for Sunday lunch?” Snape said, as they headed along the corridor to the floo.

“Are you serious?” Harry turned and looked at him.

“You’ve been wanting to catch up with Hermione, and I must admit I am curious to know what she’s up to,” Snape said. “Ron can give me a better game of chess than most, if he can manage to stay awake after lunch.”

Harry laughed. “Great!”
And it was. They spent the day working on the land, hard, physical work, which was exactly what Harry needed. He also liked seeing Kingsley wearing only his low-slung jeans, his shoulder muscles bunching and flexing under sweat-sheened skin. He caught Severus’ eye, looking too, and they shared a grin.

“You look pretty hot yourself,” Kingsley said, wiping his brow, and showing that he hadn’t lost his Auror skills.

Harry had looked down at his own naked chest. He was a lot smaller than Kingsley, but he was pleased to see that he was looking quite fit.

Snape was looked cool in a shirt, but as Severus knew, Harry only had to look at his forearms to feel his mouth watering, and Severus had obligingly got the sleeves rolled up.

Later, they swam in the river, then lay on the rocks naked.

Harry loved lying there listening to the sound of the water, and feeling the sun on his skin – he’d used protection spells of course, not wanting to get burnt in the places that never usually saw daylight. He had only to turn his head to see Severus spread out in all his glory, and Kingsley beside him. They hadn’t touched or even kissed, any of them, and yet the sense of intimacy and connection pervaded everything.

Harry couldn’t help smiling.

“Better?” Snape said quietly, looking across at him with a hand shading his eyes.

“Much,” Harry said. “You found an enchanted place when you came here, didn’t you?”

“I like it,” Snape said.

“I love it,” Kingsley agreed, “but people count more. I mean, I’d be happy lying here on my own, for a little while, but with you two here…” He turned and smiled at them.

Harry felt warm inside and out.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“What’ve you done now?” Ron said. “Honestly, Harry, you’re the most accident prone person I know.”

“What?” Harry straightened his gait as he walked across the kitchen to give his friend a hug. He tried to will away the blush that was fighting to get out.

Kingsley, opening a bottle of wine, turned and grinned at him.

“Honestly, Ron,” Hermione said, watching the interaction, “I don’t know about Harry being the
most accident prone: you’re the most tactless.” She shook her head, and stood up to kiss Harry.

“What?” Ron said, at the same time as Harry went, “Whoa! Hermione!”

She blushed instead.

Harry leant back with her still in his arms.

“Either I’ve just been a million times more tactless than Ron, or –”

“I’m pregnant,” she smiled.

“Oh my god!” Harry said. “How?”

Snape snorted.

“Well, you take one man…” Hermione began, dancing eyes meeting Snape’s for a moment as Harry pulled out of her arms and stuck his tongue out at her.

“Congratulations, Hermione, Ron,” Severus said, pausing in his chopping.

“Yeah, of course! I mean – that’s fantastic!” Harry said, as Hermione sat down. “You – you’re pleased, right?” he queried. “I mean, why on earth didn’t you say anything?”

“Too embarrassed,” Ron threw a grin at her. “You know, so swept away by my godlike body and – yeah, well, – ” he realised that Snape and Kingsley were there too, running mocking eyes over him, and shut up.

“Oh, definitely,” Hermione rolled her eyes, and swatted his hand across the table, but then, to Harry’s surprise, their fingers lingered a moment before parting.

“Wow!” Harry said again. “Are you alright? How far along are you? That feels quite a nice bump there.”

“I’m fine now,” she said. “We didn’t say anything because they were a bit concerned. You know, with me being quite old for a Muggle.”

“But young for a witch, surely?” Kingsley asked. He’d left the bottle he’d been opening on the table, and had pulled out another, performing a chilling spell on it. “I think we need champagne to celebrate,” he said, as the cork popped with a loud bang.

“I hope you all will, but I’ll stick to fruit juice, or water, please,” Hermione said.

“Would you like me to spell out the alcohol from a glass?” Snape offered. “Or would you just prefer orange juice?”

“You can do that?” Harry asked. “Why don’t we normally do that?”

“Because people like the buzz,” Ron said. “We sell a Muggle alcohol-free beer in The Leaky, but it’s nowhere near as popular as the real stuff. Gnat’s piss, Bill calls it.”

“Nice,” Harry snorted, accepting a glass.

“Congratulations,” Kingsley raised his glass in toast once he’d served them all. “It’s a lucky child to have you both for parents.”
They settled at the table, chatting and eating. Harry was thrilled that these two sides of his life were coming together so easily.

He shifted in his chair as discreetly as he could, given Ron’s ability to stick his size fourteen’s in. Trust Hermione to realise at once what his problem was.

Not that it was a problem. He rather enjoyed – the awareness. The reminder that only a couple of hours earlier, he’d had Kingsley inside him for the first time.

They’d had a super night. It was funny – funny good – how things in bed were never as he’d expected.

They’d known he’d felt – lonely, with the children suddenly gone, but rather than mollycoddling him, he and Snape had ended up lavishing all their attention on Kingsley.

It was incredible to see someone being driven out of their mind by feelings you’d created.

It’d never really been like that with Ginny. He didn’t know whether it was because he was inept, or just that, even early on, he hadn’t really been able to give her what she needed. But with Kingsley and Snape…things seemed to work. And he could watch what Kingsley did to Severus, or Severus to Kingsley, and learn, and then adapt it.

It was brilliant.

He’d been making love to Kingsley, and to his shock and pleasure, Snape had entered him whilst he was doing it, his thrusts driving them both, making him hardly know where he began or ended, the pleasure everywhere so intense, and yet Snape had encouraged him to think of Kingsley, to take his cock in hand until everything was a blur of pleasing and being pleased.

They’d fallen asleep in a sweaty tangle. He’d woken in the morning to find his face plastered against Severus’ spine, and Kingsley rocking gently against him from behind, half erect and sleepy. Things had gone from there.

He’d always expected it to be a big deal when Kingsley first took him, not because he didn’t want it, but just because of the physical practicalities. Snape was hardly small, but Kingsley was hung. But there they were, all sleepy and relaxed, with no time to get tense or worried about it: Harry was probably a bit loose from Snape being in him earlier: he didn’t know how that worked, but…. And there had been lube and fingers and Snape kissing him, and Snape was the most incredible kisser, and then Kingsley was suddenly there, and he’d been so – stretched, and full, but Snape had just kept kissing him, not distracting him by touching his cock or anything, letting him feel, letting him control it, letting him know he was utterly wanted and part of everything.

And now he could feel it, as if Kingsley was still there, sort of, as if the sex and the loving was part of everyday, every waking minute, which really, he supposed it was, just like Hermione’s bump said not just that there was a baby in there, but that she and Ron had had sex, and that was part of them and who they were.

“That looks a happy thought,” Hermione smiled at him.

He blushed.

Kingsley laughed outright.

Harry buried his head in his hands. “Why do I blush? I’m too old to blush like a kid.”
“Be glad you’re not a redhead like me,” Ron said. “Looks awful. What’re you blushing about? Not thinking about sex at the dinner table are you?” he said lightly.

Harry groaned and shifted.

“You are! Shit, I didn’t mean it!” Ron went red himself, demonstrating the truth of his earlier statement.

“Sorry, sorry,” Harry said, looking up, as red as a beetroot. “Change the subject. House elves! Goblins! What about work, Hermione?”

“How can you be thinking about sex in the middle of dinner?” Ron demanded, not letting it go. “We haven’t even had pudding yet!”

Snape couldn’t restrain his mirth.

“Because he can’t sit still, and every time he moves he thinks about it, twit,” Hermione said bluntly.

“Oh! Oh! Oh, I so did not want to know that,” Ron said. “Quidditch! Now, what about Evan Powers, eh? Good play he made yesterday –”

Kingsley was laughing too. “We were too busy to see the game –”

“But it was finished by four,” Ron argued. “You surely – in the daytime?! he said, outraged.

Hermione swatted him. “Hey! We’ve done it in the daytime, you pillock!”

“Hard at it, we were;” Harry grinned, loving embarrassing his friend rather than himself for once. “Out in the fields –”

“Someone might have seen!” Ron screeched.

“ - all hot and sweaty –”

“Alejandro joined in, of course,” Kingsley said.

“What? He – he’s married!” Ron said. “Your manager, isn’t he? Now that’s just –”

“Quite appropriate, for working in the olive grove?” Snape smirked.

Ron opened his mouth and shut it. “Bastards,” he said, shaking his head.

“Have some more wine,” Kingsley poured some into his glass, laughing.

“I bloody deserve it after that,” Ron said, swigging some back. “This is really good, by the way. Don’t want to sell some to me for The Leaky, do you? Our current supplier is crap compared to this.”

It was later, sitting in the garden, while Ron was indeed enjoying a game of chess with Severus, and Kingsley was reading a book, that Harry returned to his earlier question.
“What about work, then, Mione? I know Molly loved having the kids first time round, but is she up to it this time?”

“I’m giving up my job,” Hermione said, from her reclining position on the lounger next to him.

Harry turned and leant on his elbow. “Really? Wow.”

“Harcourt made me realise I wasn’t ruthless enough.”

“Oh. But – you’re brilliant –”

“He was better,” she said. “Willing to play it harder than me. Anyway, there’s other things I want to do. Malfoy’s asked me about working on Hogwarts: A History. And I’m wondering about teaching. But with what the fire and the elves helping rescue people, I’m having a bash at one last thing.”

“What’s that?” Harry asked, intrigued. “I thought you’d given up on house-elf rights?”

“Well,” she said enthusiastically, “of course I haven’t! It’s been on the back-burner, of course, because I realised that perhaps I was imposing my values on them.”

Across the terrace, Ron raised his head and met Harry’s eyes behind Hermione’s head with a smirk.

“You can put that look away, Ron Weasley,” Hermione said, without looking round, making Harry snort.

“I agree with you this time,” Ron said. “Fire away.”

Hermione grinned at Harry. “The thing is, the elves helped you and Ron rescue everyone, so there’s quite a bit of positive feeling about them at the moment, and obviously I want to capitalize on that.”

Harry nodded encouragingly.

“At the same time,” she said, “they weren’t even recorded as occupants of the building. I’m going to push through recognition of the elves, and all the other beings, on the back of that.”

“That makes sense,” Harry said, “although, to be honest, the prisoners weren’t listed either.”

“They were,” Ron called across. “That came out later. They’re on a separate list, though, and that new guy who was on reception didn’t know about it.”

“Hopefully it will go through. I’m going to ask Draco to run an article on the house-elves’ part in the rescue: he didn’t give it much of a mention at the time.”

“That’s because he’s a Pureblood git,” Ron said, moving his rook.

Snape coughed.

Ron looked at the board, and then at him, and then across the terrace. “I know Kingsley is,” he said, “but so am I. I’m not apologising for that. I admit Purebloods take elves for granted. But they did help with the rescue – we’d probably never have got everyone out so fast without them.”

“And the thing is,” Hermione said, “that if my amendment goes through, the goblins will be acknowledged too.”
“Yes?” Harry said, feeling the tension in his friend, the controlled excitement Hermione showed when she was on to something.

“They won’t be able to ignore their deaths,” she said simply.

Harry leant forward and kissed her.

“Oi!” Ron said. “Keep yer ‘ands off!”

Harry laughed.

It was about an hour later, just as he was beginning to doze, that he sat up suddenly.

“What is it?” Kingsley asked.

“Mitty,” he said. “I – it’s a long shot, but – we never showed her Nott’s picture.”

“But the killers were masked,” Kingsley said.

“Not when they were pretending to be the interviewers: Mitty recognised Daniel Poulter’s photo, didn’t she? I mean, Samantha Donnelly was obviously using Polyjuice, but – ”

“Nott would surely be cleverer than that?” Hermione said, brow furrowed.

“He could have been arrogant enough to do it. A man that’s willing to nick half the Department of Mysteries stuff right out from under their noses…” Ron raised his brows.

“Did he, though? What’s come of that?” Harry asked.

“Benningdean had to go through the right channels: he sent a memo to Atkins, as head of the MLE,” Kingsley sighed.

“And?” Harry asked.

“She sent a snotty note back, demanding to know if Benningdean no longer had confidence in the Auror Department – ”

“But they have no experience of fire investigation,” Hermione argued.

“I agree with you totally,” Kingsley nodded. “Anyway, she went on to say that she had the greatest confidence in her Ministry employees and had no doubts that none of them would steal from the Ministry, even had it been possible to do so without being seen, but added that she’d passed it on to Head Auror Dowling to follow up as he felt fit. Then she warned that such an investigation was a blow to the integrity and to the morale of the employees when they were already coping in a difficult situation.”

“In other words, she covered her arse, made Benningdean seem uncaring and disloyal, and shoved the blame, if any should arise, onto someone else.”

“In a nutshell,” Kingsley said.

“She’s good, isn’t she?” Harry said, after a moment. “It would piss me off to be accused of
dishonesty, and if you’re already working in tough conditions because you haven’t got your office or any of your information or paperwork – well, you would lose faith a bit.”

“You’re half right,” Ron said.

Harry raised an eyebrow in query.

“I think quite a few departments are actually enjoying working from their new locations, you know. There’s quite a buzz in Diagon Alley these days. The Ministry was fine in the public areas, but the offices – a lot of them were run down. And I was able to get out and about, but whenever I was stuck in the office for a couple of days – well, you miss the daylight,” he said.

“It can’t be good for anyone, being underground all the time,” Hermione nodded. “Why on earth was it built like that? I mean, I know it’s hidden from the Muggles, but so’s the whole of Diagon Alley, and that’s not buried.”

“A good point,” Kingsley said, “and one worth thinking about, before they sink a fortune in trying to repair it.”

“What, build a new Ministry?” Ron asked, his amazement clear. “The gala didn’t raise that much money, did it?”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Snape said. “I can’t see how they’re going to rebuild underground without the goblins sorting the lifts, and frankly, who can be surprised that the goblins don’t want to do it?”

“Unless Hermione’s change in the law can help them get justice,” Harry suggested.

She nodded. “I’d like to hope they’d change the law because it was the right thing, but –” she shrugged.

“Leverage is leverage,” Snape said. “No point in cutting off one’s nose.”


“Benningdean’s awaiting a report on it,” Kingsley said. “Still.”

“But – I mean, Nott’ll have had time to squirrel everything away!”

“I suspect that was done pretty damn quickly anyway,” Kingsley sighed. “If Nott was clever enough to get what he wanted out of there, he wouldn’t be likely to leave it lying around.”

It was true. The report came in a couple of days later. Dowling had taken Aurors to conduct searches on the homes of all the Unspeakables. It was quite clear from the wording that the searches had been superficial, a token at best: Dowling’s embarrassment at conducting them burned off the page.

And Mitty, shown a picture of Nott, just shook her head.

It felt as if they were at a dead end.
Unexpected Revelations

Harry loved the crisp air, and the scent of woodland.

“I can see why people like hiking,” he said, as he and Kingsley climbed steadily through the forest. “Maybe we can come back here sometime, you know, for pleasure.”

“I like a bit of a workout,” Kingsley agreed. “Severus would enjoy this too, I think. Not to mention he’d spend weeks beforehand researching all the useful flora of the Adirondacks, which would give him a lot of extra enjoyment. We’ll look into it, shall we?” He smiled at Harry. “Would you want to camp, or apparate back to somewhere more luxurious?”

“Not sure,” Harry shrugged. “I haven’t camped since I was a teenager, looking for the Horcruxes, and after that I told myself I’d never do it again. It was miserable.” He looked across at Kingsley. “Probably rather different doing it with you and Severus though,” he grinned cheekily.

“I should hope so,” Kingsley nudged his arm with his own. “She lives in the middle of nowhere,” he said, climbing over a fallen tree.

Kingsley had floo-called Harry not long after he’d left that morning, to ask if he’d accompany him to see the mother of Atkins’ husband. They were looking deeper into Dorothy Atkins’ background. When Harry had raised an eyebrow, Kingsley had grinned. “Bugger of a place to get to,” he’d said. “Thought you could apparate us somewhere near, and then we’d ask the locals.” Harry had laughed, and agreed.

“It is, but I’m enjoying this,” Harry said. “The trouble with apparating, if you know exactly where you’re going, is that you don’t get a sense of location.” He looked around, enjoying the feel of the tall trees, the unique odour of decaying matter, the crunch of dried leaves underfoot, the occasional glimpse of the hillside falling away and rising again in the distance through patches between the trees. “I always think it must be like Muggles on the Tube, you know, or a mole down a hole or something. You only come out at places that you expect, and you have no idea what’s going on in all the places in between, what the lie of the land is like.”

Kingsley took hold of his arm, and pulled him towards him.

“Wha - ?” Harry said, glancing down to see if he’d been about to trip, or step on a snake, or something.

Instead, he found himself with his back to a tree-trunk, and Kingsley, huge and imposing, taking up his whole world view.

His eyes went to Kingsley’s, and he swallowed.

Kingsley had seen, and his hand came up, tracing Harry’s Adam’s apple.

Something moved in the underbrush, rustling through the leaves, but their eyes never left each other.

“Now,” Harry said, suddenly impatient, and his hand streaked up behind Kingsley’s neck, pulling him down.

Their lips met, tongues finding each other, stroking fiercely. Kingsley pressed forward, and Harry’s other hand reached round, sliding over the curve of Kingsley’s arse, rough denim against
his fingers, pulled taut over the powerful muscle underneath. Harry dragged Kingsley hard against him, his own hips surging forward.

“Fuck!” Kingsley bit out, his breath hot, teeth sharp against Harry’s neck.

“Can we?” Harry gasped, dizzy with heat and the blood flooding into his groin, his cock trapped and uncomfortable and desperate.

Kingsley snorted a laugh.

“Sorry,” Harry said, burying his face in Kingsley’s chest, his hand sliding between them to adjust himself. The back of his hand brushed against Kingsley, who groaned, and the next moment, he’d pushed Harry’s hand away, his own unbuttoning Harry’s fly.

“God!” Harry said, as Kingsley’s fingers gripped him, hot and tight.

“I want to fuck you,” Kingsley said in his ear, his hand working Harry, “but surprise, surprise, I haven’t any lube and I won’t hurt you.”

“Bet Severus would know some plant that would do it,” Harry said, leaning back against the tree, gasping.

“Bloody right,” Kingsley said, kissing Harry hard again.

Harry’s hand reached out, tugging the top of Kingsley’s jeans. He popped the button, and the next moment, he had Kingsley’s cock in his hand, heavy and full and delicious. He pulled out of the kiss, and the touching.

Kingsley looked at him in surprise, and then Harry spat into his palm and resumed.

A feverish moment or two passed, violent kissing and hands working hard, then Kingsley pulled away.

“Don’t stop,” Harry moaned. “So close…”

Kingsley leant in, biting his lip.

Harry jerked.

And then Kingsley dropped to his knees, and swallowed Harry down.

A thin wail left Harry’s lips.

A bird squawked, startled.

“You,” Harry gasped, unable to find words.

“Look,” Kingsley said, pulling off.

The cool air washed over Harry’s wet cock; so simple, so incredibly stimulating.

He looked down.

Kingsley was grasping his own cock, his hand moving back and forth.

A spurt of precum issued from Harry’s in response. “God, that’s hot,” he hissed.
Kingsley reached forward with a finger, scooping it up, then smeared it over the head of his own cock.

“Fuck!” Harry gasped. “Please!” he grasped himself, thrusting forward.

Kingsley batted his hand away. “Hands on the tree,” he growled, and then his mouth was tight and hot around him, and Harry could only look and feel and gasp, and then Kingsley suddenly convulsed, his teeth grazing against the head, his come splattering onto the ground; Harry tried to pull back, but Kingsley lunged forward, and Harry’s cock slipped into the back of his throat, and then he was coming and coming.

“Oh my god,” he said a minute later, as his vision and breath began to return, “we’re definitely coming hiking again.”

Kingsley, standing, laughed, and kissed him, his mouth tasting of Harry.

“I’ve got spunk on your trainers,” Kingsley said, against his mouth. “Fuck, that was good!”

Harry nodded, pushing Kingsley away and looking down at his shoe.

“That’s hot,” he said.

“My jizz on your shoes?” Kingsley laughed.

Harry nodded, grinning. “I’m leaving it there.”

“You are a dirty little pervert, aren’t you?” Kingsley said, performing a quick cleaning spell on himself. “I’m going to tell Severus all about it tonight.”

“You think it will turn him on?” Harry asked, straightening. He looked up at Kingsley. “He won’t mind, will he?”

Since they’d been together properly, they’d always been in the same room, even if one of them was watching, rather than actively participating.

“There’s always going to be times when two of us have the – inclination – when our third isn’t around,” Kingsley said easily. “As long as we show him how much we love him later, hmm?” He slung his arm over Harry’s shoulder.

There was something rather nice about the way Kingsley accepted that love. Harry nodded. “I’ll put the sight of you into a pensieve if he wants,” he said. “Best wank material ever!”

Kingsley laughed again, dropping the arm as they negotiated the woodland.

“What brought that on?” Harry asked after a moment. “Not that I’m complaining, but when we set out to interview Atkins’ mother-in-law, sex hadn’t been on my mind.”

“You – just your way of thinking got to me,” Kingsley said, from behind him. “You make me laugh.”

“And that makes you horny?” Harry looked back at him with a grin.

“You complaining?”

“I’ll start consulting joke books,” Harry beamed.
Bur five minutes later they weren’t laughing.

“I know this must seem intrusive,” Kingsley said from beside him.

“It’s the past. Forgotten,” said the old lady at the door, closing it as she spoke.

“If you’ll forgive me,” Harry said, making the door stick with a little wandless magic, “you don’t sound like you’ve forgotten it at all. My wife was murdered this March, and I can’t imagine ever forgetting it.”

He felt the resistance slacken. The woman didn’t look out, but she didn’t try to shut it any further.

“Did she kill your wife too?” her voice said, from behind the door.

Harry glanced at Kingsley, who raised his brows.

“I’m trying to find out,” Harry said quietly. “I’m hoping you might be kind enough to talk to us.”

“I don’t like magical folk no more.”

Again, Harry and Kingsley exchanged a look.

“You’re not a witch?” Harry asked quietly.

“Don’t you think you kin hurt me!” the woman said. “I gotta gun, and –”

“We don’t want to hurt you,” Harry said quickly. “We only want to talk.”

“Would it set your mind at rest if we put our wands down on this table out here?” Kingsley asked.

There was a moment’s silence, and the woman peered around the door. She looked from one to the other.

“I might not have no magic, but I brought up a boy with it, now didn’t I? And I sure as hell know my door don’t usually stick, and I didn’t hear no spell,” she said challengingly.

“You’re right,” Harry said. “It was very wrong of me, but we really don’t mean to hurt you, and we’ve come a long way to see you. Will you accept my apologies?”

“You did that without words,” she said, looking Harry up and down.

“Yes, which is why I didn’t think to offer you my wand. I can do magic without it,” he said honestly.

“Without a wand or words?”

“Some,” Harry agreed.

“My boy couldn’t do that, but he said powerful wizards didn’t always need their wands. One of his teachers was like that.”

Harry nodded.

She looked at Kingsley, who held his out. “My apologies, Madam. I do need it to do magic, so if it would set your mind at rest….”

“Oh, you’d better shove it up your sleeve, or wherever you keep it these days,” she said. “I suppose
you’d better come in.” And she turned back round, leaving the door open.

They followed her inside.

The room was dark and warm, dominated by a stove which seemed to be cooker and heater all in one. Not an item one could floo into. A blackened kettle sat to one side on the top, a faint steam haze coming from it, but she didn’t offer them a drink. There was a chair pulled up to the stove, wooden backed and armed, with cushions which had probably once been chintz. She pointed to a couple of stools, one beside a small table, and the other buried under a stack of old newspapers.

It was quite obvious that she lived alone.

Once they were seated, Kingsley, looking too large by far for the stool, said, “Firstly, our condolences on the loss of your son.”

“Well, if that ain’t come fifteen years too late,” she said, sitting back and crossing her hands under her bosom.

The most enormous cat leapt up onto her lap, turned several times, and then settled. Its eyes turned on Harry. It blinked.

“Is that a kneazle?” he asked. “She’s beautiful.”

The creature’s lion-like tail swished in front of it, draping in front of the woman’s legs.

“You’d know all about them, of course,” she said. “I only let you in because she’d had a look at you and settled. She’s very picky about strangers.”

“Kneazles are,” Harry agreed. “My best friend had a part-kneazle when we were at school together. Helped us catch a traitor, who was in his animagus form.”

There was a flicker of interest in the woman’s face.

The kneazle arched into her hand as she stroked it.

“Well then. Why are you here? What are you hoping I can tell you? I only met that Dorothy once.”

“Yes?” Harry said, latching on to the comment. “Was that at your son’s wedding?”

“Nope. I got Lyme Disease, and couldn’t go. Damn ticks, they never used to be a problem here when I was a girl. Docs wouldn’t let me go, and I couldn’t tell ‘em it wouldn’t be so bad what with your floos and apparition business.”

“That must’ve been tough,” Harry said sympathetically.

“I lived,” she said. “Got a touch of arthritis, but all in all, it could have been much worse, eh, couldn’t it, Puss?” She rubbed the kneazle under its chin, causing it to emit a noise like a car engine ticking over.

“Well,” Kingsley said, after a glance at Harry, “that’s good to hear – ”


“I think Kingsley only meant that he was pleased you lived. And to be honest, I’d meant it was tough to miss your son’s wedding,” Harry gave her a rueful look. “I’m sorry if we’re all talking at
cross-purposes. Of course we’re sorry to hear that you’re in pain.”

She gave him a glance up, as she moved her ministrations to Puss’ ears.

“Well,” she said, mollified, “it ain’t so bad this time of year. Winter comes in, and it’s a different ballgame.”

Harry nodded sympathetically.

“An’ I don’t know if it’s a good thing or not that I missed his wedding,” she went on, “I sometimes wonder if I’d been there whether any of this would’ve come about.”

“Any of this?” Kingsley prompted.

“That bitch killin’ my boy,” she said.

“You seem certain of that,” Kingsley said after a moment.

“Certain? What’s certain?” she said. “That’s not what I found out, of course, but I know what I think.”

“What did they tell you?” Harry asked gently.

“Nobody told me nothing!” she snarled. “Not one person came to see me. Not her, of course. Not no-one else neither.”

“No-one came to tell you your son was dead?” Kingsley said in surprise. “That sounds dreadful. How did you find out?”

“Well, when they’d gone back, I didn’t hear from them, of course, but when I reckoned it was about due, I sent them letters, and heard nothing, so I just decided I needed to go over there for myself.”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, “when what was due?”

“The baby, of course. That’s why they came to see me in the first place.”

“Dorothy was pregnant?”

“Didn’t I just say so?”

“I’m sorry,” Harry said, “but I didn’t realise that Dorothy had a child.”

“Oh, she doesn’t. Good thing too! The thought of that bitch bringing up a grandchild of mine -” she bit out.

The kneazle swizzled its head, and butted her lightly in the stomach.

“I know, I know,” she said to it. “But the thought makes my stomach turn. Anyways, I went to England, and I left a message for my son at that pub – what’s it called? The Leakin’ Pot?”

“The Leaky Caudron,” Harry said.

“That’s the one,” she nodded. “Sent it to his work, what with him not answerin’ any of the letters I’d sent to his home. And David came to see me, my son’s business partner, that is, and tells me my boy’s dead and gone. Heart attack in the shop, he said.” She looked at them both.
“Apothecaries, they both were: you’d think he’d know if somethin’ was wrong with him, dealing out stuff for other people’s ailments every goddam day, wouldn’t you?” she demanded.

“You don’t believe it was a heart attack?” Kingsley asked.

“How can I know for sure?” she said. “He’d always been as strong as an ox – you have to be to live here, it’s hard living,” she said challengingly.

“I can see that,” Harry nodded. “It’s amazing: I’ve never seen scenery like it, but I expect it must get pretty isolated in the winter?”

“My boy was taught early to apparate, once he went to that school in Boston,” she said. “Only way he could git home for the winter holidays, wasn’t it?”

“He must have been a very able wizard,” Harry said.

“Exelled at everything,” she said proudly. “Potions and charms and all that sort of stuff you do. Much good it was to him,” she sniffed.

“So,” Harry backtracked, “you only met her the once?”

“Said so, didn’t I? They came over to tell me they were expectin’, didn’t they?” she said. “My Charles was all excited! ’Course, when she realised I was a Muggle, she weren’t happy at all, oh no.”

“She didn’t know beforehand? How come?” Harry asked.

She shrugged, and shifted in her chair. The kneazle stood up, digging its claws in, and rearranged herself. After a couple of minutes, the woman looked up fiercely. “Truth be told, I don’t think Charles said too much about me.”

“He was ashamed that you were a Muggle?” Kingsley said, keeping his voice free of any intonation.

“No! Never known anything else, had he, till he got the letter from the Academy in Boston! My word, I was never so relieved to get anything in my life!”

Harry raised a quizzical eyebrow.

She’d obviously decided to confide in him, and she leant forward, over the kneazle.

Its rumble paused, and then started up again.

“Folks round here – well, it’s a backwater, no sayin’ otherwise. Bad enough me being an unmarried mother. They thought the devil was getting’ into ‘im, or somethin’. You know, did a couple of bits of magic by accident, like. Scared me half to death too, I can tell you.”

“Oh, that happened to me,” Harry commiserated. “I was raised by Muggles too. I had no idea what was going on.”

“There you are, then,” she nodded, settling back.

“Forgive me for being intrusive,” Kingsley said, “but what happened to Charles’ father?”

“Came here one summer,” she said. “He was camping out on the mountain,” she nodded backwards. “I was young and – well, there weren’t no men that interested in me round here.
There’s not many to start with,” she sniffed. “Only Barry turned out all right,” she said thoughtfully. “Anyways, he came along and he was handsome and amazin’, and I was a young girl, foolish and ready for love. I got stuck with the baby and he disappeared,” she said. “It’s an old story, ain’t it?”

“Did you know he was a wizard?” Harry asked. “Was he a wizard?”

“Not that I ever knew,” she said. “Maybe I shoulda known, the way he just turned up here an’ disappeared agin. Anyway, it didn’t surprise me that Charles hadn’t said anythin’ about me. He loved me, I know he did, but I know he was ashamed that he had no dad. Can you believe it, I was so excited when he wrote to say they was comin’ to see me?”

“So, how did Dorothy react?” Harry asked.

“Threw a almighty tantrum,” she said. “Nice as anything when she got here, she was, all friendly like. Then she came in an’ sees me puttin’ the kettle on the stove, and that was it. ‘Course, Charles tried to make it alright. Made her stay the night, an all, but I told him, you’re a man now, son, I said, and your wife has got to come before your mother. He hugged me. Last time I saw him.” A tear slipped out.

Kingsley handed her a handkerchief.

She dabbed her eyes. “Sorry, I never cry no more.”

“Nothing wrong with crying,” Kingsley said gently.

“Don’t do no good,” she said sharply. “He’s dead an’ buried, and I didn’t even get to go to his funeral. I’ll never forgive her for that, even if she didn’t kill him, which I’ll never believe. Don’t know what she did to get rid of the baby, neither. I asked David about the baby – he was real sorry he hadn’t come to tell me, thought she woulda done it, he said. Which of course, any regular daughter-in-law woulda done. Said she must’ve lost the baby because she definitely wasn’t pregnant no more. I tried to go and see her, but she didn’t answer my letters, even though David let me use his owl. I stayed a week over there, and then I came home again. Not heard one word about my boy’s death until a fortnight ago.”

“What happened a fortnight ago?” Kingsley asked, flashing a glance at Harry.

“Man turns up, tells me he’s an – Auror? Some funny word.”

“That could be right,” Kingsley said. “Bit like the police. Did you catch his name?”

“That’s all I got from him,” she nodded. “Puss wasn’t havin’ it at all. Hissed and spat. Charles gave her to me, you know. Anyways, I got my gun and told ‘im to clear off.”

“That was sensible,” Kingsley said. “Who did he say he was?” he prompted.

“Felton,” she said. “Ramsay Felton. Studied the Great Depression in school. Your Prime Minister was called Ramsay MacDonald back then. Always did like the name, but I trust Puss when it comes to strangers. Never let me down. I sent him packing. You going to tell me what all this interest is about?”
There was no doubt that Dorothy liked playing cards, Lucius thought. He didn’t mind a game himself, but she was a bore at the table. Wilkes was not a bad player, but Nott was disinterested.

When the round ended, Lucius stood up.

They all looked at him. “I need to stretch my legs,” he said coolly. “Theo, perhaps you’d care to join me? Unless you’d like to go over the round?”

Atkins and Wilkes had done so after every single one, so far.

Theo stood up. “What a good idea,” he said, picking up his glass of firewhisky. “Want yours?”

“Thank you, no,” Lucius said.

“So Dorothy,” Wilkes said, “A rather masterly stroke when you played the knave, I thought. What….”

Wilkes’ voice faded away as they strolled outside. It was Wilkes’ town house, and the garden was rather small, but the fresh air was welcome.

“So,” Nott said, sipping his drink as they paused by the back door. “You’re welcoming Draco back to the Manor, are you?”

“He bought a ticket, like everyone else, I assume,” Lucius said.

“No reconciliation on the cards?”

Lucius looked across at him. “I have no desire to discuss my son with you, Theo. As I understand it, you were never friends.”

“No, we weren’t,” Nott agreed, taking a wizarding pipe from his pocket and lighting up. “A person’s contacts are important though, don’t you think?”

“Family and contacts are two different things,” Lucius said. “There are many matters on which Draco and I do not see eye to eye, but he is my son. You’ve hardly lived in your father’s pocket all these years, and yet here you are, espousing the same cause. I find that infinitely more interesting.”

“You think I was disloyal to my father?”

“You tell me,” Lucius shrugged. “I can only judge on appearances.”

“My father had a very simplistic view of life.”

“A polite way to say that he was not your intellectual equal,” Lucius said.

There was a moment’s silence. “That’s true,” Nott agreed, smiling.

“Your views are more refined? Do tell.”

“I don’t have to prove myself to you. Dorothy has set you up to this,” Nott said.

“Oh, she definitely felt it was time I met you, but I think that would have been the case anyway. What I’m wondering is whether you’ve always held each other in disdain, or whether it’s a passing fancy. It makes it uncomfortable to work with you both.”

“And I’m sure the Death Eaters were a warm and friendly brethren,” Nott said sarcastically.
“No, one came to expect torture and humiliation,” Lucius said. “You’ve not had personal experience of either, I imagine, but I can assure you, I don’t desire to be part of an organisation that works by the same methodology.”

“You’ve lost your stomach?” Nott sneered.

Lucius grasped him by the neck.

Nott choked as the pipe hit the back of his throat, unable to spit it out, or breath properly. “Oh, I haven’t forgotten how to dish it out,” Lucius said, “but personally, I prefer to use a more subtle approach.” He looked Nott’s face over. “I’m wondering if you’re of the same mind, or just a coward.”

Nott’s face was getting redder, and Lucius leant in until the pipe hit the back of his throat again. Nott gagged.

Lucius let him go, brushing his hands off.

Nott’s wand was at his temple instantly.

“If you touch me again, I’ll kill you!”

Lucius stood perfectly still, and looked down his nose at him. “Would you have the guts?” he said, conversationally. “It takes personal strength to kill a man. You’re very clever, but a killer?” He turned and walked down the garden. There was a rather ornate seat down the bottom, and he went and sat on it.

Nott was watching him.

“You’re cool, I’ll grant you that,” Nott said, following him after a moment, and standing in front of him, tapping his wand against his leg. “You’re a different kettle of fish to Draco.”

“Shall we agree that you won’t mention Draco, and I won’t mention your father?” Lucius shifted slightly.

It was an invitation to sit down, and with a laugh, Nott did so.

“Did she want you to sort me out?” he asked.

“Dorothy Atkins does not rule the world,” Lucius said.

“She could have you thrown back in Azkaban.”

“You think she hasn’t made a point of telling me that?”

Nott grinned. “She’s a bully,” he agreed.

“Oh, you don’t want to allow that,” Lucius recommended.

“I ignore her. It gets up her nose.”

“I’m sure,” Lucius said, allowing a smile to show. “I’m surprised you give a fuck about Muggles, and half-bloods,” Lucius mused.

“Oh?”
“I was under the impression that you were astonishingly clever: I know Draco only did as well as he did at Hogwarts because I paid Severus a little something.”

“I wouldn’t have thought the traitor was interested in money?”

“Oh, it was for the House, of course. Severus took being a snake rather too far, perhaps.”

Nott laughed again. “You have to admire him, I suppose. He fooled us all.”

“Quite,” Lucius said.

“A man of his intellect is capable of so much. Potions, teaching, herding us Slytherins and spying, all at the same time. Impressive.”

Lucius looked at him. “A man of your ability no doubt finds it inspirational. Forgive me if I still feel somewhat aggrieved.”

Nott smiled. “You’re not stupid,” he said, in the tone of a man who was conferring a hint of praise on a lesser individual.

“I have my moments,” Lucius said. “And you’ve obviously had yours. Why is Dorothy at outs with you? She’s an intelligent woman herself, but you must be something of the jewel in her crown.”

“Benningdean brought a Muggle into the Ministry to investigate the fire. Obviously, I saved as much as I could from the Department of Mysteries. She’s a little irritated that the lack of – stock - is raising questions.”

“I would have thought she’d be pleased that you had been so – effective,” Lucius said slowly. “What on earth were you doing in on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day? Or did you come over all absent-minded genius and ‘forget’?” he said with a smirk.

“I don’t forget things,” Nott said with a straight face. “I wasn’t in.”

Lucius was silent. “You’re able to apparate into the building, like Potter did? Intriguing.”

Nott looked angry for a moment. “Potter is a freak.”

“Oh, I think the whole business was quite fortunate for showing the world that,” Lucius agreed easily.

Nott shot him a look. “You saved his life. In court.”

“By outing him as a rampant homosexual? It was hardly much of a favour.”

“He was already outing. You didn’t need to say anything.”

Lucius sighed. “I owed him. It’s now paid.”

“For what?” Nott said sharply.

“He kept Narcissa out of Azkaban. It was a fair exchange.”

Nott was silent. “I always wondered about that.”

“He was merciful. I told him I owed him at the time. After I’d been in Azkaban for a week, I knew the – enormity of the debt I owed him. Narcissa would not have survived it.”
“She didn’t survive anyway.”

Lucius stood up swiftly. “There is a difference between a swift death after happy years, in comfort, rather than rotting away slowly, a day at a time, suffering the most appalling degradations and –” He bit his tongue.

Nott too had stood up.

“I expect they may be ready for another hand,” Lucius said tightly.

“My apologies –” Nott began.

“Accepted,” Lucius snapped, and despite his cane, moved away swiftly.

He was irritated, but he also had the upper hand.

That was where he wanted to be.

“So,” Ron said at the next meeting, “we know Nott was in the building and nicking stuff, despite Dowling’s investigations. Draco, you suggested he could have got in and got the stuff out with a vanishing cabinet –”

“And then left the building posing as Peter Stubbins,” Rose said. “Quite neat. But as he said to Mr Malfoy, he can always argue that he was saving stuff, if it comes to light.”

“After keeping schtum about it to begin with?” Gloria scoffed. “If he was just rescuing stuff, surely he should be boasting about it?”

“I’m worried about what he’s doing with those brains,” Ron shuddered.

“I’m presuming he’s got one of these hidden vaults that the goblins mentioned,” Harry said.

“I don’t think that can be all that was wrong between them,” Lucius said quietly. “There has to be something else, but I felt I’d taken it as far as I could.”

“The information you got us was excellent,” Kingsley said. “Thank you, Lucius. And if you could continue with that…”

Lucius nodded.

“So, Atkins’ mother-in-law says Atkins was pregnant,” Andy said.

“Yes, and she blames Atkins for the death of her son,” Kingsley said. “But a mediwizard verified that he’d had a heart attack.”

“What exactly happened?” Snape said.

Kingsley looked at him sharply. “There were a couple of customers in the shop, plus David Wallace, his co-owner. He just clutched his chest, then died. Interestingly, the witness reports – from one customer and the business partner, have gone missing.”

“Really?” Scorpius asked. His brow furrowed. “How come you knew what was in them, then?”
“I’d had them copied a month or two back, when we first started looking at her. I got my contact to go back to the original file, because there’s no statement from the second customer, and I wanted to see if that was just an oversight.”

“Who do you think has - Felton!” Ron exclaimed.

“That’s where I’m going to check first,” Kingsley nodded. “Tomorrow.”

“I’d like to see the witnesses, if you can get hold of them,” Severus said.

Kingsley nodded again.

A lull fell.

“I wanted to talk about something else, briefly,” Harry said. “Something to think about.”

Everyone turned to look at him.

“I know we started all this with Gin’s death,” he said, “but now this is all about society, isn’t it? And I’m not - that’s the right thing,” he said quickly, seeing Ron opening his mouth. “But we’re – firefighting, the Muggles call it. Trying to do stuff after the fact. We’ll never get on top of it.”

“What are you suggesting, Harry?” Gloria asked.

“Well, in some ways this group is right, isn’t it?”

“I beg your pardon?” Minerva screeched.

“No right about what they want to do,” Harry said quickly, “but right in that things aren’t right with society. I was thinking the other day about Guy Fawkes blowing up Parliament, and what the Muggles did afterwards.”

“You do know he didn’t blow up Parliament, don’t you?” Snape asked with a smirk.

“Yeah, you know what I mean,” Harry said, rolling his eyes, and smiling at Snape to soften it. “But I was thinking we need to be more – democratic. Have more representation. Voldemort and Atkins and the like all try to do this stuff by sneaking, or just brute force, but if we had proper representation and voting – young people on the Wizengamot, and not people being there falling asleep just because they’re forced to be there – well, surely it would be better?”

“People might choose to have a society you didn’t like,” Lucius suggested coolly.

“Yes,” Harry said after a moment, “but I’d like the chance to debate it openly. Everything gets all screwed up when people don’t talk about things. The Wizengamot ought to have a forum for debate. We work with laws that haven’t been changed for hundreds of years, and maybe they don’t need changing, but there’s got to be room for improvement, surely? Like the elves, and rights and so on,” he said, turning to nod at Hermione.

“Well, I know it’s not quite on the same scale, but the elections for the two new governors are coming up at Hogwarts,” Draco said. “We’re running a piece on all the candidates this week, and trying to encourage people to vote.”

“Will people think that’s bias because of Scorpius? You are standing, aren’t you?” Minerva asked.

“I am,” Scorpius nodded.
Lucius’ head whipped round to look at his grandson.

“So am I,” Hermione said to him, from her seat next to him.

He turned to look at her.

“And I’ve asked all the candidates to submit their manifesto to the paper,” Draco said. “Same word-length allowed, so they’re all on an equal footing.”

“Good. They need more publicity, and openness, rather than the candidates just rounding up all their cronies,” Minerva said.

“Isn’t that what’s happening here?” Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“No,” Scorpius said. “I’m hardly going to garner votes in here, because you can only vote for your house candidate, but I still want people to vote. People will see from The Prophet’s article that there are a variety of candidates, and the Headmaster has agreed to hold hustings so that everyone can come and see what the candidates are like.”

“Really?” James leant forward to look at him. “That’s a good idea.”

“Did you suggest that to him, Severus?” Harry grinned. “Or you, Minerva?”

“Peter suggested it himself,” Minerva said.

“What about Adrian Donnelly? He didn’t object?” Ron raised a brow.

“He’s left,” Minerva said.

“Excellent,” Ron said with satisfaction. “Stupid, rude pri – idiot,” he changed his words, going red.

“Oh quite,” Minerva nodded. “I think Peter Brown will do a lot better without him. I’ve suggested one or two replacements: I think it’s a good idea to have a school secretary, but Adrian Donnelly will be no loss.”

“Are you standing with a view to going into politics in the long run?” George asked Hermione. “I think you’d be brilliant, of course, but why bother with Hogwarts? You’re past all that now, aren’t you?”

Hermione shared a fleeting smile with Ron, then Rose. Ron grinned at Harry.

“Well,” she said, “Hugo’s fine at Beauxbatons of course, but I’d really like our next child to go to Hogwarts.”

There was a stunned moment. Without exception, everyone’s eyes slid down Hermione’s figure, coming to rest on her hand, which was smoothing protectively over the swell of her stomach.

“Are you - ?” George beamed.

“You’re expecting?” Minerva was out of her chair. “Ach, well done, dear!” she came round and hugged Hermione.

Harry couldn’t help laughing at the shocked look James, Scorpius and Andy gave Hermione.

And then, in the midst of the congratulations, Hermione turned to Ron, and then Harry. “Oh, you won’t believe who I saw at the maternity clinic at St. Mungo’s this afternoon!”
“Who?” Harry asked, smiling.

Babies seemed to bring such infectious pleasure.

“Hannah! Hannah Longbottom! It’s so wonderful and so sad. After all those years, she got pregnant just before he died. He never knew. How dreadful is that?”

Harry felt his heart actually stop.

The thud as it set going again jolted him back into the conversation.

“Is she pleased?” Gloria was asking.

“Thrilled,” Hermione nodded. “She’s very small, though, but then you can’t get more stressful than what she’s been through. She says she’s put on more weight recently, and I gather her father and step-mother are very supportive.”

“She’s staying with them?” Minerva asked.

Hermione nodded.

“They’re good people,” Minerva said. “Her father was a Gryffindor,” she explained.

“I thought –” Ron began, looking puzzled.

Harry kicked him under the table.

He looked at Harry, stuttered, and finished, “Er – that she was buying her own house up there. You know, after selling us The Leaky.”

“Well, she’ll be glad of the support, no doubt,” Minerva said. “It won’t be easy, raising the bairn alone.”

Harry swallowed.
"You’ve been to see Charles’ Atkins’ mother,” Kingsley said to Felton, as the man opened the door.

“She wouldn’t speak to me,” Felton shrugged. He looked at them sharply. “So, you’re following up on my lead after all, are you?”

“Are we going to have this conversation on the doorstep?” Harry asked.

“I could say that you didn’t make me welcome in your home,” Felton said, raising an eyebrow.

“No. Because you’d watched me being assaulted and encouraged mistreatment that nearly killed me,” Harry said stonily. “I don’t think I’ve done anything to cause you injury – apart from being innocent, of course.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I thought you weren’t interested in my help,” Felton said, stepping back.

“I wasn’t until I realised you were involved,” Kingsley said. “And that you’ve been carrying out your own investigations.”

“Did you think I’d give up?” Felton led them into his kitchen.

It was antiseptically clean, the worktops bare of clutter and gleaming. Not a teaspoon or mug was left lying about.

It made Harry shiver.

Felton put his wand to the kettle.

“It’s not a social call,” Kingsley said flatly.

“Do you want my help?” Felton demanded.

“I thought you wanted the truth,” Kingsley countered.

Felton looked at him, and tucked his wand up his sleeve. He moved to the table and pulled out a chair.

“We’re looking into the death of Charles Atkins,” Kingsley said. “Funnily enough, the records are missing from the Ministry. Either she’s got them, or you have.”

Felton sat with his hands linked, and smiled at them.

“You were the investigating officer at the time,” Kingsley said. “We’ve found out that much. Given her position, an Auror was sent to investigate. That task fell to you. What did you find?”

“What do I get out of helping you?”

“What are you looking for?” Harry asked, from his position leaning against the door frame. “Paying you isn’t going to help your credibility.”
“I was paid before: finding out stuff was my job,” Felton countered. “I want it back.”

“That’s not in my power,” Kingsley said.

“It will be if you get that cow out,” Felton argued. “I was damn good at my job—”

“You overstepped the boundaries,” Harry said sharply. “I don’t know whether you were good once, but don’t expect me to have any confidence in you. I’ll pay you if you want, though, galleons here and now.” He strode over and threw a handful of coins on the table.

One of the coins spun on its axis, before clattering noisily onto the wood.

Harry stood next to the table, hands shoved in his pockets.

“The forensic wizard reported that it was a simple heart attack,” Felton said, after a moment. “There was no reason to doubt that.”

“He was very young,” Kingsley queried.

“It was unusual,” Felton conceded. “Mrs Atkins was working on a tough case. There was concern that he may have been poisoned or something, especially as we never found the man who came into the shop just before it happened; but if he was poisoned, there was no trace in his body.”

“So you took witness statements from—how many?”

“There was just Charlie Atkins’ business partner – David Wallace – and another customer. As I said, the third man disappeared.”

“You didn’t look for him?”

“Of course we did!” Felton snapped.

“Not hard enough, obviously,” Kingsley said.

“It isn’t unusual for a witness to disappear,” Felton said. “I wasn’t surprised, especially as the death happened in an apothecary.”

Harry raised his eyebrows in question.

“He might have been in there to buy something dodgy, or embarrassing. A remedy for piles, or to get an erection: who knows? You go into one of those places because you’ve got something wrong with you.”

“When did you begin to suspect there might be more to his disappearance?” Harry asked.

“Since I started looking into her. It all seemed straightforward at the time. Bit of a tragedy. We were obviously sympathetic to Atkins. She was a good Prosecutor. We all knew her.”

“Respected her?” Kingsley asked.

“Yes,” Felton agreed. “She got a lot of tossers put away.”

“So, when did you nick the paperwork? Recently? You’ve visited the witnesses?” Kingsley asked.

“One of them,” Felton said, a challenging look in his eye. “And I obliviated him afterwards.”
“What?” Harry said sharply.

“Why would you do that?” Kingsley demanded.

“Because I don’t trust her,” Felton said.

“So you’ve destroyed any evidence?”

Felton looked confused. “Only of my visit,” he said, “not of the original event. What sort of idiot do you think I am?”

They both gave him a look.

“Do you think you’re in danger?” Harry asked.

“I hope not,” Felton said slowly. “I hope I’m beneath her notice, but I’m careful.” He looked at both of them. “So, you believe me now? I told you that something was going to happen, didn’t I? She blew up the Ministry, didn’t she? I knew it!” he slammed his hand down on the table.

The coins jumped and jangled.

Neither Harry nor Kingsley spoke.

Felton slumped. “You have no evidence, have you?” he sighed. “Of course you haven’t.”

“I’d like to read those reports and interview those witnesses,” Kingsley said. “Why did you only interview one?”

“I traced the other, and that’s taken me ages. He moved away within weeks of Atkins’ death. I found him in Buenos Aires, but I can’t afford yet another international port-key. He was the business partner, though, so he could be useful, although there was nothing in the original statement that helped.” Felton got up, went over to a large dresser, and retrieved a small package from the back of a drawer, before re-sizing it. “Here,” he said, throwing it down in front of Kingsley. “If you can get any more out of them than I did, good luck to you. I learnt nothing new from John Drewe, the witness I saw again.”

“What was the case she was working on?” Harry asked.

“The Beauchamp brothers: shady characters, dealings with Borgin and Burke’s, history of illegal spell use and even physical violence. They both went to Azkaban.”

“And the missing man?” Kingsley said. “What did the other two say about him?”

“Mr Average Wizard,” Felton said. “Dark robe, middling height, maybe in his sixties; the only thing of any help was that he had an odd walk.”

“Voice?” Harry asked.

“Didn’t speak, apparently. Came into the shop, Mr Atkins was serving Drewe. He looks up, sort of goes green. Shouted ‘No!’ That was the noise that made his partner, David Wallace, come out from the back of the shop. Atkins started clutching his chest. Keeled over. Massive heart attack. Wallace and Drewe tried to help him. The other wizard just left.”

“Do you have anything else?” Kingsley asked, after a moment.

“On Atkins? I’m working on it. Whether you take me on board or not.”
“Only the truth can damage her,” Harry said. “Fabricating –”

“I know,” Felton snapped. “Any case against her will have to be watertight.”

“Do you need protection?” Kingsley asked.

Felton leant back in his chair. “That would draw attention – however good your men. I’ll be alright.”

Kingsley nodded, and stood up, and they moved to the door.

Harry turned round as they reached it. “What happened about the baby?”

Felton spun round to look at them. “What baby?”

“Oh, I knew she was having a baby,” David Wallace said. “Charlie had been brewing her anti-nausea potions.”

Snape, Kingsley and Harry sat in the cramped potions’ lab behind the apothecary shop in a backstreet of Buenos Aires. The beaded curtain separating the area from the shop itself did nothing to diminish the jangle of the door, or the lilting Spanish of Wallace’s assistant as he talked to the customers.

“Do you know what happened to it? There’s no record of its birth,” Kingsley asked.

Wallace shook his head. “I supposed the shock of his death caused her to miscarry,” he said.

“Really?” Kingsley asked. “Had she had a difficult time? Before? Did that seem likely?”

“Only the nausea that I knew of,” Wallace said. “I only had what Charlie said to go on, though: I only met her a couple of times myself.”

“And yet you’re scared of her,” Snape said quietly.

Wallace’s head whipped round to look at him.

“That’s ridiculous!”

“Is it?” Snape asked. “We have every reason to believe that she condones murder, and here you are, about as far across the world as you could be, hiding in plain sight in a Muggle area, which you know is the last place she would think of looking.”

“I have a very busy trade with Muggles – not selling magical potions to them, I promise –”

“I can see that,” Snape said. “I looked at your stock whilst you were serving. Wizards have to approach you directly, I take it? You keep your wizarding stock in here: it looks well organised.”

“You – you’re the Severus Snape?” Wallace’s eyes widened.

“It depends on what you mean by that,” Snape said lightly.

“The – the inventor of Veritaserox? And –”
“Then yes, that is me,” Snape said.

“You – I didn’t kill him!” Wallace leapt to his feet. “He was my friend! I – do you think – are you here to – do you think someone made me do something I didn’t know about? Are you wanting to use Veritaserox on me?” His face was pale with horror.

“Do you have any memory of anything strange happening around then?” Snape asked.

“No,” Wallace shook his head. “I mean, Charlie dying was totally unexpected – ”

“He’d been in good health?”

“Yes. Well, no – well –” he rubbed his hands through his hair. “He’d been drinking, but, you know, his pregnant wife had left him, so it’d only been a few times, and how could I not sympathise with that? He was gutted.”

“Can you tell us a bit more about that?” Harry asked.

“Did – did he –” he pointed at Kingsley, “say that you were Harry Potter?”

Harry stood up and held out his hand. “Yes, I’m sorry, the introductions were perhaps a bit hurried.”

“The Harry Potter?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw Snape’s lips twitching.

“Well, if you mean the Middle-Aged-Man-Who-Lived Harry Potter, that’s me,” he said, as the other two snorted, “and just to be clear, Kingsley is ex-Minister-for-Magic Kingsley Shacklebolt.”

“Wow.” He looked at them all. “Sorry, sorry,” he said. “You have to admit, you’re hardly three wizards anyone would expect to see together, let alone round my work table in the backstreets of Buenos Aires.”

“Really?” Harry said, whilst Kingsley barked a cough. “The thing is,” he said, “we started working together when I tried to find out who killed my wife – ”

“Your wife is dead? I’m so sorr - you think Dorothy Atkins killed your wife? But Dorothy’s some top notch in the MLE, now, isn’t she? Why on earth would she?” Wallace looked from one to another.

“Yes, she’s Head of the Department. You might have heard that the Ministry was near-enough destroyed recently?”

“I daren’t order The Prophet directly, but I have a customer who occasionally brings me copies, so my knowledge of the news is a bit sporadic. I’d heard about the Ministry, but not about your wife,” he shook his head.

“We’re trying to find out some background about Dorothy Atkins,” Kingsley said. “Charlie’s mother felt she had a hand in her son’s death, which is why we’ve come to you, as a witness.”

“I’m not quite following why you’re digging up the past?”

“We were just getting some background information, but obviously, we had to follow up Charles’ mother’s claim.”
“All this time later? And – I mean, you’re not MLE, are you?”

“We’re not,” Snape said. “I suspect you wouldn’t talk to us if we were.”

Wallace snorted. “You’re right there. But – I left England to get away from – I mean, am I in danger?”

“I don’t know,” Kingsley said honestly. “If you can tell us what happened back then, I might be able to judge.”

“Shit!” He stood up, and walked backwards and forwards across the small room.

“I can help you, if you are,” Kingsley said soothingly. “I work for the EWA – the European Wizarding Alliance, I don’t know if you’ve heard of it?”

“Not really, and this isn’t Europe.”

“Point,” Kingsley said easily, “but the events we’re investigating were in Europe. If you can give us any information…? I’d like to know what happened the day Charlie died, but also why you left England so soon afterwards? And came here?”

Wallace scrubbed his hand over his face. “Alright. I went to see Dorothy after Charlie died: I felt I ought to, to give my condolences, obviously; I mean, who wouldn’t? He was my business partner. We went to school together in Boston,” he explained. “Met up again later and found we were both thinking of going to England, and it just all seemed to fall together. Anyway, I was concerned that she might be worried about money, and the business side of things. I wasn’t sure how I was going to buy her out, but I wasn’t going to mention that, going round the first time, just wanted to offer her some money to tide her over, if she needed it, I mean, I know she had a good job, but – you know. The funeral,” he swallowed.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

“She told me that I was under suspicion for his murder, and that I ought to clear out of the country. I - well, you can imagine: I couldn’t believe it, but she was – telling me like she was helping a friend. I told her that of course I hadn’t hurt Charlie, that he was my mate, we had a good business together. She went from concern, to – well, I felt – threatened. And when I asked about the baby, she downright said that she wasn’t pregnant. But I knew he took her home to tell his Mom in person! We’d discussed it, before he went. I don’t know what happened out there – they’d planned to have a week there, but they came back almost straight away, and Charlie would hardly speak. I found him a couple of mornings later, sleeping on the sofa above the shop, with a helluva hangover. Told me his wife had gone batshit when she’d found out his Mom was a Muggle.”

“Had you known?” Kingsley asked.

“Yeah, sure, I’d visited when we were at school.”

“And your family?”

“What d’you mean?”

“If you don’t mind me asking, are you a Pureblood?” Kingsley said.

Wallace gave him a look. “Y’see, we’re not into that crap in the US. We’re much more in tune with the Muggles – you know, a meritocracy. You are what you do, not where you came from.”
“I thought there were a lot of Muggle – dynasties – in the States,” Snape said. “The Bush family, the Kennedys – even in television and film, I believe.”

“Well, that’s true,” Wallace admitted, “but, y’know, we’re a young country. The Muggles approve of success.”

“And wizards?”

“Innovation, I’d say.”

“That’s interesting,” Harry said. He looked at the others. “I really ought to visit some more. You know, when – ” he went quiet, and looked away quickly. “Sorry, I was getting off the subject. So, what happened then? With Charlie and Dorothy?”

“Well, she’d kicked him out, he said. Wouldn’t let him in the house. He was beside himself. I told him it would blow over, but he – well, he didn’t seem to believe it.”

“So then he had the heart attack. Do you think he could have worked himself up into such a state that it happened?”

“Well, I was supposed to think that, I think. But when he died, she was in the papers, all upset, like, and there was no mention of her having left him, or the baby, or anything. I mean, I know people like to hide their dirty washing, especially if she’d been planning to get back together, but then when I went to see her…she started out like she was giving me insider information and telling me to run, and when I said I wouldn’t, she gave me this look…and then, the next day I was raided, and they said I had illegal substances on the premises.”

“Did you?” Snape asked.

Wallace looked at him, then at Kingsley. “Is this – what’s going to happen with what I say here?”

“We’re not looking to prosecute you for anything, unless you’ve committed murder,” Kingsley said.

“It – I’m just glad to talk about this after all this time,” Wallace said shakily. “All right, then. I had some unicorn blood on the premises – ”

Snape’s eyebrows raised.

“Honestly, it was legit! I mean, Charlie and I had been on a hunting holiday – before he married, this was, near his home – you’ve been there, right?”

Harry and Kingsley nodded.

“Well, we didn’t expect magical creatures there – he’d never seen one, and we were with a couple of locals. One of them hit the unicorn – thought it was a stag. Honestly, it wasn’t all white like you think in the stories! Anyway, we realised, so we obliviated the guys, sent them home with a suggestion spell, and healed the unicorn, but it had bled a lot. Charlie asked it if we could use the blood from the cloths – we’d used our shirts to staunch the flow - and it nodded. So when we got back to his Mom’s, we spelled it out of the fabric, and got it into a vial, and we kept it under a stasis charm. We’d had it for a couple of years, but hadn’t actually got round to using it for anything. You know what it’s like when you have something really precious? You sort of save it, don’t you?”

Snape nodded. “And they found it?”
“No,” he said, looking at them. “That’s when I knew I was in trouble. They ‘found’ some Veritaserum – you have to be Ministry-approved to make it, and we weren’t; you have to pay for a special licence to get the approval, and frankly, it wasn’t worth it for us, it wasn’t something we were asked for often. We were more into healing stuff. It had been planted. Within a month, I’d lost my partner and my licence to practice in the UK, so I just sold the stock, sent her half the money, and left.”

“Can you tell us about the day Charlie died?” Kingsley asked. “What exactly happened?”

Wallace nodded. “Can I get you a drink? I’ve got some great Columbian coffee, or there’s chilled water if you prefer.”

“Coffee would be good,” Kingsley said, and the others nodded.

Wallace set about making it as he talked.

“It was a normal day. Charlie was out in the shop, I was making up a batch of – hayfever remedy, I think it was.”

“Was that your usual set-up?” Snape asked. “You did the potions, and he dealt with the customers?”

“No,” Wallace shook his head. “We took turns, no particular order, depending on how we felt, what needed making. It was never a problem, we both liked doing both.”

Snape nodded.

Wallace lifted the kettle just before it boiled, and poured the contents over the coffee grounds: the scent rose into the air, rich and satisfying.

“Anyway, I could hear Charlie talking to a customer, and I heard the bell go on the door – you notice these things, even if you don’t have to deal with it – and then I heard Charlie yell, so I dashed into the shop. He was staring at the man by the door, his hand was on his chest,” Wallace unconsciously shifted into the posture, showing them how his friend had been. He shook his head. “I dashed over to him. He just sort of crumpled in. He was still staring at the man. He – this is a bit weird – I mean, I suppose it isn’t odd, thinking about it, it must have hurt like shit, but it struck me as weird at the time – sorry, I’m gabbling – the thing is, he had a tear coming from the corner of his eye. Then he just keeled over. I tried to grab him, but he was a – a dead weight.” He paused. “I had no idea what that expression meant until then.” He turned away, pouring the coffee, and brought the cups over, taking a deep breath and then a big sip of his own.

“You didn’t smell anything on his breath?” Snape asked. “Suspect poisoning?”

“Not at the time, but afterwards…after what she’d said to me…I tried to think back over everything.”

“And?”

“He’d had a letter from her that morning; he’d been really excited. She’d said she was going to visit, and he was hoping for a reconciliation. I wondered if there’d been anything on it, though I couldn’t think what could have been impregnated in the parchment that would bring on a heart-attack.”

“How long was it between when he read it and the attack?” Snape asked, eyes sharp.
“Five or six hours, I should think,” Wallace said. “I can’t think of anything that could last that long, from skin contact, and still have an effect, can you?” he asked Snape.

“I’ll do some research,” Snape said, “but no, nothing springs to mind. I don’t suppose you still have the letter?”

“The Auror team took everything – all the post for the whole week, our books, orders, receipts, customer records – ” He shrugged. “That alone would have scared off quite a few customers, a death even more: I knew it would have been an uphill struggle to stay, let alone the threat of being arrested for something I didn’t do. I left,” he said, with a hint of defiance.

“I’m not surprised,” Harry said equably. “No-one has troubled you since?”

“Not till now. Am I in danger?” he asked again.

“Would it damage your business if you had a short holiday?” Snape said.

Kingsley and Harry looked at him in surprise.

“I believe there are some potions that I’m working on that might interest you, if you’d consider a short sabbatical.”

Wallace’s mouth opened and shut. “I’ll pack my bags,” he said.

“But – oh my god! Don’t you see?” Hermione gasped.

“What?” Ron said, looking at his wife. “Everyone suspects Atkins, but there’s not a thing to suggest she’d done anything!”

“Damn, once again, we can’t prove anything!” she said, shaking her head, “but I bet that bitch was the man who came into the shop.”

“Why would you think that?” Gloria asked, leaning forward over the table.

“She sent him a letter telling him he’d see her that day – I bet he spent every minute wondering if it was her every time the door bell jangled, getting tenser and tenser – ”

“What are you getting at, Hermione?” Scorpius asked.

Hermione gave him a small smile, and turned to Ron. “What things was I told I mustn’t do? You know?” she said, running her hand over her belly.

“What? Well, no sex for – ”

“Not that, Ron!” Hermione said, going bright red.

Everyone tried to hide their sniggers.

Ron opened his mouth –

“Think about Atkins,” she hissed.
“Wha – oh – oh no,” Ron said, leaning back, “she couldn’t have – wouldn’t – I mean, that’s – and it would hurt like shit, surely – ?”

“Get out a whole sentence, bro, would you?” George rolled his eyes.

“Her husband made potions,” Hermione said. “I’ve no doubt they might have used them now and then – you know, a bit of role-playing, spice up your love life – ”

“You’ve always been good at potions,” Harry said, smirking, “what’ve you two been up to, eh?”

Hermione batted his arm. “This is serious, Harry. Horrible.”

Harry’s face straightened. “Explain it then, please. You know I’m thick.”

“You’re not, and stop trying to get my sympathy,” she said briskly. “We know she uses Polyjuice, and is fond of being a man – she chose to be Duncan when she could easily have polyjuiced as a woman.”

“Yeah?” Harry’s brow furrowed.

“Hermione is suggesting that she polyjuiced as the man who came into the shop,” Snape said, looking at her.

“Wha – how did you get to that?”

“She sent him a letter that morning,” Ron said, “then left it all day. His anxiety levels must’ve got really high. Then this person who walks odd comes in.” Ron looked at Lucius. “You knew there was something odd about her by the way she walked as a man,” he said.

Lucius nodded.

“You can’t use Polyjuice when you’re pregnant,” Hermione said.

“But she was pregnant,” James frowned, “you said so, Kingsley.”

“What I mean is,” Hermione said, her hand unconsciously on her stomach again, “you can’t use it without killing the baby.”

There was a shocked silence.

“That woman doesn’t deserve to be called a woman,” Gloria said. “She’s scum. Pond slime.”

Nanette had her hand over her mouth. “What – what happens?”

“If you tried to transform into another pregnant woman, it wouldn’t work,” Hermione said, “even though there’d be a womb. The baby is a separate magical and human entity. Transforming into a male body – with nowhere for it to go – that baby just got crushed and suffocated –” she put her hand over her mouth. “Sorry,” she gasped, leapt up, and dashed out of the room.

Ron shot out after her.

Snape got up and followed; Harry sent him a grateful look. Hermione wouldn’t like anyone to see her being sick, he knew, but Snape could help, if she needed it.

They sat in horrified silence.
“She’d have had to have transformed into someone that she’d - or he’d - been before,” Scorpius said quietly.

Everyone looked at him.

“So her hubby would recognise that it was her,” Gloria said, nodding. “She wanted to show him she’d killed the baby.”

“Oh, mais – that’s just – horrible,” Nanette had her hands over her cheeks.

Next to her, James patted her back in sympathy.

“You’re surely right,” Gloria agreed. “The thing is, there ain’t no way to prove it, now is there? We can’t prove she did it, or that she knew the effect it would have on him. She’s one slippery customer,” she shook her head.

Later, most of the group had headed home. Harry made sure Hermione had had a cup of tea and some biscuits, and she and Ron, Harry and Kingsley and George had sat in the living room for a bit, until Hermione had felt up to taking the floo.

They’d moved into the parlour, and George reached for the floo powder too, but Harry stopped him. “I’d like a word, George, if you can stay a few more minutes.”

“I’ll get home,” Snape said, and with a nod, threw some powder into the floo and was gone.

“Will you be coming later?” Kingsley asked, hands in the pockets of his jeans.

Harry tried not to look at the fabric stretched over his crotch. “Not tonight,” he said, swallowing. Kingsley nodded, and a moment later had followed Snape.

George raised an eyebrow.

“Come and have a beer,” Harry said.

They were sitting at the kitchen table with a bottle each when Harry said, “George, I went to Hogsmeade yesterday to the bookshop: Lily had asked me to get her a copy of a book she needed.”

“You’ve seen Lily?”

“I nipped over this weekend, and went to see Albus too.”

“Blimey. They both alright?”

“Fine,” Harry smiled at him. “I wanted to check out Albus’ wards, see if they needed a bit of strengthening: I’d meant to do that when he first went, but what with him having to go so suddenly…”

“Right.” George took a long swallow from the bottle. “So, Hogsmeade. You saw my kids?”

“I – I feel like a tattle-tale,” Harry said. “I’m not sure if I’m doing the right thing telling you –”
“You saw Roxy with Josh Nott.”

“You knew! Thank god. That’s alright then.”

“Well, I won’t say alright, exactly,” George said, his hands playing with the bottle on the table in front of him. He looked up. “I told them both – Roxanne and Fred – that we had suspicions. She said Josh’d been her friend for years, that she trusted him, and that if his Dad was dodgy, it was even more important that he had a good friend. Can’t argue with that,” George shrugged.


“Of course,” George said. “It’s hard work, this parenting business, isn’t it? I thought it would get easier as they got older.”

Harry nodded, not meeting his eyes.

“What’s up, Harry?” George asked quietly.

Harry’s gaze darted to his. “Just – you know, all this business –”

“No,” George said, standing up and swallowing the last dregs from his bottle. “Looks to me like you’ve fallen out with Kingsley and Severus, but I’m not one to stick my nose in where it’s not wanted.” He put the bottle down and headed for the door.

“George,” Harry said, standing. “I – there’s something I can’t talk about, alright? I don’t mean any offence –”

George turned back, a hand on the door jamb, and looked at him. “If you say so. But you look miserable, and I’m sad to see you back to that. I would have thought they were worth working for. They’re good men, and they’re good for you.” He gave a slight smile. “That’s how it seems to me, anyway, but it’s your life. If I can help at all, ask,” and with a nod, he was gone.

Sitting at a bar in the centre of Dublin, a pint of Guinness in hand, Kingsley was wondering what had gone wrong too.

Harry hadn’t been over since the night after they’d been to the Adirondacks. It wasn’t as if it hadn’t been a scorching hot night, either. Despite the travelling followed by the meeting at Grimmauld Place, Harry had been absolutely on fire and rampant. Kingsley smiled thinking about it. True to their earlier intentions, they’d told Snape about their dally in the woods, and had lavished him with attention, but after the first round, Harry had pretty much gone to town on him as well. He’d woken them again in the night, and left them so sated that they’d only woken to the alarm.

Severus rarely needed an alarm to wake up, and it had made him smile.

Harry had left them a note on the kitchen table, saying that he’d had a great night but had a busy day.

They hadn’t thought anything more about it.
He hadn’t.

But then Harry had sent an owl that he wouldn’t be around that night, and the day after that they’d seen Felton together and Wallace, and Snape had got Wallace set up in the village and working in the lab with him. Harry had sent a message saying he was going to India to see Albus at the weekend.

It could have been just life, but he’d let it go on too long. It wasn’t. Something was going on.

He took a swallow of his beer. He’d gone straight back to the villa after Severus had left, but Severus had already gone down to his lab. Severus often did, if he had something important on, but there was something about the way that Severus hadn’t looked at Harry before leaving that was firing off warning bells.

Like Severus knew something he didn’t.

Had Severus been unhappy that he and Harry had had that wank together in the mountains? He thought back. Severus had seemed happy enough that night.

Had he – had he misunderstood Severus?

Had Severus had words with Harry about it? That might explain why Harry was staying away.

And this chap David Wallace: he’d come home twice and found them both locked in the lab.

Severus rarely worked with anyone else.

He hadn’t investigated Wallace’s sexual orientation, but he did know the man was single, and obviously was in awe of Severus.

Severus wouldn’t be getting his own back with him, would he?

His lips tightened.

His urge was to go back and have this out with Severus – Merlin knew, they’d had enough sparking moments in the past, though never about fidelity.

Did he have any right to expect Severus to be faithful?

There was Harry….but Harry was different.

Harry was part of them.

“Want another, now, my friend?” the barman asked, coming over. “You look to have slaughtered that one."

“It was good, but I’m done for tonight,” Kingsley said, getting up.

They needed to talk.

All three of them.
Harry was in his sitting room, slumped in front of his television.

His life felt like a roller coaster – ups and downs, a long plateau, down with Ginny’s death, up higher than he’d ever been – and now he’d plunged right down again, and there were no more ups, just this till the end of the journey.

And this time, it was nobody’s fault but his own.

So many things he wanted slipping away, just out of reach.

He’d been to see Albus at the weekend; he hadn’t planned it, but he missed Albus tremendously. His quiet common sense and humour had been something he’d taken for granted.

They’d had a good evening, and he’d been really pleased that Albus was settling in well, and was loving the training so far. They’d laughed and talked, but when Albus had said, “What is it, Dad?” he hadn’t been able to tell him.

Not that he would have. Yet.

It wasn’t a burden he should put on Albus.

He’d just said he was fine, and when Albus had given him a look, he’d said merely that he was finding it a bit frustrating that they weren’t getting anywhere.

Albus had paused and eventually nodded, but when Harry was about to leave, he’d said, “Dad, tell me you’re not in danger?”

Harry had pulled away, holding him by the biceps. “I’m not in danger,” he’d grinned.

Albus had remained serious. “Alright. And I know you’re grown up and can sort out your own problems, but – if you need someone to talk to, I’m here, yeah? I can come through any time –”

Harry hugged him again. “You’re too sharp. Something’s bothering me, but I need to think it out. Don’t worry about it, alright? Otherwise I’ll think I shouldn’t have come.”

“I’m glad you did. It’s good here, isn’t it? I mean, noisy, and hot, and – well – it’s all so different. I’m really enjoying it.”

“Good,” Harry said. “When will you next see Laura?”

“Probably the holidays,” Albus said. “International travel is expensive, so we’ll save it up for a long spell. We send letters. Quite romantic,” he laughed.

Harry laughed too, and headed home, but when Laura had come to the training session earlier that evening, he’d slipped her an international return port-key. “Use it when you want,” he said. “but I expect you’d like to see where he’s living? And I think he’d be pleased to show you round.” Harry was pretty sure of the latter, because as he’d been showing Harry, his conversation was littered with, ‘Laura’d love this!’ and ‘I told Laura about this – she thinks it sounds amazing!’ and ‘It’s really hard to describe smells and get that across when you’re writing it, isn’t it?’

Harry had made his way to see Lily with a much greater effort to keep his face relaxed, and she’d been happy to chat and show him round Beauxbatons, introducing him to the Headmistress, and
had then sent him off to get her the book.

He sort of felt redundant in their lives.

Which was, of course, exactly how it should be, and he shouldn’t be relying on them for support, either.

But they were family.

Family.

He hung his head in his hands, and grabbed his hair. He could feel his magic swelling in response to his frustration, and was glad that he’d burnt some off with the intercontinental travel.

He heard the floo flare, and didn’t know whether he welcomed it or dreaded it. He got up, and headed through. To his surprise, Hermione and Ron were walking towards him.

“Did you forget something?”

“No,” Hermione said sternly. “Something’s up, and I think I know what it is. Come on, let’s sit down.”

Ron just looked at him, and said, “You know Mione. She’s not going to let this go. And I agree. Why the hell didn’t you tell us, mate?”

Harry opened and shut his mouth, and then the floo flared again. They all turned back. Albus stepped through.

“Are you alright?” Harry rushed forward.

“Yeah, apart from the fact that I can’t sleep for worrying about you,” Albus said, a hand on his father’s arm.

Harry hugged him. “You needn’t worry about me,” he chided.

“Why not?” Albus stepped back, holding onto him. “Something’s wrong. It’s nagged me ever since you visited.” He looked over his shoulder. “Hi, Mione, Ron. Sorry to disturb you – ”

“We’ve just come back for the same reason,” Ron said.

“I’d make a shitty spy,” Harry joked, but then slumped, and said, “Come on through. Who needs tea? Or a stiff drink?”

They went back to the sitting room, and Harry summoned Dinky, who organised drinks; a plate of sandwiches appeared too, which he took straight over to Albus, bowing low and obviously delighted to see him.

“How’s Allie?” Albus asked. “I’d love to see him, but I don’t want to wake him.”

“Oh, but if Master allows it, it is very good for an elfling to see his human,” Dinky said excitedly.

Albus looked to his father, who looked to Hermione.

“I’m all for a baby’s welfare,” she said. “We can wait a few more minutes.”

So they drank tea while Albus stroked Allie’s ears, and then the little elfling held out his arms.
Albus stared at Mitty. “Er – ”

“Allie,” Mitty said to the elfling, tucking his arms back into the pillow-case, “Masters is not wanting to cuddle elflings – ”

“Oh, but I’d love to!” Albus said, “If – if that’s alright with you, Mitty?”

So Albus sat there with a sleepy Allie snuggling into his chest, and a beaming smile on his face, and both parents hovering happily at his feet, and Harry found himself swallowing, and getting up to walk to the window, twitching the curtain back and looking out at the night and the cars and the bustle of London life that never stopped.

The floo flared again. “For god’s sake!” Harry said, turning to head to the door, “If Lily has sneaked out of school too – ”

But as he reached it, Kingsley and Severus walked in.

“Oh god,” Harry said.

“Well, there’s a welcome,” Kingsley said, looking hard at Harry. His glance swept to the others, and his eyebrows rose. “Evening, all. You look good with a baby on your chest, Albus. Something to tell us?”

Harry felt his stomach lurch up into his throat.

“We should go,” Snape said, looking at Harry.

“We need to talk to you,” Kingsley said.

“We beat you to it,” Ron said.

“Dad, all of us love you and we’re all obviously concerned. Why don’t you just spill? It can’t be that bad, can it?” Albus said, carefully handing Allie back. “He’s adorable! But obviously sleepy: if Mitty takes care of him, would you bring some tea and more whisky glasses, Dinky?” he asked.

“And the sandwiches are great, thanks.”

The elves disappeared, glowing with pride.

Kingsley came into the room, but Snape remained by the door.

“I don’t wish to discuss our personal business in public,” he said coolly. “If you wish to talk to me later – ”

Hermione stood up, lumbering to her feet with less grace than usual, and came and stood in front of Snape.

“I understand that this is very personal, or the impact will be, but if the problem is what I think it is, then Harry’s going to need us all. Will you stay a little while? When Harry gets round to telling us what’s bothering him, and we’ve had our say, we’ll go and leave you to it, alright?”

“Look,” Harry said, “thank you all, but - I can’t tell you.”


“Can’t? Not won’t?” he said sharply.
Harry nodded.

“You’ve had a compulsion spell placed on you? Damn, I should’ve spotted that.” He whipped out his wand, and waiting a second for Harry’s permission, waved it over him.

“You’re right. Do you know who did this?” his hand was gripping Harry’s arm gently.

All the others, except Snape, were now standing around him. Snape had moved into the room and was sitting in the desk chair, tall and straight.

“I don’t believe that Harry Potter can’t throw off a compulsion charm,” he said, with something of the old sneer that Harry hadn’t heard since his childhood.

Hermione looked at Harry. “That’s true,” she agreed surprisingly.

Harry wouldn’t meet her eyes.

“Unless you – didn’t want to throw it off,” she said. “Weren’t ready to,” she amended.

He looked up at her, and she placed her small hand on his chest.

“It’s time, Harry. I can break it by saying what I think is the problem.”

His eyes opened wide.

“What Ron and I think is the problem,” she said.

Harry looked down, then up again.

“I’m so sorry,” he said, looking at his friends, and then his son, and then Kingsley. His gaze met Snape’s impenetrable one across the room. His shoulders slumped. “There’s no sorting out what I’ve done,” he said. “I – I didn’t mean it to happen, but it has, and it affects things, and – I just – I know you’ll all hate me, and I deserve it, but – ”

“Dad,” Albus said gently, “we won’t hate you.”

Harry shrugged. He looked back to Hermione.

“Right,” she said. “Well, we might have got the wrong idea entirely, so don’t go off the deep-end, anyone, until – ”

“Mate,” Ron said, “you got Hannah up the duff, didn’t you?”

“Ron!” Hermione thumped his arm. “You have the tact of a hippogriff!”

“There isn’t a tactful way of saying that, Mione,” Ron said. “Anyway, it’s true, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Harry said, and sat down heavily in the chair behind him.

“Wow,” Albus said, after a moment. “You – I’m going to have a – a step-brother or sister?”

“No,” Harry said, sharply. “because Hannah wants nothing to do with me. She says the baby’s Nev’s and she’s sticking to it.”

“Then how do you know - ?” Albus began.

“Neville told us quite a while back that he was infertile,” Ron said quietly. “He’d had lots of tests.
He was subjected to the *Cruciatus* too when his parents were, and it damaged – well, that stuff,” he said, nodding his head downwards and going red.

Snape stood up and moved to the door.

“Where are you going?” Kingsley demanded.

“You dragged me away from an important potion,” Snape said. “I need to get back to it.”

“Severus –” Kingsley said, appealingly.

“It’s quite obvious that Mrs Longbottom will come to her senses once her embarrassment at her speedy indiscretion has abated,” Snape said. “We were never in doubt that Harry is bisexual: I think this makes perfectly clear where his preferred interest lies. There is nothing further to say,” and with that, he swept out of the room.

Harry hung his head.

“Dad!” Albus snapped. “Go after him!”

“Leave him be for the moment,” Kingsley contradicted. “He’s hurting, and he can be inclined to say things that he might later regret. Not to mention, he has the most cutting tongue in the world.”

“I deserve it,” Harry said.

“Then -?” Albus queried.

“Don’t you see?” Harry looked at him. “I know she says she doesn’t want me, but I’m not free now! If she changes her mind – I - I’m responsible – and – “

He looked at Hermione, her belly, and away quickly.

“God knows, I didn’t plan any more kids,” he said, looking up at Albus, “the three I’ve got are more than blessing enough, but – it’s my child.” His gaze shifted back to Hermione. “I can’t – I can’t abandon it! I – I don’t know what to do.” He buried his head in his hands.

There was silence around him.

He looked up again, at Kingsley. “We –we need to talk privately,” he said, “but you need to know – I never cheated on you. I – it was just the once. Before – ”

“Was this the night you were freed properly?” Albus interrupted. “The day Allie was born? You said you slept over on Hannah’s sofa – ”

“I did,” Harry said, “except she did too. We were both drunk – this is so embarrassing – ”

“She’s an attractive woman,” Ron said, “no offence, Mione,” he added quickly.

“I – I – this is awfully rude,” Harry said, “and I’ve always liked Hannah, as a friend. But – it – I’ve never even thought of her as attractive, or not. It was just stupid. We were both seeking comfort, is all. Except – ”

“You forgot contraception?” Hermione raised an eyebrow.

“Er, we can hardly talk, on that score,” Ron smirked.
“Well, that’s true,” she agreed, turning a rueful smile on him.

Ron slid his arm around her waist.

“I – I didn’t even think. Not like think we were about to have sex. It just happened. Gin always did – oh god, Albus, it’s totally wrong for you to hear about your parents’ sex life – ”

“We’re way past that,” Albus grinned. “Anyway, I thought you and Mum didn’t…?”

“Well, we did enough to make you three,” Harry said acerbically. “You didn’t come out of eggs! But yeah,” he agreed. “We hadn’t for eight years, and it wasn’t exactly on my mind…sex wasn’t on my mind…well, not sex with Hannah,” and he glanced at Kingsley and went red again.

“Are you somehow blaming me for the fact you got Hannah pregnant?” Kingsley said in astonishment.

“No! I’ve only got myself to blame, I know that! It’s just – I was – aware of sex, after living with you two – ”

Ron made a squawking noise.

“Don’t be a prat,” Harry said, “they didn’t go at it in front of me! But – they’re both hot, and it was odd me finding them hot, and they were so – I was jealous. Of what they had. Of their love,” he said. He shrugged. “I felt - so – alone. And Hannah was warmth, and we were a bit in the same boat, and – it just happened. And we both regretted it terribly.”

“Worst next morning ever, eh?” Ron waggled his brows.

“Like you’ve had loads of experience of that,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “At least, I hope not,” she turned a fierce look on her husband.


“Yeah, yeah,” she said, but slipped back against his side.

“Yes, it was dire,” Harry said when he could get a word in. “We agreed to forget it. Which I did, until Mione said Hannah was at the clinic.”

“So you’ve been to see her?” Kingsley asked.

Harry nodded. “Yeah. She let me in. Said she’d been expecting it since she bumped into Mione. Anyway, she started off pretending it was Neville’s, and then when I said I knew it couldn’t be, she said I wasn’t going to deprive her of it, and she was going to present it as Neville’s and think of it as Neville’s, and if I cared for Neville’s reputation at all, I wouldn’t stand in her way. So I asked to be godfather, and she won’t even allow that. Says the further away I stay, the better.”

“Well, she has a point, mate,” Ron said.


Hermione heaved herself up, and came over to stand beside Harry, a hand on his arm. “You might have to,” she said gently.

Harry stood very still. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes, and he tried to blink them away.
“I’ve ruined everything,” he said. He turned back. “I’m so sorry, Kingsley.”

Kingsley shrugged. “I can’t say I’m not – disappointed,” he said. “You may not have been strictly unfaithful, but we’d already offered you a life with us at that point. Maybe you need to think about what you really want, hmm? I need to go and talk to Severus now,” he said. “We’ll talk again.” He nodded at them all, and strode out of the room.

Hermione slipped her arms around Harry, and hugged him tight.

He wondered how, in someone’s embrace, he could feel so utterly alone.
Kingsley sat in the kitchen with a glass of wine, waiting for Severus to come out of his den.

He’d done a scan, and at least bloody David Wallace wasn’t in the house.

He sighed, and rubbed his hand over his face.

He heard the click of the laboratory door and looked up.

Severus met his eyes from the corridor.

He hated the way Severus tensed, girding himself before he came through.

“Can we just go to bed?” he said, throwing all of his good intentions out of the window.

Severus just held out a hand.

“What upset you?” Snape said quietly, his back to Kingsley in his favourite position, the next morning.

Kingsley’s arm tightened around him. “He – it was the night he was ‘freed’. Freed from us,” Kingsley said.

Snape turned round to look at Kingsley. “That hurt you?”

“He knew we – we cared. We’d offered him. A place, here with us.”

“He hadn’t made any commitment,” Snape said after a moment, settling himself on the pillow beside Kingsley.

Kingsley’s head swung down to look at him. “That makes it alright with you?”

“If it had been last week, that would’ve been different, I suppose,” Snape said.

“You suppose?” Kingsley sat up, cross-legged, in the bed.

Snape looked at him for a minute.

“What?”

“I’m perhaps – I’ve thought a lot about infidelity in the past,” Snape said.

“You what?” Kingsley’s brows drew together. “You thought of – of cheating on me? You wanted to?”

Snape sat up too. “Don’t be such an idiot. I wondered about you.”

“Me? What?”

Snape sighed. “Kingsley, you’re one of the most attractive men I’ve ever seen. You’re away a lot.
You mix with fit young men. Of course I wondered whether you might – indulge.”

“And – you – you were okay with that?” Kingsley frowned.

“I spent a long time overcoming my – jealousy. You came home to me: that was what mattered.”

“You absolute stupid prick!” Kingsley roared. “I – I’ve never even thought of – I’ve got you!” He reached forward, grabbing Snape’s arm.

Snape allowed himself to be pulled forward, and the next minute he was pinned under Kingsley, being kissed thoroughly, morning breath by the wayside.

Kingsley’s hands were urgent as they raked down his sides, his teeth just shy of painful as they tormented his nipple.

“Accio lubricant,” Kingsley growled.

Snape let Kingsley show him quite thoroughly that he was the entire focus of Kingsley’s attention.

Later, sweaty and heaving, his cock still inside Snape, Kingsley said, “Since we first became lovers, I only ever wanted you. And the thought of you with anyone else –” he bit the sentence off.

“Much as I like being ravished and claimed, could I just mention – Harry?” Snape smiled.

“Harry’s different. It works with the three of us,” Kingsley said. He pulled out slowly, watching the expression on Snape’s face, making him feel every inch of him.

Then he sighed, and rolled onto his side. “I suppose that sounds stupid.” His head turned to look at Snape. “I can’t believe – even after all these years, I still don’t know you. I can’t believe you worried about that.”

“I – I got over the worrying long ago,” Snape lied. “I loved you. I’ve had more happiness here than I ever imagined possible.”

“You shouldn’t have had to worry about that. I’ve been sick with jealousy about this David Wallace guy.”


“Because something felt all wrong. We had that night with Harry – after he and I’d wanked in the woods – and he was all over us both. I thought he was just feeling particularly randy, but there was – desperation in it, I think. And then he’s never been back, and you kept shutting yourself in your lab. I thought you’d not been happy about us doing it without you, had words with him, and were giving me payback.”

Snape stroked a hand across Kingsley’s chest. “I thought your description of your little tryst with Harry rather – arousing. I could picture it. I wanted to have been there, just watching.”

“Good,” Kingsley said. He reached forward and slipped his hand under Severus’ balls, cradling them and his cock in his hand. “I’m not as – nice as you. I’m a jealous lover,” he said. “I’m not willing to share you.”
Snape’s eyes darkened, and he reached forward. They kissed long and slow. He was hard again by the time they pulled apart.

“Wallace has been helping me with some experiments. I have a potion at a crucial stage. His presence suited both our purposes. I’ve no idea whether he’s gay or straight, and I don’t care to find out.”

“Oh.”

“Oh indeed. So you never need to worry about sharing me,” he said. “Except with Harry.”

“Except with Harry,” Kingsley repeated, stroking a finger down the swollen vein as he slowly released Snape. He turned and shoved his hands under his head, resting back on the pillow. “I’m so pissed off with him.”

“I think it was understandable of him to want to check whether he had any heterosexual interest,” Snape said. “I’m glad of it, even.”

Kingsley’s head turned again.

“He came to us afterwards,” Snape said simply.

“I suppose,” Kingsley said. “Unfortunately, sex with women requires contraceptive spells. Damn! He’s so upset.”

“Upset that he made a baby?”

“Upset that she won’t let him have anything to do with it.”

Snape’s mouth tightened.

Kingsley looked at him quizzically.

“She’s playing hard to get,” he said. “She slept with Harry without using contraception. She wanted to have his baby. She’ll come round, and in a couple of months we’ll have the wedding splashed all over The Prophet, with the hero of the Wizarding World taking on his old friend’s widow and child.”

Kingsley snorted. “To be fair,” he said, “apparently Longbottom was infertile. From the Cruciatous as a baby. She wouldn’t have been accustomed to using contraceptive charms.”

“Oh,” Snape said, turning to lie in the same position. “I concede I was wrong on the second point then, but all the rest still applies.”

“And if Harry doesn’t want to marry her?”

“He will anyway.”

They both lay there in silence.

Lucius stared at the throng as he stood in the doorway of Nanette’s little flat.
"Lucius!" Her face lit up as she came towards him, and he could not resist smiling back.

She paused just in front of him, and as he took her hands, she leant up, and kissed him on both cheeks in the continental manner.

She was wearing a delicate floral fragrance; her skin was whisper-soft, her breasts pressing momentarily against him.

She pulled away.

"I am so glad you could come! And my neighbours have come, and two other apprentices, and Harry and James. Come and let me introduce you. Oh! A glass of wine first! Come!"

Lucius found himself talking to a witch who lived downstairs, while Nanette circulated, making sure all her guests were happy. The wine was good, and she had prepared plates of appetizers.

“I made them myself,” she said, coming back to him and presenting the oddly shaped little pastries. “They are not very good, are they? Everyone is being very polite, though,” she twinkled at him.

“Perhaps they’re delicious,” he smiled at her. “May I try one?”

“I am afraid you will be sorely disappointed, but I applaud your courage for trying,” she laughed. She looked at the plate, and selected one. “I think this looks the least awful,” she said, and held it up to his mouth.

The witch from downstairs laughed.

Lucius took the morsel from her fingers, trying to remember that she was but a child, and that the eroticism of the touch of her fingers to his mouth was all in his mind, not her actions.

His eyes cast around the room, but no-one was watching, apart from the witch and Nanette.

“The flavour is – rather unique,” he said, chewing.

“I knew you wouldn’t like it,” she said, but she was still smiling. “I think I need to get a house-elf, do I not?”

The witch, whose name eluded Lucius, giggled.

The door-bell rang.

“Excusez-moi,” Nanette said, going to open it.

“And how is it that you know Nanette?” the witch asked, and then – “Oh! Of course – you must be Scorpius’ father!”

Lucius turned his head to see Nanette welcoming Scorpius and his lover with the same kissing as she had welcomed him, and felt a ridiculous disappointment.

He was furious with himself.

“Grandfather,” Lucius said flatly, and moved away.

A minute later, Gloria arrived, though Draco wasn’t with her.

He was no doubt working on that newspaper of his, Lucius thought.
Scorpius and Andy were talking to Potter. Who looked rather – pasty, Lucius decided. James Potter was now hogging Nanette, he noticed sourly.

Gloria came over to him. “Lucius. Nice robe. Nanette’s thrown a lovely little party, hasn’t she?”

“Indeed. She’s a very capable hostess.”

“You’ve been to other events she’s hosted?” she asked with interest.

“Her father invited me to dinner or to share a drink several times.”

“Ah.”

The downstairs witch came back, carrying a fresh glass of wine, and rejoined them.

“Hello, we haven’t met before,” she said to Gloria. “I’m Belinda. I live downstairs.”


“Oh yes, we were just talking,” she said sunnily, as if Lucius hadn’t just walked away from her. “Would you believe Scorpius is his grandson?” she asked, pointing to the blond-haired man across the room.

“Well, there’s quite a family resemblance, don’t you think?” Gloria said smoothly.

“Oh yes, But I thought Scorp must be his son. Such a lovely boy. He and Andy have always been good to me, and now they’ve been looking after Nanette too: showing her the local shops, and the communal owl chutes, and helping her find her feet here. I think they must have even left her some of their furniture,” she said, looking around.

“They’ve always seemed very nice lads to me,” Gloria agreed.

“Oh yes, you know them! Such a pity Scorp is gay, otherwise I would have been trying to set him and Nanette up. Not that Andy isn’t a darling, of course. Fixed my cooling charms this summer when they were playing up, and wouldn’t even accept my courgette cake in return. I’ll just have to keep my eyes open for a nice young man for her. Mind you,” she rattled on, “that Potter boy is quite a looker, even if his family is a little iffy these days. I suppose she could do worse.”

“She could hardly do better,” Lucius said stiffly.

“Do you think so?” Belinda turned to him intently. “Even after all the scandal?” she whispered loudly.

“He can hardly be blamed that someone murdered his mother,” Lucius said coolly.

“I suppose so,” she said dubiously. Things seemed to click in her brain. “Wasn’t Scorpius’ father involved in that somehow? That would be your son,” she said, as if the thought had astonished her.

“And my lover, dear, so before you put your foot in it any further, why don’t you go and see if Nanette needs a hand? She’s just gone into the kitchen,” Gloria pointed across the room.

Belinda choked on her wine. “You two! You do love teasing!” she said, when she’d finished spluttering. “I’ll leave you to it, I think.”

They both watched her walk away.
Gloria chuckled.

“You found her amusing?” Lucius stared down his nose at her.

“People’s assumptions and presumptions are very amusing, yes,” she said, taking a sip from her own glass.

“It doesn’t bother you that people think your relationship with my son is a joke?”

“It’s really none of their business, now is it?” Gloria said, turning sideways to look at him. “I knew she wouldn’t believe me when I said it. I don’t wash my dirty linen in public.”

Lucius stiffened. “You regard my son as dirty linen?”

“Tush,” she said, “get off your high horse! I regard your son as a wonderful young man. I’m not ashamed of him or he of me, but I’m not stupid enough to think that our relationship isn’t a little – eccentric. I like eccentric.”

“Draco’s affairs are none of my business – ” he began icily.

“No, they’re not, except that you’re worrying that he’ll marry me, and then where will your family line be?”

Lucius said nothing. He didn’t know whether he was repulsed by, or admired, her plain-talking.

“He isn’t going to marry me, you silly fool, unless you push him into it to annoy you,” she said, “though I think he’s grown past such things. So if you could bring yourself to converse with me as if I was just another friend of his, we’d get on mighty fine.”

Lucius said nothing for a while. It was a long time since anyone had called him a fool and not lived to regret it. He could not deny a feeling of relief, however.

“He’s still grieving over that lass,” she said. “He needed comfort, and I’ve been giving it to him. Simple as that.”

“Well,” Lucius said, after another moment, “it’s been over 400 years since we had a princess marry into the family, but she was royal in her own right. I do feel we could wait somewhat longer for another.”

Gloria laughed, and jostled him on the arm.

Lucius barely prevented the red wine flying over his robe.

“That’s the spirit,” she said.

They stood side-by-side watching Nanette talking to Harry and James.

“Of course, you’re still a fool,” Gloria said.

“What is my sin this time?”

“Letting that girl get away from you.”

Lucius tensed.

“James Potter isn’t the man for her, anyone can see. He’s too selfish and set in his ways.”
“And I’m not?” Lucius said incredulously.

Gloria turned again and looked at him. “Well, you’re selfish, of course. You’re determined to do what’s best for you.”

“I beg your pardon -?”

“Beg all you like, dear,” Gloria said, “and try and convince yourself as much as you like that you’re pushing her away for her benefit, but you’re just scared of getting hurt, like we all are. Sometimes you have to take the risk, you know.”

“You are being utterly ridiculous!” Lucius said. “What you’re suggesting would be entirely inappropriate –”

“Why? Don’t think you could stand the gossip?”

“Madam –”

“Oh, you are not fighting, surely?” Nanette said, her hand suddenly on his arm.

Lucius stared at Gloria, who stared straight back, a challenge in her eyes.

Lucius forced the tension out of himself, and turned to Nanette. “Of course not, child. We’re just enjoying a difference of opinion. We take our pleasures where we can at our age,” he glanced up at Gloria.

“Oh, touché,” she laughed. “He’s a dear, isn’t he, chicken?”

Nanette looked from one to the other. “Of course he is, when he wants to be,” she cast him a cheeky look from under her lashes, “but I do not know what you’re plotting, you two,” she shook her head. “Andy and James have been admiring your tailor, Lucius. And I thought the braiding on your collar must be elven work, but Harry thinks it’s antique human-made. Am I right?” She laid a hand on his arm, smiling up at him. “Come over, both of you, and settle it,” she said, transferring her smile to Gloria, but giving Lucius’ arm a little tug.

“You must be lacking conversation to be discussing my apparel,” Lucius said. “Of course Gloria must come over: I’m sure she’ll stir something up in a trice.” He stared over at her, but to his disappointment, Gloria was not a woman who was easy to rile.

“I’ll certainly do my best,” she chuckled, “if that’s what you’d like.”

“Oh, you two,” Nanette said, sliding one arm into each of theirs and leading them across the room. “Behave!”

“I am your humble servant,” Lucius bobbed her a little bow.

“Yes?” Nanette said, looking up at him. “Voyons, then that must mean, for tonight, that I am your mistress, non?”

Gloria’s laughter pealed across the room.

“Did I get my English muddled again?” Nanette asked anxiously.

Harry had overheard, and was trying to avoid grinning. “Remember that conversation we had about puns, Nanette?” he said.
“Really?” she beamed. “I made one?”

“You did not,” Lucius said, and her face fell. “A pun has to be intentional – and appropriate,” he said, looking at the small group severely.

Scorpius was biting his lip, looking down. Gloria’s bosom was jiggling like a jelly.

“I think everyone is very amused, all the same,” she said quietly. She looked up at Lucius. “I am sorry if I said something offensive, to you, but - ” and she looked at the others, “you are all my guests, and I have made you laugh. That is a good thing, non? Does anyone have any good jokes? James? Scorpius? Laughing is happiness, I think. I like it,” and she gave Lucius’ arm a gentle squeeze.

Lucius watched the ease with which she made her guests comfortable, with which she had his grandson, his lover, Harry Potter, the mad witch from downstairs and the overwhelming Gloria, and himself all taking part in the same conversation, and marvelled.

Gloria, he thought, might enjoy throwing convention to the winds, but Nanette deserved better. And to suggest that his actions were selfish…he looked across at Gloria, and gritted his teeth.

She turned an eye on him, and raised an eyebrow. Her lips formed the word Coward.

Severus was cooking supper when Kingsley walked in. David Wallace was sitting at the table, but so too were Alejandro, Rosita and their children.

“Evening all,” Kingsley said, raising an eyebrow, and ruffling Amelia’s curls, before doing a high five with Rafael, their eldest.

“Pour Kingsley a glass of wine, David,” Snape said, putting some tapas onto the table.

The children dived in at once. Rosita remonstrated. Severus told her there was plenty.

Kingsley lowered himself into his chair and let the atmosphere wash over him. He was tired, and out of sorts.

Unhappy about Harry.

Severus had been right, he thought.

It was better that Harry hadn’t come to them and then got cold feet. That would have been – hell.

And he hadn’t been bothered that Harry had been trying out pubs and clubs, had he? He’d been amused.

Was he just being an idiot? Was he jealous because he couldn’t compete with a woman? Because Harry had known the woman, and there was an emotional attachment?

And Severus.

He’d been shocked that Severus had spent years, just – not letting him know he was concerned.

Jealous.
He looked across at his lover.

He didn’t like the thought of causing Severus pain, but there was something – stimulating – about Severus feeling jealous.

That Severus cared enough to feel jealous.

That he’d loved him enough to try and overcome it.

Severus came and put a plate in front of him, a hand on his shoulder, his expression quizzical.

Kingsley took his hand, and kissed it.

Conversation paused for a heartbeat.

They did not normally make public displays of affection.

But Severus smiled at him, and brushed his hand over his shoulder as he returned to the stove, and Rosita, next to him, said, “Hard day?”

Kingsley turned a warm smile on her. “Yes.”

Rosita nodded. “And you’re missing Harry, I expect. Will he be back soon?”

Kingsley looked at her. “You noticed he hasn’t been around?”

“He leaves a kind of gap, doesn’t he?” she said. “The children said they hadn’t seen him. They sneak down to the workshop and hope for sweets,” she smiled. “He brings some English ones over for them. And he hasn’t been in the village – Antonio’s family are waiting for him to do some work for them, and Esme asked me if he was around.”

“He’s a little busy right now,” Kingsley said. “You don’t mind? About the sweets?”

“Oh, he asked me first,” she said. “He cares, doesn’t he? I hope he’s alright?” she asked, giving Kingsley a curious look.

“He has a lot on,” Kingsley said again.

Rosita touched his arm, and then one of the children distracted her, and the conversation moved on.

Later, when David had left to walk down to the village with the family, Severus suggested a walk outside.

“Why don’t we go and see Harry instead?” Kingsley said. “We’ve messed up our usual thing of not settling matters before bed.”

Severus pulled back. “I don’t know if this can be settled.”

“You’re not willing to try?”

Severus began running water into the sink.

“Dion can do that,” Kingsley said. He paused. “I’m losing my brain. If you weren’t bothered about Harry sleeping with Mrs Longbottom, why did you leave last night?”
“It’s surely obvious that our relationship is over,” Snape said, leaning back on the sink. “He won’t put us ahead of his child.”

“We don’t know what’ll happen yet,” Kingsley said.

“Hannah Abbott was an air-headed twit, but she was never a fool, even in school,” Severus said.

“School was a long time ago. You can’t know what she’s like now. We can’t know what Harry’ll do.”

“I can’t, Kingsley,” Snape said. “You go.”

“You don’t want me to bring him back here?” Kingsley said, coming over and stroking a hand down Severus’ cheek.

“No. You stay there, if you want to, I understand – ”

“I don’t,” Kingsley said. He looked at Snape, and leaned in, kissing him gently. “I’ll be back, hmm?”

“We’ll see,” Snape said, turning back to the sink.

Kingsley turned him round, and kissed him till he felt the stiffness finally fall from Snape, and then kissed him some more until they were both sweating and pushing against each other, stiff elsewhere instead. “I’ll be back,” he said again.

Snape nodded. “Very well.”

Kingsley sighed. “Things will work out. They will.”

“You’re more of an optimist than me.”

“Maybe I’m more willing to fight for it,” Kinglsey said challengingly.


But his tone was light, and Kingsley laughed, and stepped into the floo.

He stepped back, moment’s later.

“That was quick,” Snape said. He was still standing, leaning back against the sink.

“He’s at Nanette’s house-warming. I forgot all about it.”

“Damn, me too. Though it would have been awkward. We’d better send her some flowers, or something,” Snape said.

“Some herbs for her windowsill, perhaps,” Kingsley said. “I told Mitty to tell Harry I’d called. He’ll know at least that we’re thinking of him. Let’s go to bed.”

They went.
Harry returned home only minutes later. He didn’t know what to make of Kingsley calling, but not Severus.

He only knew that they weren’t in his bed, and it felt very big and cold without them.
Harry was drying his hair as he pushed open the en-suite door to walk into the bedroom.

“Good morning.”

Kingsley was sitting on the bed. He was wearing a deep purple robe, simply cut, but formal. Not an inch of his body was visible, apart from his head, hands and feet, and yet Harry couldn’t help swallowing.

He looked magnificent.

“Good morning,” he said, continuing to rub his hair after the momentary pause. “You’re very smart today.” He walked over to his wardrobe, and opened the door, pulling out jeans and a shirt haphazardly.

“I’m meeting Benningdean.”

“And you felt the need to look impressive?” Harry swung round, raising an eyebrow.

He dropped his towel, and pulled on the jeans.

“I’m feeling very impressive, watching you like that,” Kingsley said, shifting his hips a little.

Harry felt the tension in him ease a fraction. It was good to know that he could still have an impact on Kingsley, even if…even if it wasn’t appropriate any more, he thought, realising his own stupidity. He turned away and shrugged on his shirt.

Kingsley came up behind him as Harry stood in front of the wardrobe mirror.

He didn’t touch him.

“It was hard enough not to come and join you in the shower,” he said, voice gravelly, meeting Harry’s eyes in the mirror. “You’re still mad at me.”

Harry swung round. “Me mad at you? It’s the other way round, surely? And of course I understand that, and anyway, I know it’s over, and I’m really sorry – ”

Kingsley stepped forward and placed a finger over his lips. “I was jealous.”

“Wh – what?” Harry said, his lips moving against Kingsley’s fingers.

“I promised you that we’d get over all the humps and bumps in life, and I went off the deep end at the first problem. I’m sorry,” he said, his hand back at his side.

He didn’t move away though.

“You were jealous about Hannah? The most embarrassing experience of my life, even worse than being searched by those guards?”

Kingsley’s eyes crinkled. “That bad?”

“Waking up in the morning was the most cringe-making - it was just awful. I started off by calling her Hermione – ”
“Whoa!” Kingsley stepped back, but he was smiling.

“Don’t be silly,” Harry said, moving over and unconsciously making the bed.

Kingsley said not a word about house elves and just grabbed the duvet from the other side, helping shake it up and settle it back.

“I was so out of it I thought it was Mione handing me a hangover cure. Not that I had my eyes open or my glasses on,” Harry said. “When I realised what I’d – we’d - done – well. We were both gutted.”

They headed, without words, down to the kitchen.

Mitty beamed at Kingsley, but Harry sent her off after thanking her for the coffee.

“I – I’m so stupid,” Harry said. “I never even thought of contraception. Didn’t think of sex and babies in the same thought.” He took a long drink of his coffee. “I – I expected you to be mad. I’ve ruined everything. But jealous? I told you about the clubs, and the men there - ”

Kingsley nodded. “I know. I shocked myself, I think. How I felt. I - I suppose it was because you knew her. And she had something to offer you that we don’t.”

“She didn’t,” Harry said quickly.

Kingsley looked at him.

“I – well, yes, womanly bits,” Harry said awkwardly.

“I suppose I was thinking that, and that we couldn’t compete if you wanted a woman after all. But that was tied up with your intimacy with her – ”

“No,” Harry said.

Kingsley waited for him to go on.

“I – this sounds terrible too – but Hannah was always Nev’s wife, you know? We weren’t friends at school together – I knew her, but different houses and all that rubbish. You know how it is, you just don’t get close. If Nev hadn’t married her I don’t suppose I would ever have seen her again apart from passing the time of day in the street. Or in The Leaky, obviously. And I’m saying this about the woman carrying my child,” he said, his hand starting to shake. He put his mug down.

“What did she say exactly?” Kingsley asked gently.

“She said she knew I’d turn up after Hermione had seen her, but she’d lost enough, and she wasn’t giving up the child, or her reputation, or Neville’s reputation, and people would just think it was his, she’d say it came early, or whatever, and that I was to stay away from her.” He rubbed his hands through his still-damp hair. “And I could do all of that, I suppose, I could have not said anything, and pretended it didn’t happen – ”

“But it did,” Kingsley finished for him.

“Yeah. And I can’t – it’s my child, Kingsley.”

“Do you have any concerns that she won’t treat it well?”

“What? Of course not! Not that I know how she’ll be, but they’d always wanted kids, and she’s
“Half-brothers and sisters,” Kingsley corrected, “but yes. I don’t see you have much say in this, Harry,” he said. “I know you want to help, and you can offer her help – but…”

“I know,” Harry said, “but I can’t just leave it. I can’t.”

Kingsley drank his coffee, while Harry got up to get himself some cereal.

“I take it Severus isn’t happy about this anyway?” Harry said, as he got the milk from the cool cupboard.

“I thought Severus had had words with you about our wank in the woods,” Kingsley sighed, making Harry turn round sharply.

“What? No,” Harry shook his head. “You think he was upset about that?”

“That’s why I brought him over. I thought we all needed to talk about it. I had no idea you were staying away for something else entirely, and that Severus wasn’t having hot sex in his lab with the American guy from Argentina.”

“Where did that come from?” Harry asked, sitting down again. “What on earth made you think that?”

“He’s been holed up in his lab with him a lot,” he shrugged. “I seem to have burst out in this jealous state and I’ve no idea where it came from.”

“He’s not, is he?” Harry said.

“No, I got the wrong end of the stick. He’s at a critical stage on one of his potions. He gets all shut up and work-immersed when that happens, but I got it all mixed up with what was happening with you.”

“Is – is he mad at you as well as me, then?” Harry asked.

“Not mad,” Kingsley shrugged. “He thinks Hannah will see the wisdom of marrying the most powerful wizard in England, though.”

Harry opened and shut his mouth.

Kingsley’s eyes narrowed.

“You would marry her,” Kingsley said. “If she’d have you.”

“Kingsley, it’s not fair on the child –”

Kingsley stood up. “I thought Severus was wrong. He obviously knows you better than I do.”

“I don’t want it to end this way,” Harry said, “but I created a child. Its safety and happiness must come first.”

“Yes,” Kingsley said, watching him with inscrutable eyes. “I need to go and see the Minister. We – we’ll talk again. “

And with that, he turned and was gone.
Harry felt worse than before he came.

Hermione took the train up to Durham. It was a long journey, but she enjoyed trains, and she wanted the chance to think. And it was rather fun, going back to Kings Cross without having to push through walls. It was strange, sitting in the carriage before the train departed, realising that a steam engine managed to make its way through London and into the same station without anyone observing it.

She’d never really wondered how the magic worked for that, but it was intriguing. The magic involved must be monumental.

From the station she took a taxi to the Cathedral, and then made her way to the wizarding quarter. It was no distance then to find her way to Hannah’s house, and she knocked on the door.

She plastered her best smile on her face when it was opened by an elderly elf, who led her into a comfortable sitting room overlooking the garden at the back of the house.

“Hermione. I might have known you’d come,” Hannah sighed, coming into the room. She glanced back furtively. “Don’t say anything to – ”

“Hannah! You have a visitor! How lovely!” A large woman in an elegant robe peeped round the door.

“It’s nice to see you again, Mrs Abbott,” Hermione stood up and held out her hand. “I’m sure you don’t remember me, but we met long ago - at Hannah and Neville’s wedding - and I was at his funeral, of course. Hermione Weasley.”

“Oh, you must forgive me! It was all such a blur. Such a shock…” she said, glancing across at Hannah.

“Hermione and I went to school together,” Hannah said to her step-mother. “She’s expecting too.”

“Oh! Well, now isn’t that wonderful!” Mrs Abbott’s eyes dropped to Hermione’s belly. “Just think, your children might go to Hogwarts together too! What house were you in, dear?”

“Gryffindor,” Hermione said.

“Well, if this baby takes after his father, and yours takes after you, maybe they’ll be in the same house,” she said. “Were you there at the same time as poor Neville, then?”

“Yes, he was a very good friend,” Hermione said.

“Such a shame he won’t see his baby,” she dabbed at her eyes.

Hermione could feel Hannah stiffening beside her.

“I know he would have loved to have been able to bring up a family with Hannah,” Hermione said diplomatically. “We all knew how very much he loved her.”

Mrs Abbott sniffed loudly and nodded. “Well, you two must have so much to talk about! Do you have anyone to knit for you, dear? Young people these days don’t knit much, I find, and Hannah says there won’t be enough days in the year for everything I’ve made already!”
“That’s very kind of you, but my mother-in-law loves knitting too.”

“Ah well. I’ll send our house-elf with some tea and sandwiches. You girls need to build yourselves up,” she smiled, and sailed out of the room.

Hannah closed the door, and they sat down.

“Thank you.”

“She doesn’t know,” Hermione said.

“No one knew! Until you went and told Harry!”

“I didn’t have any idea,” Hermione said. “I just said that I’d seen you. Harry worked the rest out himself. And he didn’t tell us,” she said quickly. “We could see he’d been upset over the last week, but he wasn’t saying anything. Nev told Ron as well as Harry that he was infertile, so - ” she shrugged.

“You must think – I – I’m so - ” Hannah’s face began to crumple.

“Oh, Hannah,” Hermione said, taking the other woman into her arms, and holding her through the sobs. “Of course I don’t think any the worse of you because of it!” She patted her back. “I was shocked when I found out I was pregnant: I’m hardly one to talk about planned pregnancies.”

“You – you didn’t plan it?” Hannah pulled away a bit to look at her.

“No. It makes you feel daft, doesn’t it, at our age?”

“I - I’m so ashamed. I let Nev down so much…”

“Shush,” Hermione stroked her back. “Neville was the most gentle, sympathetic - empathetic - man I ever met. He’d understand.”

“Do you think?”

“That you were lonely and hurting and needed comfort? Of course he would have.”

“I can’t – no-one can know. I can’t – I’ve shamed Neville’s name enough.”

Hermione sighed. “Well, I’m afraid several people know already: Harry wasn’t alone when Ron blurted it out.”

“Oh! Oh no! No!” Hannah had her hands over her face.

“Hannah, Harry has people in his life. He didn’t say anything, and it was making his life miserable. Did you really believe he could just walk away from his child?”

“It’s my child!”

Hermione just sat looking at her.

The elf brought tea and sandwiches and cakes. Hermione was ravenous, despite the snack she’d eaten on the train, and tucked in, whilst Hannah picked at her food.

“He offered to marry me,” Hannah said at last. “I said no,” she added defiantly.
Hermione looked up. “Well, I think that was very sensible of you.”

“Really?” Hannah gasped.

“You’d both be miserable,” Hermione said. “Both of you full of guilt, and full of longing for people who weren’t there: that can’t be the best way to raise a child, can it?”

“Is Harry missing Ginny, then?” Hannah asked.

“I’m sure he is, but…he’s in a new relationship. I wondered if that was why you’d sent him away.”

“He never said anything!”

“Well, he wouldn’t,” Hermione said. “Harry would put his child’s happiness and his responsibilities before his own, every time.”

“I – well, she won’t want to know anything about me! Harry needs to keep quiet.”

“Hannah, Harry is in a relationship with Professor Snape and Kingsley Shacklebolt. You know, the man who used to be Minister for Magic.”

“You’re joking.”

Hermione had one of those horrible moments when her Muggle heritage lurched up into her throat. She had been seeing this as a Muggle, and she’d entirely forgotten traditional wizarding views on homosexuality. She cursed inwardly.

But Hannah would have to know sometime.

“No.”

Hannah started laughing. It had rather a hysterical tinge to it.

“Hannah!” Hermione said firmly, hoping to snap her out of it.

“It’s just,” Hannah laughed, “I was so scared that my step-mum would find out that Harry had offered to marry me. Even without knowing…because she’d push me right into it. I mean, he’s Harry Potter. But now – she’d never let me – oh, thank Merlin!” And she kept giggling.

“Well, that’s one way to look at it,” Hermione raised a brow. “Does it bother you?”

“I don’t know,” Hannah said. “I can’t think about things anymore. Nothing seems to matter in the way that it used to.”

“No,” Hermione said gently, “I can understand that. But – perhaps you should think in terms of how beneficial it might be to be allied to Harry. He’d do everything he could to protect you and the baby, Hannah. Don’t rule him out.”

Hannah picked up a little cake and nibbled it. “I know he would,” she said at last.

“Can you not think of some way of letting him in? Perhaps as godfather?”

“I wouldn’t want people asking questions – ” Hannah said sharply.

“Well, Harry was godfather to both our children; I don’t think anyone would think it the least bit odd if he was godfather to Neville’s. In fact, I think they might find it odd if he wasn’t, in the
circumstances.”

Hannah looked at her thoughtfully.

“And I’m sure you want to choose your own godparents, but if you might think about Ron or myself,” Hermione went on, “we’d both consider it an honour, and a duty that we’d be most grateful to perform. Neville gave his life saving our son,” she said. “I know we can never repay that, but – ”

“Neville would always put others before himself,” Hannah said.

“He and Harry were very alike in that respect,” Hermione agreed.

“I – I need time to think about all this,” Hannah said.

Hermione stood up. “I know. And I hope we can be even better friends in future, Hannah. “

“You’re going? Did you want to use the floo? How did you get here?”

“I came on the Muggle train,” Hermione said. “I wouldn’t mind using your loo before I go,” she gave a sheepish grin. “This pregnancy business plays havoc with the waterworks, doesn’t it?”

Hannah gave a genuine laugh. “Tell me about it!”

Kingsley sat opposite Benningdean, not perturbed at all by the desk between them.

“Merlin, Kingsley, this is so frustrating!”

“I know. She’s certainly clever.”

“Yes. Nott too. I have absolutely no evidence against him, and I can’t tell you how much it offended the whole Unspeakables’ department that we searched their houses.”

“How many Unspeakables are there?” Kingsley asked with interest.

“Only seven. Four of them are so ancient that I think they’re treasure trove in their own right. Unspeakable, incomprehensible. I talked to two of them and hadn’t a clue what they were saying. I think too much mystery and research has weakened their attachment to reality, frankly.”

“I have it from his own mouth that he’s sequestered stuff away,” Kingsley said.

Benningdean looked at him sharply. “Do you know where?”

“Not yet. I understand that some families have goblin-built vaults, though?”

“Perhaps the goblins would help us out then,” Benningdean said hopefully.

“I don’t think so,” Kingsley shook his head. “They may be tempted to, but to do so would invalidate the secrecy that clients buy into: they’d never get any future work.”

“Well, I’ve got Cuthbert Mockridge – he’s still head of the Goblin Liaison Office – doing some intensive work there. I’m pushing through Mrs Weasley’s Beings Equality Law: he thinks that that
will restore some favour with the goblins, at least. Merlin knows, we need it,” he sighed.

“How’s the reconstruction at the Ministry going?” Kingsley asked.

Benningdean gave him a small smile. “Right to the heart of the matter. We’ve almost finished the major repairs – frankly, thanks to Harry’s actions, it was nowhere near as bad as it might have been.”

“Well, that’s tremendous!”

“Not really,” Benningdean said. “We’ve been doing it all by ladders. It’s an absolute maze down there. Unless the goblins come and get the lifts working again, it’s all to no point.”

“And they’re still refusing?”

“Until the wizard who killed their own is caught.”

“So – how are your Auror department getting on with that? I’m assuming Dowling must be working on it? Is Atkins blocking it?”

“In theory, she’s just leaving it in his hands. That’s always been the way. Of course, the paperwork and reports come to her, but I’ve insisted on being copied on everything. I’ve got someone down there making sure I am too: there’ve been one or two documents that haven’t come my way along the official route.”

“So she’s filtering stuff out? Interesting stuff?”

Benningdean reached in his drawer and then handed Kingsley a small folder. “I’ve made copies for you: to be honest, I can’t see that there’s anything particularly incriminating in there: nothing, certainly, that she couldn’t say she hadn’t sent on because it looked a waste of time, but there might be something that sparks ideas with you.”

“Thanks,” Kingsley said, shrinking the folder and putting it in his pocket.

Benningdean leaned back in his seat. “Do you mind if I ask you a general question?”

“Sure,” Kingsley said, spreading his hands, and looking at Benningdean curiously.

“Do you think the Ministry needs to all be in one building?”

Kingsley raised his eyebrows. “Interesting question: what brought that on?”

Benningdean sat forward, steepling his hands on the desk. “Everyone’s been farmed out, of course – there are departments all over Diagon Alley, as you know – we’ve used up every available spare room –”

Kingsley nodded, encouraging Benningdean to continue.

“Obviously, we can’t go on like that, many of the rooms are on short-term lets, or aren’t really suitable –”

“But?”

Benningdean thumbed a sheet of parchment to his right, and handed it to Kingsley. “Turnover has gone up incredibly.”
“Turnover of staff?”

“Turnover of work,” Benningdean said. “Despite less than comfortable quarters, lack of files that were still in the building or destroyed, almost all departments have increased their turnover. I’ve been making a point of regularly visiting all the outposts, so that people don’t feel forgotten, but the impression I get is that most people are much happier, and there’s more departmental cohesiveness too, I think.”

“That’s interesting,” Kingsley said. “Do you think it’s because they can get out and about in Diagon Alley?”

“I don’t know yet. I think real light and fresh air make a big difference, certainly.”

“Where is this taking you?” Kingsley got to the point again.

“I’m not sure. I’m wondering whether it’s not time for a change.”

Kingsley leant forward. “Dismembering the Ministry?” he asked in astonishment.

“Not really,” Benningdean hesitated. “I’m trying to think outside the box. I haven’t discussed it with anyone else yet, but I must admit, it’s useful to chuck ideas around with you.”

“You could do an anonymous survey – pretend it’s about how people are finding their temporary conditions – to see what people really want. What they’d ideally like in the Ministry.”

Benningdean nodded. “Maybe. Of course, money is always a problem, and I don’t want to raise expectations.”

“No. But people are already out of their usual tracks: it’s not a bad time to discuss it.” He stood up. “I must go. It’s always good to talk to you,” he smiled, reaching across to shake hands.

“Agreed. Keep me in the loop: I’ll do the same.”

Harry worked hard to keep himself busy over the next week. He went over to the village in Spain and did the house expansions that were waiting on him, but he didn’t call in at Villa Olorosa. He wrote to Hannah, so that she would have a formal offer of his help; he knew she hadn’t told her father and step-mother, so he phrased it as if her story was true.

It hurt.

He didn’t know what to do about James and Lily; Albus knew now, but Hannah didn’t want it known. He’d tell them at some point. Not yet. Maybe Hannah would come round. Then it would be easier.

Wouldn’t it?

He didn’t want – he didn’t know what to do.

The truth was that he felt utterly miserable.

That was a shitty way to feel about fathering a child, and he hated himself for that too. He’d been so excited about the births of his other three; he’d stroked Ginny’s belly in bed at night, looked
after her so solicitously that she’d laughed at him, gone to all the hospital appointments with her. He had none of that now.

He felt in limbo. He couldn’t be part of his child’s life, and he couldn’t be part of Severus’ and Kingsley’s, either.

Kingsley was still coming over at night to say goodnight to him, but they didn’t even kiss. It felt wrong, without Snape, his absence like a physical wedge between them.

Harry wasn’t sure why Kingsley was still coming. He just said he wasn’t giving up, but Harry couldn’t see that he could have a future with them in any way. Hannah had written to him after his letter, telling him that Hermione had visited. She knew about his relationship with Kingsley and Severus, and her step-mother would never have let him in the house if she’d known.

Hannah said she was surprised; at the same time, she wished him happiness in his new life.

It was a complete dismissal.

But Harry couldn’t give up.

Even if that meant giving up Kingsley and Severus.

He ought to tell Kingsley that tonight. That it was over. Snape had obviously already come to that conclusion.

He’d been loveless and lonely before.

He’d cope.

Kingsley and Severus would have each other: they were hardly likely to miss him much, really.

Hermione sat in the kitchen with Kingsley and Snape, sipping a glass of fresh orange juice. “This is delicious,” she said, then cocked her head. “I know you think I’m interfering. I am interfering.”

“Then pray get on with it, and begone,” Snape said.

“Severus,” Kingsley put his hand on his arm.

“On second thoughts, I don’t believe there’s anything that I wish to listen to,” Snape said, standing up.

Hermione stood up too. “Please,” she said quietly.

Snape sighed loudly and sat down again.

“Have you both given up on Harry?” she asked.

“I believe the reverse is the case,” Snape said.

“He’s in a very difficult position,” Hermione began.

“Which he created for himself.”
“Yes, he did,” Hermione agreed. “Not deliberately, or intentionally, but he created a life. Is it so unacceptable to you both that he should feel responsible for it?”

“Hermione,” Kingsley said, “he’s offered to marry her. It doesn’t really leave us anywhere to go, does it?”

“She won’t ever accept him,” Hermione said.

“She’d be a fool not to,” Snape said sharply.

“Well, there’s no doubt she’s acting foolishly,” Hermione agreed, “but – ”

“There you are then. Even you think so.”

“She has no intention of marrying Harry,” Hermione said.

“Have you discussed it with her, or are you speculating?” Kingsley asked.

“I’ve discussed it with her.”

“You’ve encouraged her to marry Harry?”

“Certainly not: they wouldn’t suit at all. But I have told her that it would be advantageous to her to accept Harry as godfather.”

Kingsley stretched his legs apart, and leant forward on the table. “Do you think she will?”

“She’s terrified anyone will find out that Neville wasn’t the father. I think she thought that if Harry had anything to do with the baby, people might guess.”

“That’s true, surely?”

“No,” Hermione said patiently. “People will think it very odd if Harry isn’t involved. He and Neville – they have a link,” she said. “It was a weak link, but they both knew it was there.”

“What do you mean?” Kingsley asked, frowning.

“You probably know Harry and Neville were born within hours of each other, and that the prophecy between Harry and Voldemort could just as easily have referred to Neville. Neville played a role in what went on back then right from the start. He was our conscience, if you like. He thought things out. He had courage, because he never thought he had much magic, and yet he still tried to do what had to be done. He was part of Dumbledore’s Army. He stayed behind when – when we went hunting for Horcruxes. Harry asked him to kill Nagini. He did it. Neville never made a fuss about anything. His achievements have always been underplayed, because he never felt he’d done anything special. But Harry knew. We knew. If this had been Neville’s child, there’s no way Harry wouldn’t be stepping in to do everything he could to help Hannah. I suggested Hannah ask Ron and I and Harry all to be godparents: Neville gave his life saving Hugo. We owe her.”

“I understand that,” Kingsley said.

“Yes, but you probably don’t understand all about Harry. You already know he put his kids before everything, letting his marriage run on despite his own unhappiness in it. Harry approached parenthood determined never to let his kids down. His own upbringing was so shitty that doing it right was – is – paramount to him. He had no role models for getting it right, but give or take the
odd issue, he did get it right, didn’t he? They’re great kids. He didn’t plan to get Hannah pregnant, but he did. It’s his child. He’ll never be able to forget that, and he’ll always want to do everything he can to ensure the child is safe and well.”

“But there’s absolutely no reason for him to think Hannah wouldn’t be an excellent mother, is there?” Kingsley questioned.

“He just needs to be involved. To be sure. I’m sure he knows Hannah will be fine, but he’s aware that appearances and reality aren’t always the same. The Dursleys will always hang over Harry like a cloud.”

“Was it really so bad?” Kingsley asked.

“It isn’t my story to tell,” Hermione said. “Harry has never made a fuss about it. But I can just give you a flavour: Ron and his brothers had to pull the bars off his window with a flying car in second year, so that Harry could even go to school.”

She glanced across at Snape, but said nothing further about it. “Before the barred room, he’d spent all his pre-Hogwarts years, I think, living in a cupboard under the stairs. A tiny cupboard. He got fed scraps, if he was lucky – you can see the permanent effects of that under-nourishment in his size. He did all the household jobs – cooking, cleaning, gardening, you name it – from a very early age. He still washes up and tidies things himself without thinking. I think he finds it soothing, sometimes. He loses himself in it. It harks back to his childhood: I think he learnt how to disengage his brain from reality in the menial back in those days. I think that’s why he enjoys working with his hands. He needs that physical activity to give him some mental peace.” She sighed. “The thing about his childhood is, nobody ever checked on him: the wizarding world dumped him there and nobody ever followed it up. Harry can’t ever forget that, so he’ll never give up on his child. The question is, are you going to give up on him?”

Both of them looked at her, and Hermione picked up her drink and sipped some more, hoping Harry would forgive her for revealing his secrets.

“You think Mrs Longbottom won’t accept him?”

“No. There’s no perfect answer here for Harry – for anyone,” Hermione said. “Neither of them wanted a child, but there is a child, and Harry is going to do his best for it. Is that so very hard for you both to accept?” she asked honestly.

Snape stood up again. “Thank you for coming,” he said, stiffly.

Kingsley exchanged a look with Hermione, who nodded, and stood up. “Thanks for the juice: it was delicious.”

They saw her to the floo. She took a pinch of powder, and then turned to look at them. “None of us have had easy lives,” she said. “Things happen. He’s hurting. I know it’s not your fault, but if you care about him at all, how can you leave him to suffer?” And she threw the powder into the flames, and was gone.

“She doesn’t mince her words,” Kingsley said, pouring them both a glass of wine after she’d gone.

Snape snorted.
“She has a point,” Kingsley said, handing Severus the glass.

“What one are you referring to?” Snape walked through into their sitting room.

They didn’t use it much; the kitchen was the hub of the house, or they went outside. Tonight, however, rain was beating down hard on the roof, and splashing out of the gutters onto the tiling on the terrace.

Snape threw himself down into a chair, steadying the glass as he went.

Kingsley took a mouthful, and sat down in the chair next to him.

“Harry’s trying to do the right thing.”

“He always does,” Snape said wearily.

“Would you expect him to give up on his child?” Kingsley asked, over the rim.

“Oh, of course not. Saint Potter,” Snape said, using a name that had been bandied around the press on several occasions.

Kingsley set his glass down. “Alright, let’s put that another way: would you want him to?”

Snape looked at Kingsley. “The point,” Snape said after a moment, “is that I do not want children.”

“Ah. That’s what this has all been about.”

“All this? I have barely said a word on the matter.”

“Exactly: you usually have plenty to say on every subject.”

“I don’t think there is anything unexpected about how I feel,” Snape said. “If I’d wanted to have children, I would’ve married a woman.”

“Would you?” Kingsley grinned at him. “You like cock, love.”

“So does Harry, but he appears quite content to do without,” Snape said acerbically.

Kingsley took a long drink and finished his glass.

Kingsley stood up and walked out, returning with the bottle a moment later. He was relieved that Severus hadn’t used finishing his wine as an end to the conversation.

“So,” Snape said, as Kingsley refilled his glass, “you’ve got over the jealousy, and you’re happy to have a little blighter running around the place? Should Mrs Longbottom change her mind, and allow Harry to be a godparent? You have a sudden desire to share in parenting a child?”

“You know I haven’t ever considered it,” Kingsley said, “but I grew up with lots of half-brothers and step-brothers and half-sisters and what-not. How often would we see it? I can’t see Harry forcing its presence on us. We might lose him to Grimmauld Place every now and again. But to be honest, it wouldn’t bother me at all to have it running around here.”

“That’s where we differ then.”

“Severus –”
“He made a mistake. I don’t see why I should have to live with it.”

“Why not? He had to live with yours.”

Snape’s hand paused halfway to his mouth.

“I didn’t mean that,” Kingsley said quickly, getting up.

Snape had stood up too.

“A low blow,” he said.

“You know I didn’t – ” Kingsley reached out an arm.

Severus held himself stiff.

“Really – ”

“You know,” Severus said, “not once since we embarked on this relationship with Harry had I thought of the monstrous act I’d perpetrated on him. Thank you for reminding me.”

“Fucking hell! I’ve never thought of it before this evening either, I promise.”

“So the fact that he’s a neurotic parent is my fault,” Severus went on.

Kingsley opened his mouth to apologise again, and then stopped. “No. Stop this. He isn’t a neurotic parent, for a start. It’s not neurotic to love your child.”

“I wouldn’t know. My father never loved me.”

“Severus,” Kingsley said gently. “Your mother did,” he said after a moment.

“Not enough to stand up to my father.”

“And yet you hold it against Harry that he’d stand against us for his child?”

“We’re not beating his child,” Severus said sharply.

“No. We’re denying its existence. Is that better?”

“I knew from the minute he said he was going to have a child,” Snape said, walking to the door.

“Knew what?” Kingsley grabbed his arm.

“That you’d be leaving.”

“What?”

“Let’s say I’m paying my debt, shall we?”

“What the fuck are you going on about?” Kingsley shoved Severus against the wall.

“He needs someone. That’s you.”

“He needs both of us. It’s shitty that we’ve left him when he really needs us backing him up.”

Kingsley’s breath brushed Severus’ face, his chest almost touching Severus.
“I don’t want it. You’ve shown this week that you can manage together, just the two of you –”

“We don’t even kiss without you,” Harry said, standing in the doorway a foot from them. “What’s between us is the fact that you aren’t there.”

Both turned their heads to look at him.

Kingsley held out his hand.

Harry shook his head. “I never meant to come between you. I came to say goodbye.”

“Kingsley wants to be part of raising your child,” Severus said. “Don’t turn him down.”

Harry shook his head. “You were happy without me before and you will be again after. You go together.” He swallowed. “I’m not going to get all mushy. Thank you both.”

“For introducing you to gay sex?” Severus sneered.

“For introducing me to love,” Harry said quietly. “Seeing you two together…”

“We were about to rip each other’s heads off,” Snape said, but his tone was a little less bitter.

“And have hot make-up sex afterwards, no doubt,” Harry said, then blushed. “Anyway. Yeah. I’ll clear my stuff out tomorrow, if that’s ok.”

“Kiss each other,” Kingsley said.

“What?” Harry stared at him.

“I think it deserves a goodbye kiss, at least.”

“You’re just trying to make us forget common sense in sex,” Snape said, but his eyes slid over Harry almost involuntarily.

“I just want to see you kiss, even if it is the last time. I want to kiss you,” Kingsley said to Harry. “I want the memory. I don’t think it’s much to ask of you two pig-headed pricks.”

Harry looked at Snape.

“Oh for god’s sake! Come here,” Snape said. “Let’s give Kingsley his little show and have done with it.”

“You really aren’t selling that well,” Harry said with a smile, but he stepped forward all the same.

Kingsley’s arm swept him forward, positioning him in front of Snape, who still had his back to the wall.

The two men looked at each other. Snape’s eyes went to Kingsley over Harry’s shoulder.

His hand came out and grasped Harry’s chin. “I’m so mad with you,” he said.

“I know,” Harry nodded. And then he reached up, pressing his mouth to Severus’.

For a moment, it was a scrape of lips, a scratch of beard. Then Snape’s tongue swept into Harry’s mouth, and then Kingsley was behind, anchoring them all together, one hand on Harry’s hip, the other on Snape’s back. His lips were pressed to Harry’s neck.
Harry turned his head, not losing contact with Snape’s mouth, till Kingsley got the hint and met theirs … their breaths rasped in their ears, none of them wanting it to end … hands shifted… And then Snape and Kingsley jerked apart.

“What - ?” Harry said, disorientated by the suddenness.

“Someone at the wards,” Kingsley said harshly. “Dion!”

Dion snapped into sight a moment later. “There is being a man and a woman at the boundary, by the road from the village. They is saying they must be speaking to the Masters at once.”

“Who is it?” Kingsley demanded.

“She is saying, Roxanne, Master Kingsley, Sir, and she is saying it is a matter of life and death,” Dion wrung his hands.
“Roxanne Weasley?” Harry said, astonished. “I don’t know any other Roxanne’s, do you?”

“She has someone with her,” Kingsley said. “She could be a hostage.” He pulled out his wand, and they all did the same, then, with a nod, apparated.

All three landed in defensive pose.

Roxanne Weasley and the man stood waiting, wands across their palms, in a gesture of surrender.

Except…

“Roxanne?” Harry cast an illumination spell at the woman.

Because she was a young woman, and not the teenager he was expecting.

His eyes moved to the man at her side. He was familiar –

“Josh Nott,” he said.

Kingsley and Snape’s posture stiffened, wands directed at him.

“Yes,” the man nodded.

“Has he hurt you?” Kingsley demanded of Roxanne, eyes not leaving Nott.

“No!” she gasped. “He’s – ”

A gleam on Nott’s chest caught Harry’s eye. “Time turner,” he said.

“My husband,” Roxanne finished.

“Well,” Harry said. “Er. Congratulations?”

Roxanne giggled, and it broke the tension.

“We’ve come for your help,” Josh said seriously, still extending his wand.

“Did Hermione send you?” Harry asked sharply. “Put them away,” he said, gesturing at the wands.

Snape rolled his eyes. He lowered his, but kept it in his hand as the two young people slid theirs back into arm holsters.

“Aunt Hermione? Why should she?” Roxanne said, puzzled.

“She didn’t tell you how to use the time-turner?”

“She knew how to use it?” Josh stared at Roxanne. “I can’t believe all the time we’ve spent – ”

“Never mind that now,” Roxanne said, softening her words with a touch on her husband’s arm, “we haven’t any time to waste.”

“It’s dangerous to change time,” Kingsley said. “You don’t know what the consequences will be.”
“You don’t know what the consequences are if you don’t help us,” Josh said, “but we do.”

“You stole the time-turner from your father?” Harry said after a moment.

“Yes.”

“Shall we go back and discuss this at home?” Kingsley asked. “How much time have you got?”

“An hour – well, fifty one minutes now.”

Harry looked to Kingsley, who nodded.

“Hold on,” he said, and apparated the two into the kitchen.

Everyone sat down quickly.

“Let’s not waste any time,” Snape said. “What has happened to make you come here? What are you hoping to prevent?”

Josh looked at Roxanne, and then said, “Dad – I don’t know if you knew he nicked stuff from the Department of Mysteries? When that big fire happened?”

They nodded.

“You – you need to stop him: he – he – it drives him mad,” he said, his face going red.

“In what way?” Harry asked, as gently as he could.

“He – he spent more and more time with all that stuff. He’s dabbling in things he shouldn’t be. There were some weird brain things – I think they affected him, and - and – ”

“He killed his own mother this afternoon,” Roxanne said. “He tortured her, and didn’t seem to care when Josh arrived. He’s been muttering about Merlin and Salazar Slytherin and we’re scared of what he’ll do. He’s trying to change the course of history -”

“I realise we are too,” Josh said quickly, seeing Snape about to open his mouth, “but our intentions are to save life.”

“Yours?” Snape said, bluntly.

“Yes,” Roxanne said.

“No, my grandmother’s,” Josh said.

They looked at each other.

“I’m not going to let him kill you if I can do anything about it,” Roxanne said to him. “Idiot.”

Josh gave her a sweet smile, then turned to the men.

Harry looked at his watch. “Tell us what happened as quickly as you can. Why did he kill his mother?”

“There’s a vault underneath the grounds at his parents’ home,” he said.

Harry felt his interest quicken. The goblins had talked about private vaults.
“What happened?”

“Dad’s never been able to get into it - he’d been into it with his Dad, but it can only be opened by the person who’s the heir to the estate. He said once that you’d told him that his father was dead?” he asked Harry.

Harry nodded.

“He didn’t believe you, because he’s never been able to get into it, so he assumed Dad was alive, just in hiding. It didn’t bother him: he despised his father, I think. He’d had another vault built at our house – that is, the one I grew up in. But then Dad’s Uncle Lawrence came over to visit two days ago. He lives in Croatia and deals in dragon artefacts.”

Harry could see where this was going. “Your uncle was able to open it.”

“How – you knew? That Dad wasn’t really a Nott?”

Harry nodded. “We did a Muggle DNA test – not that he knew, of course.” He tried to hold back his shudder as he recalled his return to the North Sea, and the picked-over remains of the body there.

“You – you never told him?”

“For the exact reason that it would put your grandmother at risk.”

“Do – do you know who his father was?”

“We have a pretty good idea.”

“Was he a Muggle-born? I heard Granny Freya say he was. She – I arrived as he was – he was – he’d cut her to bits - she spat it at him - ”

“What spell did he use?” Snape said sharply. “Did you hear?”

“I – no. But it was as if she’d,” he gulped, and tears came into his eyes. He brushed them away angrily. “She bled to death. I was with her.” He brushed his hand down his stomach unconsciously, as if her blood was still there. “She was slashed all over; I tried, but I couldn’t heal them fast enough.”

Harry and Snape looked at each other.

*Sectumsempra.*

Harry thought of Ginny.

And of Malfoy, who would have died all those years ago in that bathroom if Snape hadn’t healed him.

What would have happened to the course of history then? If he’d been incarcerated in Azkaban, a murderer?

So much of what happened seemed to be a whim of fate.

“Please,” Josh swallowed.

“Changing history -” Kingsley said.
“I changed history once,” Harry interrupted. “Hermione and I used a time-turner to save my godfather, Sirius Black.”

Josh’s eyes lit up, but Harry held up a hand. Harry glanced at Snape, who returned his look, eyes unfathomable.

“He died anyway. Not then, but… I don’t know if you can cheat fate, Josh.”

“But – if you hadn’t saved him then, would – would things have been different later?”

He was right, Harry thought. Sirius wouldn’t have been there in the Department of Mysteries. And he wouldn’t have felt that he had someone to lean on, just a little, someone who cared about him, that hope in the background of his life,….

He wouldn’t have felt so devastated at Sirius’ death, either, perhaps….and yet, his grief and anger had morphed into resolve, because he’d felt the loss of Sirius – of the future that he’d offered him - in a way that he had been far too young to feel about his own parents’ deaths.

He sighed. “You’re right, of course. But if we change this somehow, the future you’ve had – it’ll be different.”

Josh nodded.

“You might not be married to Roxanne,” Snape said bluntly.

The two stared at each other, horror in their eyes. Their hands reached for each other.

“The thing is, you’ve already changed it,” Harry said gently.

“You’ve been working on the time-turner for some time before today?” Snape asked.

Josh nodded. “When Dad took all that stuff from the Ministry, he put it in the vault at our house – he’d just had it built, so I’m reckoning that he’d been planning it for a while. One of the time-turners – it was dropped on the floor in the hallway. I didn’t know what it was, I just picked it up. Dad was always in the vault if he was at home, and I – there never seemed the right moment to give it to him. When the Aurors came to search the house, I realised that Dad hadn’t rescued all that stuff. I – I just hid it in my school trunk.”

“He had a vault built specially? By the goblins?”

Josh shrugged. “Yeah. Before, I thought it was just because he couldn’t get access to the family vault, and he was pissed off with his father. Later, I realised that he’d been setting up in readiness for filching all that stuff. Which meant – he must have known that the fire would happen, long in advance?”

He looked at them enquiringly.

“We think so,” Kingsley agreed.

“But he wasn’t prosecuted.”

“No. He has friends in high places. We’re working on it.”

“Minister Atkins,” Josh nodded.
There was a sharp intake of breath.

“Josh,” Harry said, looking at his watch and conscious of the time. “You – we – if we intervene, your father – he’s likely to end up in Azkaban – ”

“For the theft? It’s better than for murder, isn’t it?” Josh said. “Killing his own mother – ”

Harry took a breath, and looked to Kingsley. “We suspect your father of other murders.”

Josh swallowed.

Kingsley cocked his head and looked at him. “You suspected him too,” he said.

“I – if he knew about the Ministry fire, he must have been involved in some way. I looked up the news reports. Three people died.” He looked up at them, and away again. “I was hoping that – that he was just – that he didn’t intend – ”

They just looked back at him, with varying degrees of sympathy.

“Oh.” Josh’s shoulders slumped. “I thought – I thought I could stop him. Before – before he did anything on purpose, you know?” He looked from one face to another. “Those things affected him – those brains…” His voice trailed off, and it was hollow when he said, “So it wasn’t just them, then.”

No-one said anything.

Roxanne’s hand was on Josh’s thigh, her shoulder against his, offering unconditional support .

“He’s like his father – Grandfather Nott – after all, then,” Josh said. “Even if they aren’t blood kin.”

“What you’re worrying about,” Snape said, “is whether you’ll be like him.”

Roxanne and Josh both looked up quickly.

“I was your father’s Head of House, and Headmaster. You’re obviously very clever, as he is,” Snape said, “but already, I see honesty in you that I don’t believe your father ever exhibited. And courage too. Just because your father is a murderer, will not make you one.”

“Many of us killed in the last war,” Harry said. “It hasn’t made us random murderers, or our children murderers either.”

Josh looked at the time-turner. “I came to give you some blood,” he said. “You’ll need it to get into the vault.”

“Josh,” Harry said. “We think – we think your father may have been involved in killing my wife. We don’t have proof yet, but we’re looking for it. I can’t see a happy ending for him from all this – ”

“I can’t save him.”

“I don’t think so, no,” Harry said honestly.

“There’s still your grandmother,” Roxanne said, leaning into her husband. “You can save her.”

“Can you?” he said, looking up.
“We can try,” Kingsley said. “I can’t promise. But we’ll go and see her, and make sure she’s safe. If the vault is full of stolen goods, it’ll be enough to arrest your father, and start the proceedings against him. The theft will implicate him in the fire and the murders. It will go from there.”

Josh nodded. “I – I must seem awful – to give up my own father –”

“You were trying to change things to save him. But some things – some people – well, sometimes it just isn’t possible,” Harry said. “Then you have to find a different kind of courage. Do you want to go ahead?”

Josh and Roxanne looked at each other.

He held out his arm, pulling up his sleeve.

Snape got up, and in seconds had retrieved a vial from his lab, and a knife, and had made the cut.

“We can do this without implicating you,” Harry said suddenly.

They all looked at him.

“We retrieve Nott senior’s body,” Harry said, grimacing. “Return it to your father. It’ll force the inheritance issue.”

“But Gran will then be at risk, and you won’t have any proof of the thefts or murders,” Josh said.

“You’re right,” Harry sighed. He scrubbed his hands over his face. “I’m just – this is tough on you,” he said simply. “He’ll know it was you, won’t he?”

Josh shrugged. “You think I haven’t thought about that? But I won’t do that to Gran. You don’t know – but she’s always been great to me. Use my blood. There’s a spell too,” he said, going on to go through the pattern of it with them. “The vault is under the floor of the third cellar. The entrance is hidden by father’s wine collection.”

“We need to go,” Roxanne said.

“Will it – if we’re – if we’re not together – will it take us back to different places?” He touched the time-turner, looking at Harry.

“I don’t know,” Harry said. “I’m sorry.”

“If –” Josh looked at Roxanne, and swallowed. “I love you,” he blurted. “Are you sure -?”

“I always liked you,” she said. “When we were young; when Dad warned me that you might be a bad lot. It’ll work out again. It will.”

Harry’s heart clenched in his chest. Their bravery was astonishing.

“We’ll do what we can to help, I promise,” he said.

Roxanne nodded, and then hugged Harry quickly. “I know. You always have.”

“Where do you need to be?” Harry asked. “I’ll take you straight there. It’ll give you a couple of minutes together before the hour’s up.”

Five minutes later he was back with Severus and Kingsley.
“I can’t believe they’re that brave,” Harry said. “What do we do now?”

“I’ve already talked to my office. I go and see Benningdean. Hopefully we go in and arrest him.”

“Now?”

“Can you see any reason to wait?”

“You don’t think we should all discuss it? Think about it? The ramifications?”

“I think we have information that we wanted and can’t ignore. We know where the goods are from the Department of Mysteries, and finding them will implicate Nott in the fire. We’ll be able to arrest him straight away. Acting on the information, will, we hope, prevent a murder in the future. Is anyone else going to see it differently?”

“What about Ginny?” Harry asked.

“With Nott arrested, Atkins is going to be shaken. We’ll need to keep him in protective custody, because she’s going to try to shut him up. I can’t guarantee we can get him to confess –if he did it –” Kingsley said, “but I think we have our best hope here of breaking up what’s been going on. And who knows, with a good Prosecutor, we may get him to spill in court.”

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets, and nodded. “You don’t want me to come?”

“No. This needs to be a purely above board arrest. He’s clever, and will make use of any foot we put out of place. And with Atkins…. I don’t want to raise suspicions at the moment. We’re following up information leading to the recovery of stolen items. We’ll want to see how he – and she – handles it.”

Harry nodded, rocking on his heels. “I – I think I’ll go and see George.”

“You’re going to tell him?”

“Yes,” Harry said, a hint of challenge in his voice, but Kingsley just nodded. “Where’s Lucius this evening?” he said, thinking. “Not with Nott?”

Kingsley shook his head, checking his wand holster

“What about you?” Harry turned to Severus.

“I’m going to see Minerva,” Snape said. “We’ll go and see Freya Nott together.”

“You’re going to tell her too?”

“Minerva is of the opinion that she is a very clever woman. I think she needs to know, both what we know, and the rest.”

“I hope she’ll take Josh under her wing. He’s risking his own happiness to save her life,” Harry said.

“Yes,” Snape nodded. “I hope she will.”

Kingsley leant forward and pecked Snape on the cheek, and then did the same to Harry, his hand giving his face a quick stroke.

And then he was into the floo, and gone.
“Doesn’t it bother you?” Harry asked. “Him going into danger without you?”

“Kingsley can take care of himself,” Snape said, turning away and going to the sink to get a glass of water.

“I hate it,” Harry said. “And so do you. I – I know I haven’t any right, but – will you let me know he’s safe?”

Snape turned and looked at him, and then gave a curt nod.

Harry walked to the floo, took a pinch of powder, and headed over to see George.
“How dare you?”

Dorothy Atkins jerked awake, startled by the looming figure of Lucius Malfoy leaning over her. She inched up the bed, trying to find her wits, aware at the same time that she was clutching the covers like a virginal teenager.

“‘What are you going on about? What are you doing here? What on earth is the time?’

“It’s two thirty in the morning. Of course, I should have known that you’d have no trouble sleeping after stabbing a colleague in the back,” he said, straightening up, and standing there, beside her bed, twirling his wand in his fingers.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she snapped. “Pass me my dressing gown.”

“I’m not your house elf,” Lucius said, making no motion to do as she’d said.

Gritting her teeth, she threw back the covers and stepped out of bed. She would not feel embarrassed that she was wearing pyjamas with little dragons on.

Her back stiffened as Lucius snorted.

“I can see you weren’t expecting company.”

“Who I sleep with is none of your business!”

“Oh, quite,” he smirked. “Been a long time, has it?”

She wrapped the dressing gown around her, and marched out of the room.

Lights flared in the sitting room as she entered.

“Brock!”

An elf appeared at once. “Mistress? Master Malfoy?”

“Go and iron your ears. You will not let strange men into my room ever again!”

The elf dropped forward, nose scraping on the ground. It opened its mouth –

“Not a word. Get out of my sight. I am considering clothes.”

The elf’s eyes bulged; it held its huge hands over its mouth, and then was gone.

“Did that make you feel better?” Lucius asked.

“You being out of my house would make me feel better,” she said.

“Oh, never fear. I’ll be getting out of your hair.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means I value my life a trifle more than you appear to believe I do,” Lucius replied.
“Stop talking in damn riddles! What are you doing here?”

“Your trusted ally, Theodore Nott, has just been arrested,” Lucius said. “Now tell me you had nothing to do with it.”

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“How the hell would you know about this?” she demanded, folding her arms over her chest.

“I do not appreciate foul language in a woman,” Lucius said. “I’ve been having his home watched, of course.”

“Watched – why?”

“You really didn’t expect me to trust him, did you?”

“You don’t trust me, either.”

“Are you trying to entice me to break my vow of loyalty? How very clever of you.”

“I didn’t - ”

“I’m here, am I not?”

“Yes, yes of course.”

“Good. Because if anything should happen to me, Dorothy, don’t think that I haven’t taken steps.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“Being honest. Something you probably aren’t acquainted with.”

“What do you know?” she demanded, planting her feet firmly and glaring up at him.

“I know that he’s been arrested,” Lucius repeated slowly, “which means you either gave him up, or you have no control over what’s going on in your department at all. Neither option is looking particularly attractive to me.”

“You don’t know what he’s been arrested for?”

“Surprisingly, my informant didn’t go up and ask the Aurors.”

“This – you may have entirely the wrong end of the stick – ”

“At least I know that there is a stick,” he said. “You’re out of the loop, aren’t you? Your department obviously don’t trust you.”

She pulled herself up. “You may dispense with that tone. I trust my department to work without coming to me with every little thing....”

Lucius’ laugh pulled her up short.

“We’ll see how little this is in the morning, no doubt,” he said.

He walked over to the fireplace and took a pinch of powder, then turned to her. “What you do now
is going to make or break our plans, Dorothy. Are you a leader? Now is the time to prove yourself.”
He threw the powder into the floo, and stepped into the flames.

“Surely she’s going to try and shut him up?” Scorpius said.

Everyone was sitting round Harry’s table again, but this time they were eating toast and marmalade and drinking copious amounts of tea and coffee.

*The Prophet* had got the scoop on the story, with a front page spread on the arrest of Theodore Nott, and pictures of a team of wizards and witches putting up wards around the perimeter of his home.

Draco had brought a stack of copies with him, and everyone was studying the hastily thrown-together articles over breakfast.

“‘That’s why I’m holding him in Ireland,’” Kingsley said. “‘She doesn’t have any jurisdiction there, and I trust my people.’”

“But it will have to go to court, surely?” James asked. “Will you be prosecuting, Hermione?”

Everyone turned to look at her.

She shook her head. “I’m working on the Beings Equality Law – it’ll be extremely useful to have it in place before his trial. Benningdean has fast-tracked it, and it goes before the Wizengamot next week. I haven’t the capacity to do both.”

“Harcourt,” Harry said.

“That bastard?” James said. “Sorry,” he nodded at Minerva and Hermione, although he knew his aunt wouldn’t be offended.

Gloria wasn’t around. “I’ll tell her anything she needs to know,” Draco had said easily. “She isn’t her best in the mornings.”

Kingsley had laughed outright, and Snape had grinned.

Gloria’s glorious appearance needed a healthy hand in the morning, and three cups of coffee before she spoke to anyone.

“I was just about to suggest him,” Hermione nodded. “He’s damn good at his job.”

“He nearly had Dad sent to Azkaban, or worse!” James expostulated.

“Exactly,” Hermione said. “If he can do that with an innocent man, just think what he’ll be like with a guilty one.”

“She’s got a point,” George said.

“You’ve been very quiet, George,” Minerva said. Having spent years getting a school in shape by the crack of dawn, she had no trouble with rising from bed and being fit to fight, despite the late-
night call from Snape.

George looked to Harry and Kingsley. “I’ve got things to think about,” he said.

Bill gave him a sharp look, then turned to Kingsley. “Are you going to tell us why you arrested Nott now? There was no mention of you doing so at the last meeting – and I appreciate you have a job, Kingsley, and can’t run everything by us – but I’m surprised. Something must’ve happened."

Kingsley nodded. “Yes. This is difficult. Thanks for your understanding, Bill. Information came to my attention and I decided I needed to act on it.”

“Does this mean there’s someone else who knew about what Nott was up to that we hadn’t considered?” Scorpius asked, leaning round Andy to address Kingsley.

“I think we need to tell them,” Harry said, looking from Snape to Kingsley. “The future has already been changed.”

“Whoa!” Scorpius’ eyes grew round as saucers. “Hold on! Are you – are you saying…. you mentioned time-turners before – ” he glanced from Harry to Hermione to Kingsley.

Kingsley looked at Snape.

“It’s difficult to decide what to do about time-travellers,” Snape said quietly. “The repercussions of travelling mean that the traveller’s present will potentially disappear.”

“I can’t get my head around the ins and outs of it,” Kingsley said bluntly, “but what it boils down to is that we were visited last night by two very brave individuals who knew they risked their whole future to bring us the information.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“Who was visited?” Bill asked, looking from Kingsley to Snape.

“Kingsley, Severus and I,” Harry said.

“They knew where to find you?” Scorpius said perspicaciously. “Someone who knew you well?”

“One of us?” Andy’s brow’s drew together.

Harry looked from Hermione to Minerva. “You two know more about time-turners than anyone I know. Should we reveal who they were?”

“How come you two know about time-turners?” Draco asked, looking at the witches.

Minerva gave Hermione a fond smile. Hermione grinned back.

“Don’t get all stroppy about something that happened thirty years ago, Draco,” Hermione warned him.

“What?” His eyes narrowed. “You used a time-turner back then?”

“Hermione wanted to take more classes than fitted the time-table. It was unusual, but I deemed she’d be able to cope,” Minerva said firmly.

“Hold on,” Draco’s eyes were bugging out. “I thought you meant you used it for one of your escapades – ” he looked from Hermione to Harry to Ron.
“Oh, we did that as well,” Harry grinned. It was fun to tease Malfoy.

“But – are you saying,” Scorpius frowned, “that you used it for a whole year to take extra classes?”

Hermione nodded.

“And you – permitted this favouritism?” Lucius’ eyes narrowed on Minerva.

“Father –”

Minerva sat forward. “People are a lot more careful about time travel than in my youth,” she said. “I did the same mysel’, and I wasnae the only one,” she said, her accent intensifying.

“But –” Scorpius said, “it’s all a bit mind-blowing, isn’t it? On changing the future, and stuff.”

“Well, we used them only to regain an hour or so,” Minerva said. “Longer term travel is another matter. Those young people were astonishingly brave,” she said.


“They did it to save a life,” Kingsley contradicted. “They believed – hoped – that this was a crucial point in time to change things. We could have ignored their visit, but ultimately, that would negate their bravery, and who knows what is supposed to be the ‘right’ thing to happen?”

“So, let’s get this clear,” Scorpius said. “One of them must have known you to find you – to know where you lived. Why didn’t he – or she - come alone?”

“Because the other must have known Nott very well to know about the hidden stuff,” Bill surmised. “Therefore someone you were unlikely to trust.”

“Josh Nott,” Harry said.

Heads whipped round to look at him.

“And my Roxanne,” George added.

“Wow,” Andy said. “They were friends, right? In that group together?”

“Yeah,” Harry said.

“Surely Josh is in danger now?” Scorpius asked sharply.

“I’ve hopefully sorted that,” Harry said.

They all turned to look at him.

“Josh gave us his blood so that the wards on the vault could be dropped – and the spell and location. His father might be in custody, but he would’ve known that his son had given him away. I went to see Ragnok, at Gringotts, last night, to see if they’d be willing to help a bit.”

“And they were?” Bill said disbelievingly.

“Josh didn’t know it, but he really had chosen the right time,” Harry said. “Although his father had gone through the motions of placing the blood wards, he hadn’t paid the goblins – probably because he didn’t have access to the family vaults. The goblins place their own wards which
prevent the activation of any other until they’re paid. They’re more than happy for that to be made known.” Harry smiled, “which will let Josh off the hook. Kingsley’s team can take credit for surveillance and detection.”

“Surely suspicion will fall on Grandfather – Nott’d told you about taking the stuff, hadn’t he?” Scorpius said, glancing at Lucius and away again.

“I made a pre-emptive strike in the early hours, and accused Atkins,” Lucius said. “I suspect Nott himself might suspect either of us, before his son. I’ll take that risk.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“George, you said that Josh Nott and your daughter did this at huge personal cost,” Scorpius said. “Why? And do you know what the cost is?”

Harry explained about the uncle visiting, and the murder of Freya Nott.

“I want to ask something else about that,” Scorpius said, “but – the personal cost?”

Harry looked to George.

“This will change the future. Maybe some things will stay the same, maybe not. Harry said that – that they were very much in love.” George paused, and swallowed. “That they were married.”

A silence.

“Shit,” James said. “Sorry,” he added to Minerva. “Oh. That took – that took guts, then.”

“Yes,” Lucius said, “I understood that part. But the vaults at Gringotts – you said that the second vault wasn’t paid for because he couldn’t get access to his family funds. But the goblins seem to know automatically when someone dies. When my father died, I received a letter inviting me to arrange an appointment to have access to the family vaults. You would have had such a letter from Gringotts when I entered into – our arrangement.”

Harry nodded. He’d written to the bank to instruct them to allow Lucius to keep on drawing on the accounts, and he was sent a monthly statement. “Yes, but Nott wouldn’t have expected that, he didn’t believe his father was dead – ”

“Yes,” Lucius said, “I understood that part. But the vaults at Gringotts – you said that the second vault wasn’t paid for because he couldn’t get access to his family funds. But the goblins seem to know automatically when someone dies. When my father died, I received a letter inviting me to arrange an appointment to have access to the family vaults. You would have had such a letter from Gringotts when I entered into – our arrangement.”

Harry nodded. He’d written to the bank to instruct them to allow Lucius to keep on drawing on the accounts, and he was sent a monthly statement. “Yes, but Nott wouldn’t have expected that, he didn’t believe his father was dead – ”

“You’re misunderstanding me. Why didn’t Gringotts send the brother notification and access? If Nott senior was truly dead?”

Harry opened and shut his mouth. “You think maybe it wasn’t him under the sea?”

“It points to that. Although as the brother opened the vault, we can assume he was dead by the point in time that the young couple decided to visit you.”

“It would explain why Theo’s DNA didn’t match the sample you got,” Hermione said, eyes wide,
turning to Harry.

“I didn’t have any reason to doubt the merpeople,” Harry said, frowning.

“So – I need to go and see the goblins again,” Harry said.

“Perhaps you should go and talk to the Goblin Liaison man first?” Hermione suggested. “There might be cultural things going on here, or routines, that he could explain?”

“That’s a good point,” Bill said, “and I expect you’ve got some kudos with the goblins for what you did at the Ministry.”

“Told you so too, but maybe not,” Harry shrugged.

“You have to remember they’re not human,” Lucius said.

Hermione opened her mouth, but Lucius held up his hand.

“I appreciate that you think I am insulting them,” he said, “but I am pointing out a statement of fact. They are not human. They are sentient, clever beings, but they do not think in the same way as humans.”

“That’s a fair point,” Bill said after a moment. “I’ve worked with them, and they do think differently. Come at things from a different viewpoint.”

Harry nodded. “Alright. Well, I’ll find out what’s going on there.”

“What happens now?” James said, after a moment. “Nott’s clever. He’s not going to cave, is he, and suddenly admit being a killer.”

“If he is,” Hermione qualified. “Innocent until proven guilty, hmm?”

“Well,” Minerva said, “we’d better get down to finding proof, hadn’t we?”

Dorothy Atkins stormed into Benningdean’s makeshift office at 9am on the dot.

“Good morning,” Benningdean looked up from his paperwork.

“I believe you’ve something to tell me, Minister,” she said, tight-lipped.

Benningdean leant back in his seat and looked at her coolly. One of the benefits of recent events was that, strangely, he felt a great deal more secure and in control, even if it appeared as if the Ministry was falling down around his ears. His job was challenging, rather than dull, and to his surprise, he liked it.

“What would that be, Mrs Atkins?”
“You authorized a raid on an Unspeakable without consulting me.”

He raised an eyebrow. “I wasn’t aware I had a duty to consult you,” he said coldly.

“Common manners –”

“I beg your pardon?” His voice was frosty now.

Her eyes narrowed. “Such a high profile – and delicate - matter would normally be run past me,” she said, after a moment.

“I don’t see much delicacy in a member of staff stealing from us,” Benningdean said. “I see a situation which is certainly embarrassing to the Ministry, but I will not be cowed into accepting the unacceptable because of embarrassment.” He stared at her. “Your department failed miserably, both in its employment of someone capable of such behaviour, but more particularly, in the appallingly cursory inspections that your teams made of the Unspeakables’ homes in the first place.”

She stiffened. “We could not have known that a member of staff –”

Benningdean leant forward and cut her off. “You didn’t like that I had a fire report from a Muggle associate, and therefore you decided not to take its contents seriously. Your follow-up was insulting, and frankly, inept. It would be easy to fire Dowling; I’ll decide whether to do so after I’ve discussed with him what instructions he was given on the matter.”

“Are you suggesting that you’d fire me on the words of a subordinate?” she demanded.

“Mrs Atkins, I am this close to firing you already,” he said, pinching his finger and thumb together. “All members of the Unspeakables’ department are suspended during the course of the investigation –”

“You can’t do that!”

“Oh, I can,” he said. “Indeed, I’d be foolish not to. A thorough search of all their homes is taking place today, to see if any others were in on the activities of their colleague. The fact that none of them came forward to express any concern about the fire and the state of their department afterwards leaves me to feel that they are either incapable of the job for which they are employed, or in league with Mr Nott.”

“You – this is very bad for morale –”

“So is knowing that you have colleagues that steal, and commit arson and murder at one’s place of work.”

“Colleagues?” she said sharply.

Benningdean steepled his fingers, and looked at her. “You found a note from Peter Stubbins admitting to the fire, didn’t you? I’d like to see that, by the way.”

“Are you doubting me?”

“I believe you came in here accusing me,” he paused, allowing the words some weight, “of not keeping you in the loop. I’m sure it’s only fair for me to expect the same courtesy.”

“You want reports of all the cases we deal with?” she sneered.
“Thank you, yes,” Benningdean said. “As you know, I asked for them previously. Now, if you have nothing else – ”

“Where is he being held? Why was this investigation not dealt with by my – ”

“Mrs Atkins, it’s quite clear that in an investigation pertaining to our own staff, we needed outside help, which I requested. Nott is being held securely.”

“He’ll be tried by the Wizengamot? I’ll need to make arrangements – ”

“Given the shooting experienced in our own courtroom of a key witness, I’m taking the situation under advisement,” Benningdean said. “I understand Mr Nott has already expressed his disdain for the security on offer, and, as he is innocent until proven otherwise, of course, we must make every endeavour to ensure the integrity of the court.”

“Are you telling me that you’re going to arrange a secret trial?”

“Not in the least. However, you need not concern yourself with dealing with his case. I’m sure you have plenty of other matters needing your attention.”

“You can’t alter the way we deal with criminal offences – ”

“Mrs Atkins, I’m not in a very good mood with you today. I suggest you moderate your tone, and consider your position. Good day.”

Dorothy Atkins stood utterly still for a minute.

Benningdean carried on with his paperwork as if she wasn’t there.

Then she turned and stalked out of the room, slamming the door behind her.

Benningdean allowed himself a grin.

Harry sat facing Ragnok.

“You didn’t tell me everything last night.”

“Everything, Mr Potter?” the goblin said querulously. “You came out of banking hours – ”

“If you’re only willing to see me as a customer, then I think our business is concluded,” Harry said, getting up.

“You,” Ragnok said, as he reached the door, “are not easily intimidated, are you?”

Harry laughed. “Sometimes I am. Small things. But then I faced Voldemort.” His face grew more serious. “We can help each other. You might find that hard to believe, given past relations with wizards, but I don’t lie. I don’t reveal all your secrets, either.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” Ragnok said sharply.

Harry looked at him.
Then he disappeared.

Ragnok frowned.

“Mr Potter?” he demanded.

There was no answer.

Ragnok went and opened the door, looking out. A goblin came scurrying up at once.

Ragnok frowned so heavily at him that his steps faltered. “Have you seen anyone in this corridor? A human?”

“This morning?” the goblin asked, glancing down at a sheaf of papers. “No clients are due till 11.45 –”

“Very well,” Ragnok said, and went back into the room, shutting the door firmly.

Harry Potter stood by the fireplace. In his hand, he held a portrait.

“You –” Ragnok cut off his words.

“The wards at the Ministry felt very similar. You could have lifted them, to help them rebuild the Ministry, but you’ve chosen not to. I’ve not mentioned that to anyone.”

“When did you realise?” Ragnok said, walking over to look at the portrait in Harry’s hand.

“It’s from the Malfoy vault.” Harry said. “I expect I could get into someone else’s. But I don’t want to. I told you I wouldn’t break in again.”

“Warding is a very complex matter –”

“Yes,” Harry nodded. “I understand Theodore Nott couldn’t get into the family vault, because of the blood wards.”

“I’d have to ask the goblin in charge of his account –”

“I’m sure you’ve been brought up to date on every aspect of it,” Harry said, “since I came to see you last night, if not before.”

“Well,” Ragnok said, lowering himself back into his chair. “I may have looked into the matter.”

“Theodore Nott is not a Nott. The question I’m wondering,” Harry said, “is why you didn’t inform his uncle that he was heir to the estate.”

“We don’t have a duty to inform the client unless a will is in place. Customers usually come to us.”

“So,” Harry said slowly, “Nott senior didn’t have a will?”

“Just so.”

“Would things have been different if he had?”

Ragnok looked at him. “Sometimes there’s a will in which the testator leaves all his goods to his heir by name. In that case, even if there isn’t a blood tie, the named person is the rightful heir. For
example, you were named as Sirius Black’s heir, rather than his next of kin.”

“Alright,” Harry said, nodding. “So Nott didn’t leave a will: he had no reason to doubt Theodore was his son, so he assumed he would inherit.”

“One might assume that was the case, though it is not for me to judge the decisions of wizards. Perhaps he wasn’t intending to die quite yet.”

Ragnok was making something akin to a joke, Harry realised. He gave a slight smile in acknowledgement. “But if Theodore came to you, you’d have to tell him he wasn’t the heir?”

“There has been no official announcement of Mr Nott’s death, nor a body, as far as I understand it. It was quite within our rights to deny Theodore Nott access to the family vault.”

Harry knew he had to keep finding the right questions. Ragnok was giving him answers, if somewhat oblique ones.

“But you knew that Theodore was not the blood heir.”

“He was neither the legal heir nor blood heir,” Ragnok said. “Therefore the Nott family vaults were not his business.”

“Did you tell him that?”

“He was told that he could not be given access.”

Harry looked at him coolly. “Was that tact on your part?”

“We’re not inclined to give out unnecessary information.”

“So, how did you know that he wasn’t the heir?”

“Theodore Nott was required to give a blood sample for the ward setting on his new vault.”

“But you didn’t set the wards?”

“The sample led us to appreciate that Mr Nott would be unable to pay for the vault from family funds. We made clear that payment would be necessary before the wards were set; we discussed this last night, Mr Potter,” Ragnok said impatiently.

Harry nodded. “I’m sorry to be slow. I’m trying to think things through. So Theo would know that the vault was unwarded?”

“I’ve no doubt he attempted to set his own. Ours repel the setting of any other. Not all clients are as - trustworthy - as one would wish.”

“No, I appreciate that. So - he’d know whether his own had taken or not?”

“Indeed.”

Harry wondered why Josh had gone to so much trouble to bring him blood, if the vault was unwarded. “Hold on,” he said, as if Ragnok had spoken, “so if he came into some money, and paid you, then the warding would fix?”

“Yes, of course. We take pride in our vaults – ”
Harry knew something else still wasn’t right. It tickled at the edge of his brain.

“I think,” Ragnok said, apparently taking pity on him, “that you may be confusing two different sorts of vaults. It’s confusing that they have the same name.”

“Explain, please,” Harry nodded encouragement.

“A vault built in the owner’s abode might use blood wards to key it to the owner. Generally, the warding on them is far simpler than the warding here in the bank. Family vaults here are keyed only to the heir, unless an explicit request is made to allow access to other persons. Many families keep a number of vaults here – older families see it as ‘training’ – young members of the family might be given their own vault, for example, as you were. You did not gain access to your family vault, even though you were the heir, until you reached your majority: that too is the norm, unless a specific request is made otherwise.”

Harry leant forward in his seat, thinking. “Alright, thanks. So Theo Nott didn’t have access to his family vault here in Gringotts because he wasn’t the heir.” He frowned.

Ragnok said nothing.

“And as his father wasn’t declared dead officially, and there was no will, you basically held on to the money, waiting to be approached by the heir.”

“That would be our usual practice, yes.”

“Wouldn’t the widow have access?” Harry asked. It wasn’t the question that was lurking at the perimeter of his thoughts, but he had to wonder…. “With Muggles, I think the wife inherits everything.”

“We do not deal much with Muggles,” Ragnok said severely, “but you are incorrect. In older families, even amongst Muggles, they have the inheritance arranged differently. I presume you cannot have read Sense and Sensibility, a useful little book by a Muggle author, a Miss Austen?”

“Er, no,” Harry said, “I think she wrote that a while ago, didn’t she?”

“It is quite pertinent,” the goblin looked down the length of his nose at him. “Wizards are always so averse to exploring the world just beyond their doorstep.”


Ragnok tilted his head.

With a sudden sense of the ridiculous, Harry said, “Seriously, why don’t you come round and watch it? I’ll dig up a DVD.”

“Are you inviting me into your home?”

“Is that a breach of etiquette, or something?” Harry frowned.

A small smile appeared on Ragnok’s face. “I have never been invited into a wizard’s home except on business.”

“It’s not very grand,” Harry said, “but come and have some supper and we’ll watch a film. It’s
quite suitable for your family, if you’d care to bring them.”

Ragnok laughed. “You are an intriguing fellow, Mr Potter.”

“Well,” Harry scratched his head, “I don’t know much about you either.” He got up, rather surprised where the meeting had ended up. “Thanks for your time. Are you free this Friday night?”

“I will check with my wife.”

Harry nodded. “And if you’re bringing family – I’d appreciate knowing numbers – ”

“I have eleven children, twenty four grandchildren, sixty two great – ”

“I’ll have to expand the room,” Harry grinned, not allowing himself to be cowed. “Let me know how many.”

“You’re serious.”

“Why not?” Harry chuckled. “I could rent Sense and Sensibility as well, if you like. Have a film night.”

“I do not quite know what a film is,” Ragnok admitted. “Is it like a book reading? There would not be time – ”

Harry laughed again, because it was so absurd.

“Look, bring all your family. I won’t do dinner, and I mean that without offence. We’ll watch two films, and have beers and popcorn, which is what we do when we watch films. Come and give it a try.”

“I will inform you of our numbers,” Ragnok bowed low.

Harry reached the door, and opened it, a smile on his face, beginning to plan the evening.

Even the door had wards on it, he noted idly, allowing in only those who Ragnok wanted -

Harry turned back, and shut it behind him. “I know what’s bothering me,” he said.

Ragnok, who was standing, came around in front of his desk.

“If the family vault – the one at the Nott family home – would only accept Nott’s uncle, how come the new vault accepted Josh? His father must have keyed him to it for that to happen, right?”

“Speaking generally, that would be a correct assumption, yes.”

“Right,” Harry said. He held out his hand. “See you Friday.”

Harry walked along Diagon Alley, unsettled and anxious. He thought of going into The Leaky to talk to Ron, but in the end, he apparated directly to Villa Olorosa.

Dion came to greet him, smiling widely. “Master Harry! It is being good to have you home again! Can Dion be making you coffee? Fruit juice?”

“It’s good to see you too, Dion. Your lovely orange juice sounds tempting. I was wondering if Severus was in?”
“Master Severus is in China, Master Harry. But he is expected back shortly.”

“Oh,” Harry said. “Um.” He really needed to think a bit. “I’m going to go down to the bothy, Dion.”

“Dion will bring you some fresh orange juice, there,” the elf said happily.

“Thank you,” Harry smiled.

Harry was busy a couple of hours later when Severus walked in.

He looked incredibly elegant, in a neat, formal black robe, with his Potions Master insignia embroidered on the collar, and Harry felt regret like a weight in his heart.

“You wanted to see me?” Severus said.

“I needed someone to talk to,” Harry said, putting the saw away on the wall rack. “If you don’t mind?”

“I need something to eat,” Snape said, and Harry realised he’d come the moment he’d arrived home, and felt warmed by the thought.

“Want me to make you an omelette while you change?”

“That would be good,” Snape nodded, after an infinitesimal pause, and Harry felt something in him relax.

They both apparated back, and Harry busied himself in the kitchen, and slid the omelette onto a plate as Snape walked down the stairs.

Harry poured them both some water and ate some of the salad that he and Dion had prepared to go with the omelette.

“Thank you,” Snape said, tucking in. “The time difference meant that I seem to have missed eating.”

“You do quite a bit of international work,” Harry commented.

“It comes and goes,” Snape agreed. “This was useful.”

“What was it?” Harry asked.

Snape grinned at him. “I can’t imagine that you really want to know.”

“Well, if it’s all incomprehensible ingredients and formulas, probably not,” Harry agreed, “but in general, yes, I’m interested in what you do.”

“Formulae,” Snape said.

Harry rolled his eyes. “Yeah, see how good I’d be at understanding that side of it. Can’t even get the vocab.”

“A new potion was used for the first time in a Chinese court,” Snape said.

“One you’d created?”
“I’d hardly bother for someone else’s.”

“Really? Wouldn’t you?”

Snape looked at him as he polished off the last bite of omelette. “I might, if I was interested in it, and not busy with other work,” he conceded. “So. Why are you here, Harry?”

Harry picked up Snape’s plate and took it to the sink.

Snape let him distract himself.

“I went to see Ragnok,” Harry said, running the hot water. He looked across at Snape. “I – Josh Nott must have been keyed into the vault by his father,” he said, turning round and leaning against the edge of the sink. “Do you think we made a mistake?”

“In what way?” Snape asked. “In trusting Josh?”

Harry nodded. “He’d had the time-turner long enough to get to know how to use it. He had access to the vault. What – what if he just wanted to get his father out of the way?”

“Roxanne was with him.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” His eyes darted over Snape, and then he turned back to the sink. “Love makes you do strange things,” he said quietly.

There was a moment’s silence. “It hasn’t stopped you doing what you think is right.”

Harry spun round, and sucked in a breath. The seconds ticked out, heavy between them.

“You’re right,” Harry said, exhaling at last. He came and sat down opposite Snape. “I’m so sorry,” he said. “I miss you.”

Snape sighed. “Yes.”

Harry snorted.

“That meant we miss you too, you idiot,” Snape said.

“I’m in love with you both. Every day hurts. And I know I only have myself to blame.”

“I find it hard to understand why you’d accept Josh Nott’s word just like that,” Snape snapped his fingers, “and yet Hannah Longbottom, who you’ve known almost all of your life – you don’t trust her.”

“I do trust her!”

Snape raised an eyebrow.

Harry rubbed a hand round the back of his neck. “I know this sounds stupid,” he began, looking at Snape and waiting for Snape to tell him that that was nothing new, but Snape said nothing. Harry swallowed. “I just – I need to be part of my child’s life.”

“Even though Hannah doesn’t want that?”
Harry nodded. “Even though.”

“Why?”

“I know this is paranoid, but I need to know that my child will know that there’s someone he can go to. If things – if he – she – needs to. I know Hannah will probably be a good parent, but it’s hard work, and she’s on her own –”

“This isn’t about that, though, is it?” Snape cut across him. “It’s about your childhood.”

“I suppose,” Harry agreed. He looked down, and then back up. “I know it is. I thought it was all behind me. Well, I suppose with Ginny it was – it wasn’t anything unusual for me to be around for my kids, you know, what with being married and being an ordinary family. Well, maybe not so ordinary – Gin was away and I did a lot more of the being around than other Dad’s, maybe. It was important to me. I – I loved it. Now I’ve made a child and I can’t be part of its life. I – I’m having trouble…”

“This isn’t just about your delight in fatherhood, though, is it?” Snape pushed. “I knew Tuney Evans.”

Harry shivered. “I survived.”

“Yes.”

“I just need to make sure that he – she - has someone to check on them. Someone to go to if - if – anything isn’t right.”

Snape poured himself some water from the jug.

“Josh chose to come here. Whatever his involvement in his father’s stolen items, or however far he’d got drawn into what his father was doing, he chose to end it. I don’t know Roxanne Weasley, but based on the family history, I don’t see her supporting Josh if he’d come here to bring about his father’s death for his own gain. There is never certainty, Harry, but all three of us accepted what they said. You didn’t do this alone.”

Slowly, Harry nodded. Although the conversation seemed to have jumped all over the place, Snape had given him the reassurance he’d needed. And the opportunity to say other things that hadn’t even been on his agenda when he’d come. He was surprised anew at how easy Snape was to talk to. He didn’t let you get away with bullshit, and he didn’t hold back what he thought. It soothed Harry. “Thanks.” Reluctantly, he got to his feet. “I – you didn’t mind me coming?”

“No,” Snape said.

Harry paused. “Umm, I’ve asked Ragnok and his family to see Raiders of the Lost Ark and Sense and Sensibility on Friday. I think there’ll be loads of them, so I’m only doing beer and popcorn and crisps. If you fancy it, you’d be very welcome”.

Snape’s whole face lightened up. “Do I dare ask how that came about?”

Harry grinned back, shoulders relaxing. “Ragnok was lecturing me on Sense and Sensibility as a good study for inheritance law,” he started.

Snape barked a laugh. “It could only happen to you,” he shook his head. “I’ll run it by Kingsley. I think it might be too much fun to miss.”
That Friday night, Harry found himself entertaining twenty three goblins, sitting mixed in with Severus and Kingsley, James, Albus and Laura, and Ron and Hermione, as his ‘family’.

He’d had a moment of wobble when he’d first told Mitty that they were entertaining goblins, and asked if they wanted to come and see the films too, and he and his kids would wait on them. Mitty had been so scandalised that she got over her uncertainty about serving goblins in an instant, but Harry made sure he and his boys helped serve the beers and popcorn. Kingsley and Severus had brought over freshly-squeezed orange juice, and olives to nibble on, and Hermione had provided the *Sense and Sensibility* DVD from her collection.

Harry had thought it might be a disaster – he wasn’t much into period romance, and wondered what had possessed him to put the two films together, but he was surprised to find himself quite taken with the repressed emotions of Miss Dashwood, as he sat there, with the two men he wanted to be with sitting within feet of him but out of his reach. He’d never actually seen the film before, though he’d heard Hermione discussing it, and when Willoughby was found to be a dreadful bounder who’d got a girl pregnant and sat on his horse on the hillside watching the woman he loved marry someone else, he had to swallow back the lump that came into his throat.

The goblins however, were enthralled, and even more so when Harry put on the Indiana Jones film. The goblins had loosened up a little, Hermione having invited those around her to give their opinion of the first movie in the little interlude they had between films, and when the boys started whooping at Indiana’s antics they seemed to let their hair down. There was lots of whispering and discussion about the tunnelling work, which had Harry grinning across the room at Ron, and several were on the edges of their seats as the action built and built. Harry had forgotten about the religious side, and the Nazis, but the goblins just seemed enthralled.

At the end, they all just sat there, stunned for a moment, and Harry sat back, smiling.

It had been a weird but wonderful evening.

He might not have what he wanted in life, but Severus and Kingsley hadn’t shunned him entirely, his oldest friends were with him, his boys, and possibly new friends as well.

These were things to be grateful for.
Ron called through the floo as Harry was eating his lunch on the Monday, and Harry took the stairs two at a time, the urgency of Ron’s tone communicating itself at once.

“Ron? What’s up? Hermione alright?”

“Lucius Malfoy’s been arrested and sent straight back to Azkaban! Just had some Aurors in here.”

“What?” Harry nearly banged his head on the mantel. “When did this happen?”

“About an hour ago, I reckon. They came in for lunch, a bit overexcited, so I went and had a natter.”

“I’ll get on to Kingsley. Thanks, Ron. Oh – what was he arrested for?”

“Murder, apparently. Some French geezer, they said. Didn’t like to pry too much.”

“No, fair enough. Shit,” Harry said.

“My thoughts exactly. I’ll be in touch.”

Harry apparated straight to Dublin.

Kingsley’s head was in the fire, talking to Benningdean. He turned to look at Harry, eyes quickly assessing.

“Harry’s heard,” he said to the Minister. “I’ll just talk to him and get back to you, Joe.”

“Joe?” Harry asked, as Kingsley stood up.

Kingsley shrugged. “He calls me Kingsley. What’ve you heard?”

“Ron said Aurors had come into The Leaky. That Lucius had been arrested for murdering a French man. Is it Balcon?”

“Benôit,” Kingsley said, shaking his head. “Atkins said she had information from the French Ministry. Malfoy’s on permanent parole: she’s had him sent straight back to Azkaban.”

“We pushed her too far,” Harry said, striding round the office. “It’s my fault – ”

“No,” Kingsley said, coming and putting a hand on his arm.

Harry looked up at him.

“It isn’t,” Kingsley said. “He chose to do this, and how to play it. Allow him the dignity of being responsible for his own actions.”

Harry swallowed, and nodded. “What can we do? Do they have witnesses? What’s their case?”

“Benningdean has got me on board for the international angle. The arrest has come through as a direct request from the French Minister for Justice. We know he’s a traditionalist – it looks pretty likely that he’s one of Atkins’ buddies, and he’s doing her a favour.”

“So – she’s baled on him? Nott gets arrested and then she dumps Malfoy?”
“It’s got to be connected,” Kingsley agreed.

“She – do you think she’s – shutting up shop? Cutting her losses? Or what?”

“I don’t know, Harry. Not yet.”

Harry nodded, his hands shoved in his pockets. “What about Lucius? What can we do?”

“I suspect she doesn’t know that we already investigated Benôit’s death, because of Lucius’ involvement with the group. I’ve got the original reports from the French Aurors, and Benningdean is sending me a copy of the stuff Atkins presented him with. It’s going to be interesting to see what’s changed – ”

“Interesting? Kingsley, he’s going back to Azkaban!”

“I know,” Kingsley said, moving close to Harry again, but Harry stepped away. “He didn’t do it! We can’t let this happen – ”

“Harry, you have to trust me,” Kingsley said, and Harry couldn’t help thinking how solid and impressive he could look when he chose.

“It’s not a matter of not trusting you,” he said quietly, coming forward again and sitting himself on the edge of the desk. “I – I’m responsible for him, Kingsley. I got him into this. He didn’t kill Benôit, and he’s being set up. I can’t leave this.”

“I know,” Kingsley said, pulling up one of the chairs and throwing himself astride it, leaning on the back.

Harry’s eyes dropped to the fabric straining over Kingsley’s thighs. He didn’t know whether to feel disappointment or relief that the chair back hid Kingsley’s crotch from him, though his imagination and memory were mapping the contours – he looked away, swallowing.

“I’ll send two men to act as guards in Azkaban,” Kingsley said, and his voice was warm and knowing, even as he spoke of the practical. “They’ll replace two regular warders, but their prime duty will be ensuring Lucius’ safety. We’ll have to allow justice due process – ”

“Justice!” Harry said. “Where’s the justice? She can do whatever she likes to him – ”

“He knew that.”

“It’s not right,” Harry shook his head.

“No, I know. But going about this the wrong way won’t help Lucius. She hasn’t killed him,” he said grimly. “He may be uncomfortable, but he may be safer in Azkaban.”

“He needs to know I haven’t abandoned him.”

Kingsley bit his lip. His hands rubbed down his thighs. “Are you planning on apparating into Azkaban?”

“Will he be there already?”

“Merlin, you are thinking about it!” Kingsley said. “Harry – you’ll frighten people. If it gets out -”

“What am I to do, then?” Harry said, slipping off the desk but leaning his backside against it.
“It’ll be too late. They port-keyed him to Scotland. He’ll be on the boat – what?”

Harry had straightened. “It’ll be freezing, right?”

“Of course it will – what the hell are you thinking?”

Harry gave a small smile. “I’ll be back.” He leant forward and kissed Kingsley quickly on the cheek, hardly thinking, and then he was gone.

“Damn!” Kingsley said, but a hand crept to his cheek, and a smile played about his mouth, before he turned and strode out of the room.

Harry found himself almost paralyzed with cold as he landed in the North Sea. His brain felt as frozen as his limbs, and he choked sea-water into his lungs, salt on his tongue, fear swelling like the currents that were playing over him, water over his head, his glasses loosening – it was the thought of the loss of them that made him call on his magic to fix them in place, and in the same fraction he pulled on his magic, and on the sea, and the next moment he was breaking the surface, and sucking in air, spluttering and gasping and bobbing. The waves were huge and it was raining, slashing sideways into him. He forced the panic down again, and welcomed the sea, asked it to welcome him, and found himself rising on the swell, the chill leaving his limbs, and his breath coming back. He shut his eyes a moment, telling the sea what he wanted, thinking what he needed; he apparated again, letting his magic, the sea’s magic, guide him, casting invisibility even as he landed.

The boat rocked. A huge wave broke over the side.

“Fucking hell!” one of the guards shouted. “We should never have left, ferryman! Not in seas like this!”

Harry could see the ferryman looking fearful, as the boat rose up and up a wave.

“No saying what the sea will do,” he muttered, “she’s a fearsome lady.”

“You stupid squib!” the guard shouted over the wind, holding on to a rope as the boat tossed again.

“Lucius,” Harry whispered, to the soaked man whom he was sitting next to. “Don’t look. I’m invisible, but they’ll hear me if they get an inkling.”

He felt the man jerk as he spoke.

“What’s up with you?” the second guard said, his eyes on Malfoy. “Scared you’ll drown? It’ll be a better fate than what awaits you over there,” he sneered.

Lucius’ kept his head down, and didn’t respond.

The guard laughed, and turned away to steady himself as a wave caught the boat side-on, and joined his comrade shouting at the ferryman.

“I wanted you to know that we’re doing everything we can to help you,” Harry whispered. “I’m so sorry this has happened – ”

“Use it against Nott,” Lucius cut across him, watching to see whether the guards noticed him
speaking, but the sea was turbulent and they were both more intent on tracking the towering waves, anticipating each roll and shudder of the little vessel.

“What?” Harry said.

“Let him know Atkins has abandoned us both.”

Harry nodded, then realised that Malfoy couldn’t see him. “Alright. Will you be alright?”

Lucius didn’t answer.

“God, stupid question,” Harry said. “I could take you away now, but Kingsley thinks you might be safer in Azkaban. If I take you out, they’ll hunt you. Atkins will have you killed. It’s your choice. I can take you,” Harry said again.


“Did you speak to me?” the guard whipped round, wand out. “Shut your mouth, filth,” and he cast a stinging hex at Malfoy.

Lucius jerked back. “Go,” he said again.

A huge wave rose over the side of the boat, and knocked the guard into the well of the boat.

Harry touched his arm, and then was gone.

Two hops later, he landed back in Kingsley’s headquarters, the remains he’d brought with him squelching and clattering as they hit the floor, water pooling around them. He stepped back, shuddering.

There were shouts, and then Kingsley strode into the receiving room.

“Nott Senior and Rowle, I hope,” Harry nodded at the remnants of human life encased within the shimmer of his spells. “Thought I might as well bring them back whilst I was out there.”

“You’re soaked –” Kingsley strode over, his hands grabbing Harry’s arms.

“Oh yeah,” Harry blinked, and was dry.

Kingsley shivered, feeling the wash of magic.

He stepped away, shaking his foot.

“Sorry,” Harry said, his wand pointing at the puddled floor and drying it. “Have you got somewhere to put them?” he nodded at the remains.

Kingsley turned. “Liam, Jenny,” he said, to two of the workers who’d rushed in when Harry had arrived, “take them down to the cellar, and get Bromage in to come and do the identification work.”

“Yessir!” Liam said, stepping forward, trying to hide his grimace as he looked at the remains. Jenny nodded, tilting her head as she assessed the task.

“Come on through,” Kingsley said to Harry. “You need a hot drink.”
“Sounds good,” Harry nodded, following him. “I need to wash my hands first,” he said. “I didn’t touch them, but – ” he shrugged.

Kingsley pointed Harry to the Gents.

Moments later Harry joined Kingsley in his office, and wrapped his hands round a mug of coffee. He inhaled the rich scent, and sipped.

“Brilliant,” he said.

Kingsley sat on the edge of his desk. “You saw Malfoy?” he asked.

Harry nodded. “He says use it to get Nott and Atkins. His incarceration.”

“Yup. That’s what I was thinking too. It’s not right, but it might put the fear up Theodore Nott. If he knows Atkins has dropped Lucius in it, he might give out on her.”

“She might have a loyalty spell on him,” Harry said.

“Good point,” Kingsley said.

“The goblins will have to act on the inheritance with a body,” he said. “I think Minerva ought to talk to Freya Nott again. I know we want to protect her, but she needs to know what’s going on. If Nott’s in prison he can’t kill her.”

“He won’t be in for long if we only get him for theft.”

“I know,” Harry nodded. “But Theo’s reasons for being into this Pureblood shit will be destroyed. Hopefully we’ll be able to prove the other stuff against him – if he’s guilty – but even if not, he’ll have had time to think about it whilst he’s inside. If he loves his mother, and knows he isn’t a Pureblood after all, maybe he’ll be less judgemental.”

“That’s a lot of wishful thinking,” Kingsley said. “I thought you wanted to protect her?”

Harry scraped a foot over the floor. “I did. I do. But we’re all responsible for our actions,” he said. “She had a baby by another man and passed it off as her husband’s.” He shrugged.

“Taking a tough stance? Is this because you got Hannah pregnant?”

Harry glanced up. “It’s made me think about responsibility,” Harry agreed. “If we do things, we have to take responsibility for them.”

Kingsley nodded.

“I want to protect her, but doing so – I don’t know what Nott senior’s brother is like, but he’s the rightful heir, isn’t he? He’s entitled to inherit. It isn’t right that we should prevent that, not when we know the truth.”

“That’s a good point,” Kingsley agreed. “Will you go with Minerva?”

“Me?”

“You found the body. You brought it back.”

Harry sighed. “You’d better get the official report on it first, then,” he said. “I know I brought the sample back before, but this is official now. Will one of your team come with us too?”
Kingsley nodded.

Harry stood up.

His clothes rustled.

Kingsley stepped forward, and pinched the fabric of Harry’s shirt between finger and thumb. “Salt. It’s stiff as a board.”

Their eyes met. Words morphed to mean something else. Harry felt his breath catch in his throat, and this time it wasn’t the sea he was drowning in.

“Harry,” Kingsley breathed, and then his arm was around his back, the other in Harry’s hair, holding his head, and his tongue was stroking over Harry’s mouth, demanding to be let in.

Harry moaned, and then Kingsley’s tongue was hot and strong, and Harry’s hands were sliding down Kingsley’s back, feeling every muscle, then gripping Kingsley’s buttocks, holding him tight against him.

They both groaned. Harry’s hips lurched forward, pressing into Kingsley.

“Fuck,” Kingsley said, his hand sliding between them to cup Harry.

A mewl, uncontainable, left Harry’s mouth.

Kingsley bit Harry’s lip, his fingers exploring the shape of Harry’s cock as he walked them backwards. Harry’s thighs hit the desk, and he pressed into that warm hand, desperate for Kingsley to undo his fly and -

Kingsley’s hand moved away. A sound of disappointment was pulled from Harry, a laugh from Kingsley, as he dipped, his thighs and arms bunching as he prepared to lift Harry –

“Yes,” Harry gasped –

There was a knock and the door opened instantly.

“Kingsley – oh! Oh damn, sorry – ”

Harry’s head swung round to see Rose retreating, face as red as her name, the door clicking firmly shut behind her.

“Oh god,” Harry said.


Harry nodded, resting his head against Kingsley’s chest, trying to get his breath.

Kingsley lifted his chin, passed the touch of a kiss over his lips, and pulled away.

He moved across the room, a hand down his jeans, adjusting himself.

Just the thought that he’d turned Kingsley on so much was making Harry find it impossible to get control over himself. He stood up, feeling his own clothes, cardboard-like from the salt, dragging roughly over his cock, scraping the insides of his thighs.

It felt good.
“I – I’d better go,” he said.

Kingsley nodded. “Yeah. If you stay any longer I’ll fuck you on my desk. And everyone out there’ll know that we’re doing it,” he said, glancing back at Harry.

Harry breathed in tightly, pictures flying into his head. “Sorry,” he said. “Your workplace,” he added, hoping Kingsley would understand. He could hardly find any words.

“Fuck that,” Kingsley said.
A heartbeat. Two…

“God, I want …”

Harry’s breath stuttered. “Yeah.”

Kingsley closed his eyes. “We – there’s got to be some solution –”

Harry swallowed. Reality started drifting back. “Lucius –”

“I wasn’t thinking about Lucius.” Kingsley was standing behind his desk chair, leaning on it. Behind his desk.

Barriers between them.

The thought that he needed them was incredibly exciting.

But words were more of a barrier.

Harry took a breath. “I – I haven’t any ideas. Let’s –. I can barely think, here, Kingsley,” he admitted.

Kingsley nodded. His eyes scorched over Harry. “God.”

Harry sucked in air. “Kingsley –”

“Yeah. I know,” Kingsley said, adjusting himself again. His hands paused on his cock.

Harry groaned. “Please. Don’t. I want - I can feel –” he swallowed. “I wish you were in my mouth – filling me -”

“Fucking hell,” Kingsley bent double.

Harry held his hands over his face. “Lucius,” he said, after a moment. “Malfoy.”

“Trying to make me stop thinking of your lips around my cock?” A small smile came over Kingsley’s face, as his head twisted up to look at Harry.

“Is it working? Draco? Your mother - ” Harry responded, teasing, trying to lighten the tension.

“Oh dear god, that’ll do!” Kingsley said.

Harry felt a grin forming.

“You’d better go,” Kingsley said. “I need to get on with this.”

Harry nodded. “What can I do? Apart from see Minerva and Nott’s mother, which - is a thought enough to get rid of any boner,” he said, shaking his legs a little, as his body eased down.
Kingsley laughed. “Yes. You’d better go tell Draco first, though. He’ll be glad to know you’ve seen his father, even if he’s furious about what’s happening.”

Harry nodded. “Oh damn, I’d better tell Nanette,” he grimaced. “Okay. It’s going to be a busy day. Keep me informed, yeah?”

Kingsley nodded.

Harry apparated out.

Kingsley sighed, cast a still necessary detumescence spell, and went out to see how discreet Rose Weasley was.

The next day, Kingsley walked into the interrogation room.

“Well, well, well,” Theodore Nott sneered, “Minister Shacklebolt. Oh no, you had to give up that job because of your perversion, didn’t you?”

A witch and a wizard stood to attention by the door. Neither of them moved.

“Good afternoon, Theodore,” Kingsley said, also ignoring the comment, and sitting down in the chair opposite.

Nott’s brows rose. “I didn’t give you the right to use my name. You’re completely lacking in courtesy: you dress like a Muggle in my presence,” he said. “Or is that so other men can see what’s on offer? You have no shame. You’re a walking invitation, aren’t you?”

“It’s far easier to fuck a wizard,” Kingsley said conversationally. “Lift up his robe and slide straight in,” he added crudely. “Muggle clothing is much more restrictive: belts and zips and underwear. But then, I don’t think about fucking other men every second. Perhaps you do?”

“How dare you!” Nott snapped.

“You brought up sex,” Kingsley pointed out.

Nott shut his mouth tight.

“That’s better,” Kingsley said again. He flicked his wand, and a quick-quotes quill and parchment appeared.

“Where’s my lawyer?” Nott demanded.

“You asked for Thornton?” Kingsley said, rifling through some paperwork in front of him.

“He’s my family lawyer,” Nott said.

“Ah yes,” Kingsley agreed. “I’m afraid he’s rather busy – ”

“Are you refusing to get me my own lawyer?” Nott demanded.

“Not in the least,” Kingsley said quietly. “I believe he sent a note in response to the request we sent. Ah yes, here it is.”
Dear Mr Shacklebolt

Thank you for your communication requesting my presence to represent the wizard formerly known as Theodore Nott, of Brampton Lodge, Long Meadow, Oxfordshire.

I am afraid that I am unable to assist him at this juncture.

I was notified today by Gringotts Bank that Mr Francis Nott is the rightful heir to the Nott estates, following the recovery of the body of his brother from the North Sea. All necessary identification formalities having taken place, I will, of course, be rather busy in the foreseeable future in assisting Mr Francis, and of course, the retainer implemented by the Nott family for my services no longer includes provision for Theodore. I am uncertain which name he will now wish to take, as Mr Francis has already indicated to me that he does not wish to allow wrongful use of his family name, and as such, I will address any correspondence to Theodore in the title of his mother’s maiden name, Hinch.

As a courtesy, I have taken the liberty of attaching the names of two lawyers below, who have agreed that they would be willing to meet with Theodore Hinch on a preliminary basis, to see whether they might be willing to act on his behalf. By agreeing to a preliminary appointment, I must make clear that neither are committing to accept his case, and Mr Hinch may prefer to accept a court-appointed representative, or indeed, another lawyer of his choosing.

With my best regards to you,

Your faithful servant,

Michael Thornton.

“What is this?” Theodore snapped, waving the parchment in the air.

“I thought it was perfectly clear,” Kingsley said.

“You’ve arranged to cut me out of my inheritance?”

“I’m not interested in your inheritance,” Kingsley said. “You’re here because we found stolen goods from the Ministry in your home. Now, would you like me to get you a lawyer?”

Nott stared at him, clearly thinking. “Who did this?”

Kingsley raised an eyebrow. “Thornton has made clear why he is unable to act for you. Now, I’m asking for the last time, would you like us to put a floo-call through to another lawyer?”

“This is a set-up,” Nott said.
“Really?” Kingsley said. “You believe somebody wishes to set you up? Please don’t answer until you’ve decided about the lawyer.”

“Sod the lawyer!” Nott snapped. “They’re all stupid anyway.”

“Let it be noted for the record that Theodore Hinch, formerly known as Nott, has declined to have a lawyer present,” Kingsley said. He looked at Nott. “Did you want to say anything further about being set-up, or shall we discuss the robbery?”

“Why are you holding me here? Why am I not in Ministry custody?” Nott/Hinch demanded.

“Mr Hinch, the Ministry holding cells are out of commission, as you must be aware,” Kingsley said.

“They’re holding people in Warwick,” Hinch said.

“That’s true,” Kingsley said, “but you’re here to protect you.”

“Protect me?” he sneered. “From what?”

“You stole from the Ministry,” Kingsley said patiently. “A vanishing cabinet was found on your property. It is our case that you used it to steal rare and valuable artefacts from the Ministry – ”

“Rare and valuable? Nobody cares about that stuff except me, you know. That doesn’t mean I stole it.”

“You had had a vault built to receive the goods you stole,” Kingsley went on. “The prosecution will be positing that you set the fire that destroyed the Ministry. There were six deaths – ”

“Six deaths? Who the fuck died? And you’re fucking blaming me for setting the Ministry fire?”

“Six deaths, and a number of injuries,” Kingsley said firmly. “You are now being held on charges of murder, arson and treason, as well as theft, criminal damage – ”

Hinch began to laugh. “This is a joke, right?”

Kingsley sat back in his seat.

“I read the papers,” Hinch said. “Some kid set the fire. He left a suicide note. Try again.”

“We have reason to believe the note was a fake,” Kingsley said. “The boy’s mother, however, killed herself due to grief. That could lead to a further charge – ”

“She was a fucking murderer! She admitted that! I read the papers, Shacklebolt. You’re playing me, but you picked the wrong man.”

Kingsley stood up. “No game here, Mr Hinch. I just wanted you to know the charges laid against you. You need time to prepare your defence before your case comes before the Wizengamot – ”

“Oh, you’re going to try me in England, are you?” Hinch sneered.

“Certainly,” Kingsley said. “We’ll be providing additional security, of course. The full charges against you will be in the press shortly. You’ve caused grief to a lot of people. Hundreds of others have had their working life disrupted. You can’t expect that people won’t be – angry.”

“You have no evidence against me at all for arson,” Hinch said, leaning back in his chair. “And
I’ve no doubt when the paperwork comes through showing that I was authorised to look after Ministry property, you’re going to feel a giant tit, Shacklebolt.”

Kingsley gave him a slow smile. “Is that what you think will happen?”

“I know what happened. I have nothing to worry about.”

Kingsley stood there, and rocked on his heels, relaxed.

A flicker of something passed over Hinch’s face.

“Who do you think told us about your underground vault, Mr Hinch?” he said silkily.

Hinch’s face tightened.

“How many people knew about it, hmm?”

“Those fucking goblins,” Hinch said. “This is all to spite me, isn’t it? Late payment – ”

“Oh, I think murder of their colleagues would be a much stronger motive,” Kingsley said, “but they didn’t tell us. Of course, your wards weren’t activated as you hadn’t paid your bills. You must have suspected that there was something wrong with ‘your inheritance’ when you couldn’t get access to the family vaults, surely?”

Nott’s face was beginning to look thunderous. “Are you telling me I am not my father’s son?”

“I thought that was patently clear. The whole world will know that shortly.”

“My mother is a respectable woman.”

“Oh, very pleasant, I understand,” Kingsley said. “My representatives have talked to her, of course.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“Well, you can ask her yourself if you like,” Kingsley said, “I’ll grant her visiting rights. A man likes to know who fathered him, I suppose. Of course, you may prefer not to know. It wouldn’t bother me, but – ” Kingsley shrugged.

“What the hell are you implying now?” Hinch demanded.

Kingsley leant in. “You can’t expect your Pureblood buddies to support you, you know. You wouldn’t have.”

Hinch leapt to his feet, the chains around his arms and legs jangling. “What the fuck are you saying, you lying bastard?”

The two at the door inched forward, pointing their wands.

“Oh, I’m not the bastard,” Kingsley grinned. He looked Hinch up and down, and leant forward again. “I’m not a half-blood either,” he added. “Not that it would matter if I was. My friends wouldn’t desert me.” He patted Hinch on the shoulder and sauntered to the door.

“You’re lying.”

Kingsley looked round. “Oh no, my friends wouldn’t care – ”
“Sod your fucking friends!”

“Oh,” Kingsley said. “The half-blood thing? Your Mum confirmed it. She never got on with your Dad. You knew that though, right? And when I say ‘Dad’…. Clever woman, forced to marry a Pureblood moron? With your brains, are you really pretending you never suspected?”

“You’re lying. She wouldn’t do that to me.”

Kingsley looked at him. “To be fair, I understand you were an accident,” he said. “Born dead on nine months after the wedding, weren’t you? I’d have a fling too, the night before, if I was being forced into a marriage against my will. Well, non-stop for weeks before, if I loved someone else…”

Hinch’s fists were clenched.

“Not that any of that makes any difference to your friends in high places,” Kingsley said smoothly. “You aren’t a Pureblood, and that’s all that counts.”

Hinch sat down again. “Lucius Malfoy did this, didn’t he? I bet his shit of a son found out. Bloody journalists. Told his father, did he? And Lucius bloody Malfoy thinks he can turn his nose up at me!”

“That ‘shit of a son’ is dating my mother, so I’d watch your tongue if I were you. I wouldn’t worry about Lucius, though, he’s got problems of his own.” He reached for the door handle.

“His queer grandson been caught at it in public? Even Purebloods have black sheep.” His eyes dropped insultingly over Kingsley.

“Oh, quite,” Kingsley agreed easily. “I’m sure his grandson will do exactly as he likes. I don’t think his grandfather’s approval has ever been a consideration, and I don’t suppose the opinion of a man in Azkaban is going to bother him.”

There was a silence.

Kingsley opened the door, and was just stepping out.

“Lucius Malfoy is in Azkaban?”

“Hmm?” Kingsley looked up. “Oh, back in on a murder charge. Came in from the French Ministry, so I’ll have to look it up, I suppose. I have an international role here,” he explained. “Not too fussed. I’m glad to have him out of the way, to be honest. I’m sure we both agree it’s not nice having Death Eater scum in the family. Oh, that must be one little glimmer of light for you! You’re not related to a Death Eater after all.” He raised an eyebrow at Hinch. “My mother always said to be thankful for small mercies. Anyway, Malfoy’s nicely out of the picture. Mrs Atkins over at the Ministry saw to his arrest and transfer, so there’s no hurry. Did you want to see your mother? I gather she’s a bit anxious about seeing you, but blood is thicker than water and all that, hmm? Anyway, let the guards know. Don’t want anyone thinking we don’t treat our prisoners well.”

And he turned and left.

Hermione blinked as the cameras flared. She was standing on the steps of Hogwarts, Benningdean
just behind her shoulder, the chief elf of Hogwarts on one side, looking a trifle uncomfortable, and Ragnok, something approximating a smile lifting the dourness of his face, on her other. The Great Hall had been used as a meeting place for the Wizengamot, and the Beings Equality Law had been passed that afternoon.

At the bottom of the steps, Ron and Harry stood in the crowd that had gathered to celebrate.

“I’m so proud of her,” Ron said to Harry, beaming and waving at his wife. “Isn’t she amazing? I wish I could do something with my life that could change the course of history –”

Harry burst out laughing.

Ron looked at him, and then a grin spread on his face. “I suppose we did something, huh?”

Harry bumped his shoulder. “Yeah,” he chuckled. “She is amazing, though,” he said, looking at Hermione, “you’re absolutely right. Gonna have another brilliant kid, eh?”

Ron grinned. “I’m really chuffed. Oh, sorry –”

“No,” Harry said. “A new life is never something to be sorry about. It’s just –”


“Yeah,” Ron said.

You’ve got visitors,” the guard said, “look lively.”

Lucius raised his eyes from the book he was reading, and then stood up suddenly. “Nanette!”

“Monsieur Malfoy,” Nanette said, her eyes lowered.

“Yer grandson’s throwing up; half of them do after the crossing,” the guard laughed.

“Oh dear,” Lucius said, watching Nanette intently.

“I’ll bring ‘im along when e’s done,” the guard said. “E’ll be ‘avin to go back agin before he’s ‘ad ‘alf a mo’ wiv you.”

“I’m grateful for your assistance,” Nanette said, slipping the guard a small purse.

“What on earth are you doing here?” Lucius said stiffly, when they were alone.

Nanette walked forward, pulling a bag out of her pocket. She unpacked fresh bread, and French cheese, smoked ham, grapes and two plates, wine and glasses, and set them on the table.

“They didn’t allow a knife, I’m afraid,” she said, tearing off a small bit of bread and using a spoon to scoop out some soft camembert, before taking it to sit on the edge of the bed. “I won’t be able to leave the food,” she said sadly, “so please have some.”
Lucius looked at her, and helped himself too.

“You shouldn’t have come.”

“I needed to find what else you needed,” she said. She pulled three books out of the bag. “I’m allowed to leave these, and these,” she said, pulling out some parchment, “and the guard seems willing to send them by owl for a fee, which I’ve paid.” Nanette dropped her voice. “Harry said two of the guards are Monsieur Shacklebolt’s men, to watch out for you, but I didn’t know which ones. I do not think it can be that guard, but – he was the one who was here,” she shrugged.

“You shouldn’t be having to deal with guards! I’m very cross with you for coming,” Lucius said. “Have they changed the rules? I thought only family could come.”

“The same,” she agreed, “but Scorpius agreed to escort me. He’s pretending to be sick,” she added.

“Do you have everything planned?” his lips curled into a smile at last.

She shook her head. “If I could plan everything, you wouldn’t be here,” she said quietly.

Lucius took a grape and ate it.

“Harry brought us up here,” she said. “He’s furious about this,” she said, waving a hand to indicate the prison. “We’ll get you out.”

Lucius felt something settle in his chest. When Harry had appeared in the boat, he’d been so shocked that he hadn’t really taken in the meaning of it: that Potter wasn’t abandoning him. Now to have Nanette here….he could not help thinking that Narcissa had never visited him, not once, in all his years of incarceration.

It was an unsettling thought.

Footsteps sounded in the corridor.

“Scorpius brought me,” she said again. “I’m pretending to be his fiancée, and they allowed it. Be nice to him.”

Lucius raised an eyebrow.

“Please?” she said, leaning forward and putting a hand on his knee.

Lucius looked at it. He was wearing a rough prison robe, which he knew would only be washed once a week. He knew he smelt already, and that his hair was greasy.

And still she touched him.

The door rattled, and Lucius stood up.

“Scorpius,” he said, as his grandson entered. Stiffly, he walked forward, and held out his hand.

Scorpius came forward awkwardly and shook it.

“Fifteen minutes,” the guard said, casting a glance over the meal on the table.

“Help yourself,” Lucius spread a hand towards it.

“Oh, I will,” the guard grinned, plucking up the whole bunch of grapes and biting one off. “Tasty.”
He headed out the door.

Scorpius slid his hands into his pockets.

“Thank you for coming,” Lucius said, “and for bringing Nanette.”

Scorpius shrugged. “Harry brought us up to Scotland. What can I do for you, Grandfather?” he asked abruptly.

“You can take care of this young woman, and ensure she keeps out of trouble,” Lucius said, staring at Nanette.

She grinned at him. “You’re not supposed to give him such a hard task,” she tutted. “Andy and Scorpius have taken very good care of me, anyway, since I moved into the flat. But look,” she said, “we haven’t much time and I need to ask you some questions. I’m going to France to see Madame Benôit – ”

“You are not!” Lucius exclaimed. He paused. “They have a case against me?” he deduced.

Nanette and Scorpius exchanged looks.

“There are two avenues to get you out,” Scorpius said, talking fast. “One is to discredit Atkins, but that’s going to take time. The time of death isn’t known precisely, so in terms of an alibi, it’s pretty difficult. The paperwork is saying that Madame Benôit says you came and threatened her, after his death. I take it that isn’t true?”

“I visited once to pay condolences,” Lucius said.

“And there is another new witness who says he saw you near the place the body was found.”

Lucius sat down slowly. “So. Atkins was cleverer than I anticipated. She planned all along to have some ‘insurance’ to frame me.” He looked up. “Don’t waste your time on me – ”

“And you can stop that silly talk at once,” Nanette said sharply.

Scorpius dragged in a breath, as his grandfather turned his head to Nanette. He edged closer protectively.

But Nanette stepped over and dropped down on the cold stone beside Lucius, a hand on his knee. “Monsieur,” she said gently, “do not despair. We will not give up.”

There was a moment’s silence.

Then Lucius’ hand patted hers for a second, and he stood, raising her to her feet, and then turning so that she sat in the chair.

“Please let us ask some questions,” she said. “You will not be able to stop me going to France, but you could make it easier for me.”

“You know you are impossible?” Lucius said, but there was a gentleness in his rebuke, a tenderness, that Scorpius hadn’t known his grandfather was capable of.

“Yes,” she said, “and I was very rude, and I am sorry, but now will you tell me exactly when you last saw Monsieur Benôit, and what was said between you and Madame?”

Lucius answered her questions, and the ones that followed.
The guard came again.

“Au revoir, Lucius,” Nanette, said, picking up her bag. “We will visit again as soon as we are allowed. And Scorpius and I both have copies of the same books, so we will write and discuss our thoughts on them, yes? You choose which one to read first. This nice gentleman is going to deliver our letters,” she smiled at the guard.

“No personal stuff allowed,” he warned.

“Oui, you have told me,” she nodded, giving the guard a sunny smile which seemed to dazzle him. “I will send you a copy of the books if you would like to join in the discussions?”

“Wot, me?” The young man reeled a bit. “No fanks, love. Er. Miss. Not much the reading sort.”

“Well, you are very kind,” she said, a gentle hand on his arm.

Lucius laid one on Scorpius’ as he was exiting.

Scorpius glanced from it, then met his grandfather’s eyes.

“Thank you,” Lucius said.

Scorpius nodded. “I’ll take care of her.”

That evening, Scorpius lay in a tangle of limbs on the sofa, panting. He dragged the money bag that had fallen out of his pocket as they’d torn each other’s clothes off out from under his shoulder blade, and slung it on the floor.

“That’s been sticking in me the whole time: I bet I’ve got the clasp indented on my back,” he said, turning for Andy to look.

Andy bent over him, fingers smoothing, and bent to kiss it. “Yup,” he whispered against Scorpius’ skin. “Interesting shape.” His tongue traced the mark.

“Only you could find something erotic – ah!” he arched, as Andy shifted, tweaking his nipple and sliding behind him in one move.

“I can find everything about you erotic,” Andy said, fingers trailing across Scorpius’ sticky belly. His hand lifted to Scorpius’ mouth, and Scorpius sucked them in, lavishing attention on them, his mouth forming a smile as he felt Andy start to undulate behind him.

“Again?” Andy said. “You’ll be the death of me,” but his other hand was sliding underneath Scorpius, pulling him tight against him.

“We’re going to be apart,” Scorpius said, turning his head at last and kissing his lover.

“Going off with a beautiful woman, too. Should I be jealous?”

“I think Grandfather would kill me if I touched her. Slowly and painfully,” Scorpius said, shifting round a little to face Andy.

Andy’s hand wandered down his hip. “Does it bother you?”
“That my Grandfather’s in love with a kid younger than me?”

“That your Grandfather is showing more care for her than he ever did for you,” Andy said gently, his other hand stroking Scorpius’ face.

Scorpius inched back a bit and sighed. “I thought we were going to have more sex.”

“We can if you want,” Andy said, just looking at him.

“You know me too well.”

“I hope so.”

Scorpius laughed, and brushed his lips across Andy’s. Caring, not caressing.

“So?” Andy prompted.

Scorpius reached back with one hand for his wand, which was on the floor, and pointed it at the throw which was draped over the arm of a chair across the room. It flew over, opening as it came, and settled on top of them. He snuggled in a bit, one hand stroking over Andy’s chest, toying distractedly with his nipple ring.

Andy’s hand dropped to his flank, holding him.

“Less than I thought,” Scorpius said at last. “I – I’m worried for them. Both of them. How can it work?”

“Because of the age gap?”

“Yeah. And – she’s so innocent, and he’s – not.”

Andy gulped a laugh. “Nicely put.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yeah, I do. But she knows her own mind, doesn’t she? She’s got this sort of determination…”

“Yeah. And she can twist him round her finger.”

“Was that what she was doing today?”

“Oh yes. And he knows it, that’s the thing,” Scorpius said. “And he lets her.”

“How was it there?” Andy asked, pulling the blanket up a bit to cover Scorpius’ shoulders.

“Horrible,” Scorpius shuddered.

He was quiet.

Andy just held him.

“I’m glad I went,” Scorpius said at last. He shifted again, and Andy flowed with him, anticipating, until Scorpius was settled with his head against Andy’s chest. “It – it’s cold,” he said. “Cold because there’s no heating, and the wind howls around, and cold because you feel so isolated, like you’re not part of the world any longer. The guard – he just came in and ate food off Grandfather’s plate – stuff Nanette had brought him – which they’d already told us would be confiscated at the
end, so he was going to get it anyway – but he took the grapes, and ate them all, just because he could.”

“What did Lucius do?”

“Nothing. I didn’t know it was possible to do nothing with dignity, but that’s what he did. It spoke of all the years of it,” he said. He was quiet. “I don’t know how he came out and was the man he is. How he wasn’t ground down.”

“He’s a Malfoy,” Andy said, a slight smile in his voice as his hand soothed down Scorpius’ spine. “You don’t do ground down.”

Scorpius grunted a laugh, for the first time feeling a connection with his grandfather. He’d had enough people trying to get at him over his relationship with Andy, and his father too had had to work hard to build up respect again. Maybe Andy was right.

“And I keep thinking – he was there - he got through all that – he was there because of what he believed in,” he said. “And yet – he’s working with Harry.”

“He started doing that because he still held his old views,” Andy said.

At Scorpius’ quizzical look, he went on, “Not the Pureblood thing, necessarily, but, you know, the importance of the family line.”

Scorpius jerked. “He – do you think he and Nanette will have kids? Merlin’s scrote!”

“None of our business,” Andy said, “though – it would let you off the hook, eh?”

“True,” Scorpius smiled, and then waggled his eyebrows. “So, should we be encouraging them, then?”

“I don’t think, from what you’ve said, that they need any encouragement, do they?”

“Also true,” Scorpius’ laughed, then sobered. “Seriously, though, shouldn’t we be – I don’t know – protecting Nanette? I mean, she’s been through so much, and maybe she’s just making a bit of a hero of him, or something.”

“Well, she’s just seen him in jail – that’s hardly heroic.”

“For something he didn’t do. Got to add to the mystique.”

Andy shrugged. “I think we can’t make their decisions for them – what if we’d let people do that for us?”

“Good point,” Scorpius agreed.

“But talking of encouragement,” Andy said, and a finger trailed down Scorpius’ spine, teasing along the furrow separating the rounded globes of his behind.

Scorpius laughed, and pressed into the touch.
The door opened.

Harcourt’s eyebrows rose as he took in the occupants of the room.

“Mrs Weasley,” he said, coming forward smoothly and shaking her hand. “Minister,” he shook his hand in turn. “Mr Shacklebolt? I don’t think I’ve had the pleasure, Sir.”

Kingsley grasped his hand firmly and returned the handshake. “No. I’ve seen you in action, though. Impressive.”

“Thank you,” Harcourt said, sitting down.

They were in a room at The Leaky Cauldron.

Ron had kept two rooms furnished and available for meetings, and various Ministry departments, as well as other companies, used the service. Although Ron had kept the price minimal, people invariably chose to come in and book time slots in person at the bar, finding time to have a pint and a chat with Ron at the same time, and again, either before or after the meeting they did the same. As well as the income generated, Ron found it useful to see who came and went, who was friendly with whom, and which colleagues couldn’t stand each other.

Not to mention, many people just continued their discussions at the bar.

“We wanted to discuss a prosecution with you,” Benningdean said.

“Oh yes?” Harcourt slipped one leg over the other. “My cases are normally assigned in the department by Mrs Atkins.”

“We’re aware of that,” Benningdean nodded. “This is a high-profile case, and involves treason, which is why I am involved.”

“This is the Nott case, is it? You’re charging him with treason? You must have some good evidence,” Harcourt said, looking with interest from one to the other.

“As you know,” Kingsley said, “for security reasons, Nott is being held out of the country. A number of people died, and there are hundreds of Ministry employees who’ve been severely inconvenienced. He’s a potential target for retribution. Or elimination.”

Harcourt sat forward. “Hold on. You think someone might try to kill him to shut him up?”

Hermione gave a brief smile. “I told you he didn’t miss a trick.”

Harcourt glanced at her, and then said, “Such a suggestion means that you’re taking the treason allegation seriously. And that you think he had co-conspirators.”

There was a moment’s silence.

“I think it appropriate to tell you, at this juncture, that being involved in this case is potentially dangerous,” Kingsley said. “Would you like to listen to the details? If you would prefer to withdraw, that’s perfectly understandable.”

“You’ve already told me enough to make me a potential danger to you,” Harcourt commented.
“That’s true,” Benningdean said, “but we have to start somewhere. Also, if we feel that you are a risk, we’ll memory charm you.”

“That’s illegal.”

“I’m sure you’re aware that that isn’t the case in situations relating to Wizarding Security,” Hermione said.

“State vs Oneidan, 1734?” Harcourt said, after a moment.

“Exactly,” Hermione nodded. “But it was our intention to tell you, as we have done, beforehand.”

“Good of you,” Harcourt said dryly.

“Treason is a dirty business,” Benningdean said. “I’ll be blunt with you: I’m going to ask you some questions. I’m going to ask you to allow Master Snape to use Legilimency on you. If we’re satisfied, I’ll lay out our case. If, at the end of the discussion, you decide you don’t want to take it, that’s perfectly fine.”

“But you’ll Obliviate me.”

“Yes.”

“Why isn’t Mrs Weasley taking the case?” he said, looking across at her. “She has an excellent legal mind.”

“Thanks,” she grinned. She brushed her loose robe tighter against her body.

“Oh! My – my congratulations, Mrs Weasley,” he said, a slight flush blooming on his cheeks.

“Thanks,” she said again.

“Are you expecting this to be a long case?” he asked. “Or are you – you’re not unwell, I hope?”

“It’s not the length of the case,” Hermione shook her head. “I certainly hope that it would be over before the baby is due, but there are other considerations. Firstly, I didn’t expect the Beings Equality Law to pass so quickly, and so I ruled myself out initially on that score. That made me consider who would be best to take the case. You came to mind at once.”

“Thank you?” he questioned.

She gave him a quick smile. “You’re brilliant at what you do, and more ruthless than I am.”

At his raised brows, she went on, “It’s a compliment. And a necessity: you’ll need it. Nott and ….another conspirator….will need every ounce of your quick wit and incisive manner. You’ll be better at it than me.”

“You’re handing me the sort of case that can make a career,” he said slowly. “Are you expecting me to fail?”

“I sincerely hope you won’t,” she said.

“Forgive me, you’re more advanced in the profession than I, but, surely…”

“I don’t need it,” she said.
“No?”

“I’m changing careers,” she said. “The BEL was my last case, and I’m very happy to leave on that note.”

“But – what are you planning on doing?” He paused, and rested his chin on his hand. “I’m sorry, that’s none of my business; but I’m very surprised: it will be a sad loss to the profession.”

“Can we get this mutual ego massage over?” Snape said. “You are both undoubtedly good at what you do. We wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

Hermione laughed.

Harcourt gave her a startled look. “You know each other,” he said.

“Apart from having taught her for six years?” Snape queried.

“Don’t be mean,” Hermione swatted Snape’s arm with casual ease. “We do,” she said. “A little. The thing is, there are personal issues involved here too; I don’t want them clouding the case.”

“Personal issues in treason?”

“There are wider issues,” Kingsley said. “Shall we explain? Are you willing to proceed?”

“You know I am,” Harcourt said. “You’re promising me the case of the century.”

“More than you know,” Benningdean nodded. “Alright. I’ve looked up your records,” he went on, waving to a folder on his desk. “You’re a Pureblood.”

“Is that relevant?” Harcourt’s brows drew together.

“Yes,” Kingsley said flatly.

“I was only seven when Voldemort was defeated,” Harcourt said, puzzled. “I had no involvement at all in the war.”

“Your parents were out of the country,” Benningdean stated.

“I’m an adult. My parents views are entirely irrelevant,” Harcourt said firmly.

“Your mother is an Arithmancy expert employed by the Russian Wizarding Consortium for the last forty years,” Kingsley went on, as if he hadn’t spoken. “Your father teaches at the St Petersburg Wizarding Academy.”

“Yes. And they’ve had quite enough issues interfacing with the changes in Russian society during that period to have much concern about what was happening back here.”

“Do you believe Purebloods are more properly wizards than Muggleborns?” Kingsley asked.

“I have the highest respect for Mrs Weasley, who is, I believe, Muggleborn.”

“Funny, isn’t it, how we’ve both chosen a profession that we could actually do in the Muggle world,” she said.

Harcourt’s head swung round sharply.
“I know we’re dealing with Magical Beings, but we don’t actually use magic ourselves in what we do,” she shrugged.

“I’d never thought of that,” he said, slowly. He turned back to look at Benningdean and Kingsley. “Are you saying this is about Pureblood supremacy? That Nott destroyed the Ministry because of that? Is he trying to be a new Dark Lord?”

“I don’t think Nott is,” Benningdean said.

There was a pause.

“But you think he has a co-conspirator, who is,” Harcourt mused. “You –” he looked from one to the other. “This has to be someone from the Ministry,” he said. Another moment. “Someone from within our department, or you wouldn’t be taking so many precautions…”

They were all silent, allowing him to work it through.

“You haven’t even brought in the Head of – you suspect Mrs Atkins? Dorothy Atkins?”

“Yes,” Benningdean said. “Are you interested in taking the case?”

Snape walked over to Ron at the bar.

“All finished?” Ron asked, eyes taking in that Snape was alone.

“Yes. I left the others chatting. I’d like to see you and Hermione privately, when you have a moment, Ron.”

Ron raised an eyebrow. “Sure; wait a mo?” he said to Snape, whilst nodding to a customer who was trying to get his attention. “Pint of ale, Phineas? Usual for lunch? Veg today are roast spuds, runner beans and cauli cheese. Sound good?”

Ron pulled the pint expertly, and with a scrawl on a piece of parchment by the till, the food order winged its way to the kitchen. He came back to Snape. “Mione’s staying here for lunch today: we’re about to have it in our quarters. Want to join us? Or is it too soon?”

“Time is of the essence, actually,” Snape said. “Thank you.”

Ron gave him a sharp look, but nodded, went and spoke to a young witch with spiky green hair who was behind the bar with him, and then came to the end of the counter, lifting the flap for Snape to follow him through.

Ten minutes later they were sitting at a small scrubbed table in a neat kitchen somewhere at the top of The Leaky.

Snape had taken stock of his surroundings as they settled to eat.

“Food’s from downstairs,” Ron said. “Seems pointless to make our own. We order take-out sometimes though – there’s an excellent Chinese that delivers to the Muggle side, and doesn’t ever seem surprised.”
“This is very good,” Snape said, savouring the very English taste of steak and kidney pie.

It was funny how the temperature of a region affected what you ate so much. They never ate this sort of food at Villa Olorosa.

“Got to keep Mione’s iron levels up,” Ron smiled warmly across at his wife.

“You’ve been keeping well?” Snape asked.

“Yes, I seem to be over the worst,” Hermione said, tucking in with relish.

“You implied before that you’d had to be careful,” Snape prompted.

“They were just a bit concerned at the beginning, which is why I kept it quiet for so long,” Hermione shrugged.

“Well, I was scared shitless,” Ron said bluntly. “She fainted twice. That I know of,” he said, giving his wife a look that said he clearly thought she might have been holding out worse on him.

“Anyway,” he said, “what can we do for you, Severus?”

Snape put down his knife and fork.

And paused.

“I know I offered once to give you anything you asked,” Ron said, his eyes narrowing. “Have you come to call in the favour?”

“Yes,” Snape said.

Ron and Hermione exchanged a glance.

“Very well,” Ron said. “What is it?”

“Just like that?” Snape looked disbelieving.

“You saved our son’s life. I haven’t forgotten.”

“I might ask you to do something illegal.”

“You might,” Ron said, wiping a piece of pastry crust around the gravy on his plate, spearing it onto a piece of kidney, and popping it into his mouth.

“That – you’d just go along with that?”

“You must really want what you’re about to ask for,” Ron said, “and it must be something you can’t get for yourself, otherwise you’re far too proud not to have done so. I’d be surprised if it was something illegal, because you would probably have insisted on seeing me without Mione.”

“What is it, Severus?” Hermione asked, putting her hand on his arm.

Snape explained.

Snape could not help experiencing a moment’s enjoyment as he saw the hastily masked horror on
Hannah Longbottom’s face as she opened the door.

“P- Professor Snape!”

He could see everything she knew of him washing over her face in ten seconds flat.

“Mrs Longbottom,” he said, inclining his head.

“Who is it, dear?” a voice called.

Hermione had mentioned the step-mother was insatiably nosy.

He’d use that if he needed to.

The door pulled a little wider, and a rotund woman stood there, looking him up and down.

Hannah seemed incapable of speech.

“Severus Snape, Madam,” he said. “Hannah was my student at Hogwarts.”

“S- Snape?” Mrs Abbott said. “Professor Snape?”

“It’s a long time since I taught,” Snape said wryly. “Mrs Abbott, is it?”

“Oh, I do beg your pardon! Elaine Abbott,” she said, holding out her hand and at the same time stepping back as Snape took it. “Do come in! Hannah, whatever were you thinking, leaving the Professor on the doorstep?”

Soon after, they were ensconced in the parlour. “I had a very good lunch, with Mr and Mrs Weasley,” Snape said, declining cake but accepting coffee. “Ron and Hermione,” he said, looking across at Hannah.

She went bright red.

“Oh! Hermione is pregnant as well!” Mrs Abbott said, “Such a comfort for Hannah to have someone she knows so well having a child at the same time!”

“Indeed,” Snape said.

“So sad that Neville…” Mrs Abbott began, dabbing at her eyes.

“Elaine –” Hannah sighed.

“I can understand how upsetting his loss must be,” Snape said. “I was in court when Mr Longbottom so cleverly pointed us to Hogwarts, and what was happening to Mr and Mrs Weasley’s son. I have to admit, he was never a brilliant student in my class, but as a man – of honour, and courage – I saw it in his teens, and on that day: he was exceptional.”

Hannah’s mouth had dropped open.

“You – you were there?” Hannah’s hand fluttered.

“In court? Yes. And I went to Hogwarts, too, and saw how accurately Neville had given us directions to allow us to rescue Hugo.” He looked across at Hannah, and then allowed his gaze to encompass Mrs Abbott. “If your child has an iota of his courage, as I’m sure he will, you’ll be a very proud mother and grandmother.”
Hannah’s face went pale, and then red.

“You’re too kind,” Mrs Abbott started saying to Snape, and then, sharply, “Are you alright, Hannah?”

“I feel a trifle faint,” she said, putting a hand to her cheek.

“I’m so sorry, Prof – Mr Snape, perhaps you ought to go – ” Mrs Abbott said, bustling to her feet and coming over to her step-daughter.

Snape stayed in his chair. “Actually,” he said, “I came to offer Hannah my services. Mrs Weasley said that you were a little peaky, and that the hospital were concerned that you weren’t eating enough.”

“Just my thoughts exactly,” Mrs Abbott nodded. “I was twice her size when I had my first, I’m sure.”

“I do make nutritive brews to help women at such times,” Snape said.

“St. Mungo’s gave me some – ” Hannah began.

“Yes, generic ones, no doubt. Not totally useless,” Snape said, condescendingly, “but obviously there is no comparison to a custom-made potion.”

“Goodness, that’s so kind of you! Hannah, what do you say to Master Snape?”

“You are under no obligation to accept any potion from me,” Snape said, ignoring Mrs Abbott and looking directly at Hannah. “Mrs Weasley asked me to make her a potion - and she has given me permission to tell you that, as I’m sure you appreciate all my work is in confidence - and she mentioned your situation. It may be that there is nothing I can do to help, or indeed, that you don’t need any help at all, but, out of respect for your husband – here I am.”

Hannah looked at him.

Snape stared back.

Mrs Abbott opened her mouth.

“Hermione is – she was brilliant at potions. Doesn’t she make her own?” Hannah stammered.

“There is a subtle art to understanding the needs, as well as creating a perfect custom potion,” Snape said. “Mrs Weasley chose to follow other avenues after school, and while I am sure she has been quite capable of brewing standard potions for her family throughout the years – indeed, I would feel that the years I spent teaching were wasted if pupils did not go on to do so – some situations call for an expert. And of course, I would never recommend that a pregnant woman make potions: there are too many potential dangers to the child.”

“Oh, yes,” Mrs Abbott said. “I knew a witch once – ”

“Mrs Abbott,” Snape interrupted, standing up and stretching out his hand. “It’s been an education to meet you. I’m sure Mrs Longbottom,” he looked at Hannah, “is very grateful for your continuing support. But we need to have a lengthy chat to help me construct the potion accurately, and I can see,” he glanced down at her ankles, just showing under her robe, “that you’d benefit from putting your feet up for an hour. I’ll send something along, if you’d like, to help with the oedema.”
“Well I – that is – how kind,” Mrs Abbott said, hauling herself to her feet from her position next to Hannah. “I don’t know how you realised a lie-down was just what I needed – ”

“Every afternoon for at least an hour,” Snape recommended, leading Mrs Abbott across the room, “a pillow to elevate them will make a big difference,” he added, as he opened the door, and with a slight bow, shut it behind her.

“Did – did you put a - a compulsion spell on her?” Hannah demanded, rising to her feet herself.

“You put one on Harry,” Snape said smoothly, walking across the room and sitting down again. “I assumed you had no problem with them. Besides, it was true: she’ll feel a lot better for it. She’s obviously entirely wrapped up in your pregnancy. Idolised your husband, did she?”

“My husband was an admirable man,” Hannah said tightly.

“Yes, he was,” Snape agreed. “And every bit as fair as you. What is she going to say when your child is born with black hair, do you think?”

Hannah jumped.

“Do sit down,” Snape said.

“You – Harry told you – ”

“Yes, you know he did.”

“I’m not giving up my baby!”

“I’m delighted to hear it.”

“I’m not – what?”

“Let us not beat about the bush, Mrs Longbottom. I’m told you have no interest in marrying Harry. I find that hard to believe, but I understand that you might play him along a little – ”

“How - how dare you!”

“I don’t think there is any point in us prevaricating: we both have too much to lose.”

“What do you have to lose?” she demanded. “You’ll have everything.”

“You’re obviously working under a misapprehension,” Snape said. “Harry has terminated our relationship, on the off-chance that you will decide you need him.”

She sat down suddenly. “I’m not going to marry Harry!”

Snape gave her a quizzical look.

“I – he’s nice, of course. But – for one, he’s – ” she glanced at Snape, and away. “He’s gay. Surprising as it may seem, Neville and I –.” She bent her head, then looked up, and said, fiercely, “It was very good between us. In bed. Neville was – ”

Snape held up his hand. “Forgive me, Mrs Longbottom, I’ll take your word for it. I have no desire to hear the details of your sex life.”

“Well,” she said, after a moment, “I have no intention of settling for second best.”
“If I were a generous man, I would say that I’m sure Harry would try to make you happy –”

“You don’t understand. He wouldn’t succeed. He isn’t Neville,” she said.

“When your grief is a little less intense –”

“No.”

Snape again just watched her.

“Look,” she said, “I don’t know why you’re pushing Harry on me, but I don’t want him. I’ve known him for nearly forty years. I never fancied him, not once, in all that time.”

“And yet you slept with him,” Snape murmured.

“It – look, I’m sorry if he was in a relationship with you then – he never said, or I wouldn’t have – I didn’t even fancy him – I’m sorry – I just – he was a friend, and we were drunk, and I hurt so badly, and he held me, and I – I just wanted to forget, for a moment, and –” her shoulders rose awkwardly in an embarrassed shrug. “I’m sorry,” she said again.

It was exactly as Harry had said, Snape thought. Something settled in him.

“Nevertheless, we both have a problem,” he said. “The moment your child is born, rumours will start. And they won’t stop. They’ll affect you, and they’ll affect your child. I have a suggestion that I hope will help us both. Are you willing to listen?”

She looked at him.

And nodded.
Kingsley had called Harry and asked him to arrange a meeting for the earliest date when they could get as many as possible together, to discuss the court case.

Consequently Harry had had to extend the kitchen table to accommodate everyone, and the noise level was pretty deafening.

“Right,” Kingsley said, after banging his empty mug on the table to get silence. “I thought you’d all like to know that the case against Nott, or Hinch, as he now is, will be becoming before the Wizengamot next week.”

There were cheers of approval.

“What are the charges?” Percy asked.

“Treason, murder, attempted murder, arson and theft.”

“Whoa!” Charlie said. “Really? You have enough evidence to get him for all that?”

“Not genocide?” Minerva frowned.

Kingsley shook his head. “We wanted to go for that, but because there were elves and goblins as well as Muggle-borns in the building, we felt it would be harder to make the charge stick. Even though, of course, it’s maybe the most important part. But the bottom line is stopping it,” he shrugged.

“But they weren’t – I mean, I don’t suppose they even thought about the elves and goblins,” Charlie said. “It wasn’t aimed at them, was it?”

“That just hands a gift to the defence, though,” Hermione answered. “With the Beings Equality Law, at last their lives are recognised as having the same value as a humans’. Theo will argue that he has no desire to eliminate all house-elves or goblins, which is no doubt true, and that would weaken the prosecution’s case.”

“But three goblins were killed!” Andy said. “Don’t they count?”

“Yes, and that’s why he’ll stand trial for murdering them,” Hermione nodded.

“You’re charging him for the goblins’ deaths?” Bill asked. “They’ll be cheering in Gringotts.”

“As much as one could, given that three of their own have died,” Kingsley nodded. “As for the other charges, the theft is going to be the most straightforward: a number of items from the Department of Mysteries were found in his private vault at home. They’ve been confiscated, and his head of department has verified them, and has given a statement that they were taken without permission.”

“But how can you link him to the arson? The other charges all depend on it, don’t they?” Draco asked.

Kingsley nodded. “Yes. He’ll be charged with the murder of three humans and three goblins, and attempted murder of the last goblin, Forbin, and of all the humans and house elves in the building.”

“Wow. This is going to be ground-breaking,” Draco said. “Will there be any restrictions on the
“Press?”

“No. And it’s going to be more ground-breaking than you know,” Kingsley said, glancing at Severus.

“In what way?” Minerva asked, following the look.

“Severus has invented a new potion,” Kingsley explained, looking proudly at his lover. “I’m not going to go into details, because I don’t want to put any of you at risk. But it’s going to be big,” he added, grinning.

There were looks exchanged around the room.

“Won’t it be – open to criticism – to use something new on this case?” Minerva asked. “No offence, Severus.”

“No, I agree entirely. I personally know the accused, so I could be open to accusation from either side. But the potion has been used at two trials elsewhere in the world in the last month, and led to successful convictions. And I can demonstrate its effectiveness.”

“So I could look them up,” Draco said.

“If you can find them,” Snape nodded. “I don’t think there were any journalists at either trial, though,” he said, lips twitching.

“Really? But I could look up the court reports?”

“Of course,” Snape said.

“If you could just wait until the first day of trial, you might manage not to hinder this case,” Kingsley said.

“You want me to hide information?” Draco said, surprise and disapproval in his tone.

“I would have thought an editor usually ran a story when it was most topical,” Kingsley said. “It will be.”

“And I’ll give you the details of the other cases to ease you finding them, on the day we go to trial,” Snape said. “If you find it before, then it’s your decision.”

“Fair enough,” Draco said. He looked across the table at Hermione. “You’ll be prosecuting, I take it?”

“No. Harcourt is.”

“That bastard!” James swore.

“Mr Potter!” Minerva used her best Headmistress voice.


“Because – excuse me, Minerva – he is a bastard,” Hermione said. “We need someone ruthless.”

Several people snorted.

Kingsley turned to Harry. “You’re very quiet, Harry. Are you unhappy with this? I know Harcourt
was tough on you, but -"

“It isn’t that,” Harry said. “Harcourt – well, if it can’t be Hermione – then – he’s a good choice.”

“So?” Kingsley prompted.

“You – you’ve been working on this all this time?” Harry looked at Snape.

Snape inclined his head.

“You never said.”

“There wouldn’t have been any point in raising hopes, if I had not been successful.”

Harry stood up, picking up the kettle and filling it at the sink.

Mitty popped up beside him.

“Clean mugs?” Harry said to her, stroking Allie’s ears as he peeped out.

She nodded happily.

“Harry?” Ron said. “You alright, mate?”

Harry turned his head, looking surprised. “Yes, of course. What?”

“You went a bit silent there,” Ron explained.

“I – I’m grateful,” Harry said, setting the kettle on the stove, and finding the matches

“And?” Ron prompted.

“Is – I know this is huge, but – what about Ginny?” Harry said, turning to them. “I know we need to sort out – but – is she forgotten?”

All the Weasleys turned to look at Kingsley.

“No,” Kingsley said gently. “I’m hoping we’re going to catch in Atkins too. I need to talk to you about Ginny, which I’d planned to do after the meeting.” He looked at Harry. “The case of treason will come first. I’m sorry, but –”

“There are others of us, apart from Harry, who’re here because of Ginny,” Bill said. “Since when are only some people party to what’s going on?”

“We’ve had these meetings to keep everyone up-to-date,” Kingsley said, “so that everyone can contribute. But we’re at a critical point here, and I’m not willing to put you or the case at risk.”

“But you’re willing to put Harry at risk?” Bill said, with some sarcasm.

“I only told Kingsley yesterday about the potion I’d been working on,” Snape said quietly. “If what we plan works, I hope we’ll be able to get Nott for murdering your sister.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Charlie asked.

“Then we start again,” Kingsley said. “But Nott and Atkins will know that we’re after them.”

“Nott will be put away anyway, though, right?” George asked.
“It’s hard to see how the theft charge, at least, will not stick,” Kingsley said, “which means he’ll be in Azkaban. The element of surprise will be gone, but hopefully he won’t be able to do anything further, or have access to witnesses.”

“You have witnesses?” George said, leaning forward.

“What’s happening about Lucius?” Minerva asked, her voice softening a little as she glanced at Draco.

“Nothing,” Draco said without expression. “What is there to be done? Atkins was perfectly within her rights to throw him back into Azkaban.”

“It was trumped up,” Harry said sharply, turning from pouring boiling water into the huge teapot.

Draco shrugged.

“Scorpius’s gone to France with Nanette,” Andy said.

“You not worried about that?” Ron asked, waggling his eyebrows at Andy, trying to lighten the mood.

“I don’t know who’d kill him first, me or his grandfather,” Andy gave a quick chuckle in reply.

Harry could see some puzzled looks around the table, and leapt in. “How are thing’s going? Have they found out anything?” He reached round, two mugs in each hand, and plonked them on the table. “Help yourselves,” he said, turning back to get more.

“I’m sorry, what are they up to?” Minerva asked.

“Nanette’s going to talk to Benôit’s widow,” Harry said, after a glance at Andy. “She knows her, so it should be much easier for her to find out what this accusation is all about. As far as she knew, there was no suggestion of foul play, apart from Artur’s ‘Sight’, but she hadn’t really been following what was going on at the time. What with being forced into marriage, and all that.”

Draco was sitting with his head bowed.

Minerva glanced at him, and then to Kingsley. “Why were there charges suddenly laid against Lucius? You’ve seen them?”

“They apparently have a witness, who’s just come forward. Said he saw Lucius cast a spell on Benôit.”

“That’s a bit dodgy, isn’t it?” Percy said. “Why didn’t he come forward before?”

“Why indeed?” Kingsley agreed.

“A nice big bag of dosh came his way, no doubt,” Ron said.

“But Lucius hasn’t got an alibi?”

“It wasn’t clear when Benôit was found exactly when he’d died. Nobody had an alibi.”

“And now we have a date and time? That should help, surely?”

“It would if the French Ministry would release it,” Draco said at last, glancing across at Kingsley.
“But surely your father is entitled –”

“He’s entitled to nothing,” Draco said flatly. “He was on permanent parole. Atkins obviously decided he’d stopped being useful.”

Gloria reached out a hand, and touched his arm.

“I won’t let him down, Draco,” Harry said.

Draco’s head shot up.

“He’s my responsibility: I’ll make sure he gets out. I promise.”

“You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep,” Draco said.

“He didn’t kill Benôit: he shouldn’t be there,” Harry said, into the tension that had arisen around the table. “Your father said to use it to get Nott: when we’ve done that, I’ll get him out.”

“When did he say that?” Draco demanded.

“I went to see him on the boat to Azkaban –”

“You apparated onto a boat in the middle of the sea?” Percy said, disbelievingly.

“No, what d’you think I am?” Harry turned his head to look at his brother-in-law. “I landed in the water. But then I went onto the boat –”

“You could’ve rescued him,” Gloria’s eyes were narrowed.

“Yes, but –”

“I’m surprised at you,” Gloria said.

“Why?” Harry said, taken aback at the attack.

“I didn’t think you were that cruel –”

“I’m not some white-washed hero, you know,” Harry said tightly, “but as it happens, I did offer, and Lucius refused.”

Draco stared at him.

Harry should have told him sooner, he realised. “He’s probably safer there,” he said. “Kingsley’s got people watching him. I know it isn’t comfortable, but he’s not dead.”

Draco looked at him, and nodded slowly.

There was a bit of a silence. People sipped their tea.


“Potentially, yes,” Kingsley said. “I can’t release names.”

“This is feeling like a particularly unhelpful meeting,” Bill said sourly.

“I’m sorry. I thought you’d want to know the trial was about to start,” Kingsley said, “but I am not going to compromise it in any way. I thought you might want to come and see how it plays out.”
“Where is it to be held?” Gloria asked. “You surely aren’t going to do this one at Hogwarts? It sounds far too dangerous to risk the children?”

“Absolutely,” Kingsley nodded. “Given the need for security, it’s an issue. We haven’t decided on a location yet.”

“Why not use one of the old regional courts?” Minerva asked.

“Regional courts?” James queried. “I thought all cases were done in the Ministry – until the fire, that is?”

“Well, it wasn’t always that way,” Minerva said. “Did you not learn that in History of Magic?”

“Er – no?” James said, blushing.

“Certainly not from Binns,” Harry said under his breath.

“Might’ve been asleep,” Ron suggested to Harry, with a grin.

“Mr Weasley!” Minerva said, but her eyes were twinkling.

“There used to be regional courts everywhere. Then everything got centralized at the Ministry,” Hermione said. “I remember it being mentioned when I first started studying law, but I’ve never actually seen one of them. Do you think they still exist, Minerva?”

“Why did they stop being used?” Andy asked.

“Portkeys and apparition,” Snape said.

“What?” Charlie asked, leaning forward, freckled forearms on the table.

“Regional courts were necessary before the invention of portkeys and apparition. Once they were both in place, there was really no need for them.”

“Blimey, wasn’t there always apparition?” James asked. “I can’t imagine life without it.”

“Magic is always evolving,” Minerva said. “New spells, new potions, new ideas.”

“Rather slowly though,” Harry commented.

They all looked at him.

“Compared to Muggles: look at what they’ve invented in the last couple of hundred years. And here we are, with all this power, and what have we achieved in the same time?”

There was a silence.

“Well, Severus has been busy inventing: two new potions in the last couple of years,” Kingsley said, “and the Muggles can’t do what either of them do.”

“Kingsley –” Snape began.

“You know I didn’t mean to run down your achievements,” Harry gave Snape a quick smile. “It’s just – interesting, don’t you think? But anyway, I’m getting off the point. Sorry.”

“I’ll look into the old courts, Minerva. Good idea,” Kingsley said.
Shortly after, the meeting broke up. Several people shot off, others lingered talking.

James came over to his father. “Did I – what did Andy mean about Lucius?”

“What d’you mean?” Harry asked, innocently.

“He – he hasn’t really got a thing for Nanette, has he?” he pulled a face. “That’s totally gross.”

“Ahem,” Gloria coughed from behind him, where she’d been talking to Minerva.

Both women stared him up and down.

“What’s that, James?” Minerva asked.

James quailed.

“You have a problem with gay relationships, you have a problem when there’s a little bit of an age difference – I bet you’re utterly vanilla in the sack too,” Gloria said, dismissively.

“I – you –” James spluttered.

“Try to have a little imagination, dear,” Minerva said, at which James’ jaw literally dropped.

Harry was biting his lips to hold back a laugh.

“You might have known me in school, Professor,” James said tightly, “but you don’t know anything about my private life –”

“Och, that’s what all the students think,” Minerva shook her head. “You’d be surprised just how much the staff know about their pupils comings and goings, shall we say.”

“Minerva!” Harry choked at the inflection she’d put on the words.

“It’s no good you fancying you’d be better for Nanette,” Gloria said bluntly. “You wouldn’t be.”

James pulled himself up. “And why not?”

“What have you got to offer her?” Gloria asked.


He became aware that others in the room – Ron and Hermione, Charlie, Draco, Snape and Kingsley, were listening in.

“Well, that’s exactly it in a nutshell,” Gloria said, as if that settled it.

“Mother,” Kingsley said, “you’re interfering.”

“If us oldies aren’t fit for a bit of loving, at least we can give advice on it,” she sniffed.

“I never said –” James blushed.

“You might as well have,” Gloria said, “and if you think you’d like to live half your life without sex and a bit of warmth –”

“I didn’t say any such thing,” James said, straightening up and trying to sound dignified.
“No,” Minerva said, “I expect you think us geriatrics ought to stick together, though. Us older women have a lot to teach a younger man,” she said looking at him through beady eyes.

James squirmed.

Even Harry felt himself clenching at the thought of Minerva teaching him anything sexual.

“Don’t say a word, Mother,” Kingsley interjected, as Gloria began to open her mouth. “I’m happy for you, but I really don’t want to know any details.”

“Well, that’s something I can agree on,” Draco said, coming up and putting an arm around Gloria’s waist.

Harry realised that they rarely touched in public, and wondered if it was for Kingsley’s sake, or why.

Gloria herself turned and threw a surprised smile at Draco, and kissed him on the cheek.

“And I hope the relationship isn’t all one way,” Draco raised an eyebrow at her.

Gloria laughed, and the tension shattered.

“Not a word,” Kingsley repeated, looking at his mother.

Draco grinned at him. “Time we were off,” he said to Gloria. He turned to James. “I don’t know what’s between my father and Nanette,” he said, “but Gloria’s right: if you’re interested, you need to think what you can offer her, and whether you really want to go up against my father.”

“Go up against your - ! You think I have nothing to offer compared to your father?”

Draco’s eyes narrowed.

James visibly bristled. His hand moved to his wand.

“James – ” Harry tried to cut off the temper explosion.

”Your father is a prisoner who owns nothing,” James snapped.

Harry hated his son sometimes.

Or what came out of his mouth at least.

Silence had fallen.

“That’s true,” Draco said. “And yet, Nanette still chose to visit him, in Azkaban, and go off to France to try and clear him. I wonder why that is?”

“She’s grateful –”

“James,” Harry said waringly.

“That might be true too,” Draco said. “When have you done anything for her?” He turned away, his back a masterpiece of dismissal. “Time we were off,” he said lightly to Gloria.

“I – I’m sorry,” James blurted out.

Everyone turned to look at him.
“Everything came out wrong,” he said. “I was just – I like Nanette, and she’s very vulnerable right now, and I was surprised. I – she’s had enough bad things –”

“You think my father would be a bad thing?”

“You look at it on paper and tell me,” James said, regaining some poise. “I just think it’s a recipe for disaster if she rushes into anything.”

“If you’d ever watched Lucius with her, you’ll know he’s very protective,” Harry said calmly. “I don’t know what will happen; we just need to be friends to her. Right, bugger off, everyone. Pardon the French, ladies.”

Gloria laughed, and kissed Harry on the cheek.

“You’ve forgiven me then?” he asked quizzically.

“I don’t mince words,” she said. “I may be a bit blunt. Like your son,” and she winked at James, before kissing Severus and Kingsley, and then departing with Draco.

Minerva came up and patted James on the cheek. “You’ll be alright,” she said. “Us old folk can be a bit cantankerous. But you’re far too uptight, for a young thing. You miss so much, you know, if you don’t loosen up. I know I did. It’s liberating, opening up that mind a bit,” she said, tapping him on the head. “Ask yoursel’ why you don’t like something: sometimes you’ll have valid reasons, sometimes not. You don’t want to go through life, get to my age and find yoursel’ regretting not what you did do, but what you didn’t. Well, goodnight, all,” and she bustled off up the staircase, Snape walking beside her to see her to the floo.

“I’m trying to imagine what she got up to,” Ron whispered, grimacing.

“*Gets* up to,” Harry raised a brow.

“You’re both as bad as James,” Hermione elbowed them both rather effectively. “No offence, James,” she smiled at him.

“I open my mouth – I don’t intend to be so rude,” James said, semi-apologetically.

“I expect you get it from me,” Ron said easily. “Always putting my foot in it. I did it just the other day –” he started, looking across at Harry. “Ow!”

Hermione had given him a particularly hard shove.

“Er, see? About to do it again. Right, we better get home, Mione. Harry, we need to talk, mate. Can you come over in the morning?”


“Ten?”

“Okay. Everything alright?”

“Nothing wrong with me,” Hermione said, putting a hand on his arm at his worried face. She reached up and pecked him on the cheek. “See you tomorrow.”

“I’d better go,” James said, looking from his father to Kingsley.

“Stay,” Harry said. “Kingsley and Severus aren’t.”
“What?” James looked from one to the other.

“I’d still like to speak to you,” Kingsley said quietly.

“Can it wait till tomorrow?” Harry asked. “I need to talk to James.”

“I- ” James began.

“Sure,” Kingsley shrugged. “Just wanted to go over what to expect at the trial.”

Harry nodded. “I’d appreciate that.”

Kingsley’s hand touched his back lightly as he passed, and then he took the stairs two at a time.

Harry tried not to look at the shift of muscles in Kingsley’s arse as he moved, or feel alone as Kingsley reached Snape, who’d just returned to the top of the stairs.

Snape nodded down at him, and then they turned and left.

James shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m in for a lecture, am I?” he said sullenly.

Harry looked at him, and then stepped forward, and hugged him.

His head only reached James shoulder, and James’ arms remained awkwardly down by his sides.

Harry felt stupid and was just pulling away, when a tentative hand was raised, and patted him on the back.

“What was that for?” James said, as Harry did pull away.

“I didn’t want you to think I was always mad at you, I suppose,” Harry said.

“You aren’t mad at me?” James asked.

“Of course I am,” Harry said. “Let’s go and sit upstairs.”

Seated in the living room a moment later, James said, “I was – I shouldn’t have said that about Lucius.”

“No. But at least you apologised.”

“Yeah, but I shouldn’t have said it in the first place.”

“No,” Harry agreed.

“Is – is there really something between Nanette and Lucius Malfoy?”


James sprawled lower in the armchair, then turned to throw his legs over the arm. “I – she’s nice, but – well, a bit – proper – for me. And what’s with everyone thinking I’m all uptight and boring?” he demanded, folding his arms mulishly.

“I think Gloria was having a bit of a day for some reason,” Harry said. “She had a go at me as well.”

“How come it’s not rude to come and insult your hosts, eh?” James mused. “Just because they’re
“God, I’m glad you held your tongue a bit there,” Harry laughed. “I don’t think we’d have heard the end of it otherwise.”

“Because she’s Kingsley’s mother?” James raised a brow.

“Because she’s Gloria,” Harry said, “though to be honest, I think she likes it if you stand up for yourself.”

They were silent for a minute. “What’s with you and – you know, Kingsley and Severus?” James asked. “How come Kingsley hasn’t already told you all this stuff? Do you really not know about the potion Snape’s been working on?”

“Not a clue,” Harry said, ignoring the first part of the question.

“I thought you were much closer than that.”

Harry didn’t know what to say. He ought to tell James about Hannah; he knew he could break the compulsion Hannah had put on him, that Albus already knew, but Hannah didn’t want people to know. James had just proved his propensity to blurt things out.

How could he explain about Kingsley and Severus without explaining that?

What was there to explain? It was over, wasn’t it?

Except he’d thought of when they were kissing –

“You’ve got a far-away look,” James said. “That’s – can you not think about them when I’m here, Dad? Not like that! I’m trying to be cool, but – give me time, eh?”

“I wasn’t –” Harry began.

“Yeah, right,” James said. “You’re useless at lying – you’ve gone all red. Hey! Bloody cheek to be called boring by Professor McGonagall, wasn’t it? I mean, Gloria – fair enough, she’s a piece of work, completely bonkers, but I’ve never even heard of or seen the Professor with a man. Who’s she to tell me I’m boring?”

“Maybe she likes the ladies?” Harry suggested wickedly. He really had no idea about Minerva’s lovelife.

“Wha - ? Dad!”

“I’m going for a run,” Kingsley said, as they arrived back at the villa.

“I’ll be in the sitting room,” Snape said.

It wasn’t unusual for Kingsley to run, once the heat of summer had passed, and his trainers, when he reappeared from upstairs, were well worn.

He slipped out of the backdoor without speaking again to Severus.
Again, that wasn’t unusual, and yet he was aware of the tension between them.

He set a demanding pace, enjoying the feel of his heart accelerating, the familiar burn in his thighs as he pushed up the hill.

He wished he knew how to make things right.

They made love. They ate together. They talked.

All the things they had done a year ago.

And yet Harry’s absence was like a physical presence. It sat there, between them.

And he hated that he’d promised Harry things that he wasn’t delivering on.

Being there. Getting over problems.

He hadn’t qualified it, that it would be only problems that came from outside, or that they’d caused.

He was angry with Severus for being so stubborn.

And yet Severus was his own man. He was entitled to his opinion. His lifestyle.

The trouble, Kingsley thought ruefully, was that he loved them both.

He arrived back a while later to find a jug of iced water with a cooling charm on it on the table, a glass waiting.

He smiled, recognising an olive branch when he saw one.

He was on the second glass when Snape appeared in the door-way.

“You look like you’ve had a good work out,” he said, eyes sliding over sweat-sheened flesh.

“I love both of you,” Kingsley said bluntly. “What are we going to do, Severus?”

Snape leant back against the door-frame. “What are you hoping for?”

“I want you to fuck me,” Kingsley said, straightening from unlacing his trainers.

“That wasn’t quite what I meant,” Snape’s lips quirked.

“I know,” Kingsley said, kicking out of the shoes and coming over. “Let’s talk later. I need you.”

Snape’s hand reached around his neck, hauling him close.

“I’m all hot and sweaty,” Kingsley resisted an inch.

“You’ll be more so by the time I’ve finished with you,” Snape growled.
“God, we need clean sheets,” Kingsley said, an hour later, lying in the wreck of their bed.

“Dion,” Snape said, and the elf appeared. “Change the bed, please, while we’re in the shower, would you?”

The elf nodded happily.

“I was going to fall asleep,” Kingsley grumbled.

“And now you can fall asleep in clean sheets,” Snape said, sitting up and slapping Kingsley’s arse.

“Hey!”

But Kingsley got up, and they headed into the bathroom.

Snape turned on the shower whilst Kingsley used the loo, and climbed in, washing himself off quickly. He stepped back to allow Kingsley to get under the spray.

“Turn round and put your hands on the wall,” Snape said, lathering his hands.

Kingsley made a sound in his throat, but did as he was told.

Snape reached up to one arm, working his way down it, then soaped Kingsley’s hairless armpit. He repeated with the other, and then washed Kingsley’s back, easing his thumbs and fingers into the muscles.

Kingsley slung his head back, groaning, water cascading down his face. “You’re so good at that.”

Snape leant forward, placing quick kisses to Kingsley’s spine, before pulling back again, the wash and massage dropping lower, concentrating for several minutes on Kingsley’s arse.

“I’m hard again,” Kingsley pointed out hopefully.

“No touching,” Snape ordered. “You have the best bottom I have ever seen,” he added, a finger sliding down the crease before he dropped to his knees and moved his ministrations to Kingsley’s thighs.

“Tease.”

Snape’s teeth nipped a buttock.

Kingsley jerked with shock, then pushed back. “More.”

“You’ll get what you’re given,” Snape said, standing.

Kingsley’s disappointed moan was cut off when Severus slipped under his arm and stood in front of him, taking his mouth in a fierce kiss.

“Feeling strong?” he whispered, as he eventually pulled away.

“Feeling desperate. What’ve you got in mind?”

Severus cast a spell.

Kingsley’s eyes widened, and Snape’s arms came around his neck.
“Lift,” he ordered.

“God, Severus,” Kingsley gasped, and then his hands were under Snape’s buttocks, and Snape legs were around his waist, and Snape dropped a hand behind to guide him, and then he was sliding in, home, engulfed.

“Love you,” he bit out, and then it was all movement, and tension, and Snape’s encouragement in his ear, until he was coming again, pulsing, feeling Snape hot and wet and around him everywhere.

Later, they sat propped up against the headboard in bed, enjoying the fresh sheets and the pot of coffee and little biscuits that Dion had brought.

“Thank god for magic,” Kingsley said. “The crumbs would drive me mad otherwise.”

Snape turned his head to grin at him. “And teeth-cleaning charms: I don’t want to get up again.”

“You’re worn out? Think what you’ve done to me!”

Snape’s lips turned up in a slight smile.

Kingsley reached across to put his cup down, then took Snape’s jaw in his hand, and kissed him.

“I can say ‘my pleasure’ and totally mean it,” Snape said.

“I needed that.”

“So I could see. At the risk of a set-back, were you pissed at Harry or me or everyone else?”

“Bit of everything,” Kingsley sighed. “Worried it won’t all work. You know, at the trial. Not what you’ve achieved,” he said, a quick hand to Snape’s arm.

“We’re placing a lot on Harcourt,” Snape acknowledged, “but Hermione trusts him to manage it: she’s not a fool.”

“No. But still. If we don’t get Atkins, and the confession from Nott –”

“Then we’ll continue.”

“She’ll know. I’m worried about who’ll be in danger.”

“Me?” Snape said, turning his head again. “Harry?”

“Of course both of you! And who else besides?”

“You were cross with Harry tonight?”

“I was cross with everyone. I don’t like having to leave people in the dark, after everything. My mother was rambunctious, and Harry –”

“Put talking to his son before talking to us. I’m surprised that bothered you: James needed it.”

Kingsley turned his head. “And it didn’t bother you?”
“No.”

“Well, that’s where I don’t understand you,” Kingsley said.

Snape raised an eyebrow.

“You’ve been astonishingly understanding about James, who frankly, is a prick a lot of the time. You’ve given Albus lessons. You’ve entertained Lily quite happily. Why are you so against getting involved in any more Potter kids?”

“Babies are quite another matter,” Snape said.

“And you’re fantastic with Alejandro’s and Rosita’s. You stayed over there all night, didn’t you, when Amelia was ill – ”

“Rosita and Alejandro also had the flu. They could not look after – ”

“Rosita’s mother would have been in there like a shot – ”

“Yes, but Amelia needed potions – ”

“Severus, I’m not saying it was a bad thing,” Kingsley said, stretching out a hand and smoothing it down Snape’s belly. ‘I’m just saying, you’re good with children. You’ve always been great with all my step-brothers and sisters too, and god knows, they’ve given us one or two hard times. Why are you so determined to have nothing to do with Harry’s? He doesn’t love us any less because he loves James and Albus and Lily. Do you really think the baby will be different? He’s hurting, and he needs us. I don’t understand why we aren’t helping.”

“Why aren’t you helping? You two could be together without me - ”

“No, we couldn’t,” Kingsley, his hand flat on Snape’s stomach. “I’m here because I love you, and I need you to know I’m never going to leave you.”

“Even if that means no Harry?”

“Yes.”

Snape’s eyes met his. His hand came up and linked on his stomach with Kingsley’s.

“You miss him though.”

“I do. I think you do too.”

Snape sighed, and rested his head back. “I went to see Hannah Longbottom.”

“You what?” Kingsley sat up straight, turning fully towards Snape. “When?”

“A couple of days ago.”

“And?”

“And she says she’s never going to marry him.”

“Really?” Kingsley beamed.

Snape’s lips twitched.
“What? I’m not going to apologise for being happy about that,” Kingsley said.

“No. I must admit, I was somewhat – she meant it,” Snape said.

“Oh, god,” Kingsley said. “The thing is, will Harry believe it?”

“I’m taking him to see her tomorrow.”

“You are? Hold on, does he know?”

“Not yet,” Snape said. “I don’t know if it will go well, but…” he shrugged.

“I love you, Severus Snape,” Kingsley said, kissing him smack on the lips, and then settling back down beside him.

Snape turned in his arms, retaining hold of his hand. “Good. And now you’ve worn me out, sleep.”

“Yes, Professor,” Kingsley sing-songed, nudging hair out of the way with his nose to brush a kiss over the nape of Snape’s neck.

They were both smiling as they fell asleep.
Harry stepped through the floo into The Leaky Cauldron, and after a nod to the girl behind the bar, headed up the stairs to Ron and Mione’s private quarters.

He’d wondered what they’d wanted, and had relaxed when it’d occurred to him that they might ask him to be godfather again.

He stumbled, therefore, when he entered the room to find Severus and Hannah there, chatting at the kitchen table with his oldest friends.

“Hi,” he said awkwardly, into the sudden silence.

His eyes went to Hannah, dropping to her belly.

Hermione’s bump was a lot bigger.

He looked up and blushed. “You’re looking well,” he said. His eyes darted to Snape. “What’s going on? Are you not well?” he looked back to Hannah, trying to put two and two together.

“Sit down,” Snape said. “We need to talk before the witnesses arrive.”

“Witnesses?” Harry felt faint.

“Not to a wedding, you idiot,” Snape said acerbically. He pushed a chair out with his foot, and Harry lurched over to the table and sat in it.

Hermione poured him some tea and handed it to him.

“I don’t want to marry you, you know that,” Hannah said.

“You said,” Harry nodded, swallowing and then choking.

Ron slapped him hard on the back.

“Sorry,” he gasped. “What – what are the witnesses for?”

“If you’ve finished the melodramatics…” Snape sighed, but his tone calmed Harry.

And his presence.

Harry flashed another look at him, drinking him in.

There seemed something different about him, but he couldn’t put a finger on it.

“Harry,” Hannah said. “You offered to be a godfather: did you mean it?”

“Of course I did!”

“Good. Professor Snape came to see me –”

“You did? When?” Harry looked at Snape.

“Two days ago,” Hannah said. “I – the Professor pointed out that I – the baby – it’s quite possible – black hair is dominant –” She went bright red.
“What I suggested to Mrs Longbottom,” Snape intervened, “is the use of an old potion for godparents.”

“What old potion? We didn’t use any godparent potion with the kids. Nor Ron or Mione,” he looked at them.

“No, because all parties were present. In the course of obtaining one’s Potions Mastery, however, one studies a number of potions, both in their historical context and in terms of development, if any has taken place,” Snape explained. “Some potions come into use to serve a specific purpose, and fall out of use. This potion was invented in the 14th century, when our numbers were decimated by witch-burnings, and used frequently during the Goblin Uprisings as well.”

“What does it do?” Harry asked.

“It fortifies the baby with magical elements from other wizards and witches – from the godparents,” Hermione answered. “It was used a lot too when wizards used to travel in the days before apparition.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Sometimes a witch would get pregnant by someone other than her husband,” she said, looking at Hannah. “Especially with the belief that sex was important to maintain magical power. The husband could correct that when he returned, if the child hadn’t yet been born.”

“Correct it? How?” Harry gawped.

“If you think of it like a Muggle, Harry,” Hermione said, putting a hand on his arm, “it’s a bit like combining DNA. Except it’s magic.”

“What it means for me, and for my baby,” Hannah said, “is that people won’t know that you’re the father.”

Harry went very still.

“What we’re proposing,” Snape said, watching him, “is that you become a godfather: you will have a known and accepted role in society.”

“You – you’ll allow me to see my – the child?” Harry asked Hannah, swallowing.

“Yes. I understand this is – this is tough, I know, but it’s better for the child, don’t you see? It’s not just my reputation, and Nev’s, that I’m trying to protect. I don’t want this child,” she placed her hand over her stomach, “to grow up with whispers.”

“But what will happen if - if you need medical help, or something? Surely – I mean, I’m sorry, Hannah, but they’ll find out Neville wasn’t involved then.”

Hannah looked at Snape.

“I’m combining elements for patrimony and godparents,” Snape said. In effect, you and Ron will give a donation to the potion –”

“What about Hermione?” Harry asked, looking at his friend.

“I offered, but apparently I can’t donate: because I’m already carrying another magical signature, to do so would give something of my baby’s. It can’t give consent, so pregnant women can’t be
involved. But I’ll still be a godparent in the usual sense. People won’t be at all surprised that you and Ron and me are the godparents, Harry, in the circumstances.”

Harry nodded. “If – if it was Neville’s, I’d have offered, of course.”

“That brings us to the last part,” Snape said. “I am using a donation from Neville –”

“What?” screeched Harry.

Snape rolled his eyes. “Hairs from his hairbrush, skin-flakes from an old jumper. It will be enough.”

“To register his signature on the baby?” Harry said disbelievingly.

“Your signature will be overpowering,” Snape said, “if the child is ever checked. However, it is fortunate for us at this point that the level of your power is pretty well known: it will be assumed that your donation – given in front of witnesses – will have accidentally conferred a very strong signature.”

They were all looking at him.

“You – Ron?” he asked. “You alright with this? Mione?”

“Neville saved Hugo’s life,” Ron said, “of course we’re alright with it. And even if he hadn’t – if – like you said – this would be an honour, Harry. Mum and Dad are coming as witnesses. They’ll be proud we’re doing this. It’s old-fashioned, but it’s just showing the world that we’re standing by this child, that we’ll help Hannah bring it up. That’s what you want, isn’t it, mate?”

“I – I didn’t know any of this was possible,” Harry said, shaking his head.

“There are occasional advantages to knowing a Potions Master,” Snape said.

“Are – are you alright with this, Hannah?” Harry asked. “You told me you didn’t want me to have anything to do with the baby.”

“I – I was blocking out the fact that this baby might well look like you,” she said. “I – I was pretending in my heart that it was Neville’s. This way it can be, a bit. This is the best I can hope for – better than anything I thought was possible. I don’t know how to thank Professor Snape enough,” she said.

Harry looked at Snape again. “This – this won’t harm the baby? I won’t do it if it –”

“None of us would do it if there was any harm,” Hermione said, her hand on Harry’s arm again. “It’s not like Muggle stuff: this really is magic, Harry.”

Harry stood up on shaky legs.

“My broom’s behind the door,” Ron said. “You always think better when you fly.”

Harry threw him a grateful look. “When – you said your parents are coming. Are there other witnesses?”

“My father and step-mother,” Hannah said.

“What time - ?”
“They’re coming in three quarters of an hour, but if you don’t want to go ahead, you don’t have to,” Hannah said, biting her lip.

“I’m going ahead anyway,” Ron said, “I want to.”

Harry nodded. He picked up the broom. The sitting room next door had a small balcony, and he went through and opened the doors, and took off.

He shot straight up, and then made himself invisible, sweeping through the wards that separated the wizarding world from the Muggle, until he was flying over the Thames, following its line and finding soothing relief in the sight of its murky waters.

He’d been flying for twenty minutes – he’d left the familiar landmarks of the Oxo Tower, and St Paul’s and London Bridge, and even the Thames Barrier far behind – when he’d finally allowed himself to think. He dropped down, still invisible, until he was skimming the water, trailing a hand in it.

He was never going to be a father to the baby in Hannah’s tummy.

His heart felt tight in his chest with grief, and yet it wasn’t as if he hadn’t known.

He was being offered something.

A stake.

A big stake in his – Hannah’s – child’s life.

It was more than he’d thought.

And his friends had -

No.

Severus had made it happen.

Severus had done this for him.

And Ron and Mione – no doubt they’d done it for Hannah, and to protect Neville’s memory – but they’d done it for him too.

And for his child.

He loved them. And they’d committed to helping bring up his child. He and they and Hannah – it was a good start, from an awful mess.

He would make it work.

And Severus and Kingsley – were they – would they – still – want him?

His heart quickened.

He didn’t know.

But he had something to work with, and Severus had made it happen.

He spun the broom through a sharp 180 degrees; in the far distance, he could see the London Eye
rising against the skyline, sunlight glinting on the capsules. He pointed his broom towards it as the quickest measure to return, and then blinked, and apparated, broom between his thighs, straight into Ron’s sitting room.

He hadn’t expected them to have moved in to sit in there, and staggered over Ron’s outstretched feet.

“Bloody hell, mate, some warning, would ya?” Ron put out a hand to steady him.

“Oh god, sorry,” Harry said, his eyes flying to Mione. “I didn’t give you a fright, did I? Are you alright? Where’s Hannah?”

“I’m fine, you twat, and Hannah’s in the loo, luckily.”

“I’m really sorry,” Harry said, “I thought you’d be in the kitchen.”

“Severus is setting up the potion in there. He’s putting Nev’s stuff into the base, so no one will know about it. You going to do it?” Ron asked.

Harry nodded. He bent over and kissed Hermione on the cheek, and gave Ron a quick hug.

“What’s that for?” Ron hugged him back.

“Thank you both,” he said. “I can’t ever thank you enough.”

“You can if you’re willing to be godfather again to our next one,” Ron said.

“Really? Are you sure?” Harry asked, grinning.

“Go and thank Severus,” Hermione whispered. “It was all his idea.”

Harry nodded, and slipped into the kitchen. He popped the broom back behind the door, moving slowly so as not to disturb Snape, who was measuring something into a cauldron set up on their cooker.

Once the measure was in, Snape looked over at him.

“Thank you,” Harry said, leaning against the door.

“You’re willing to participate?”

“I’ve already done that bit,” Harry said, “it would ruin it all if I wasn’t here, wouldn’t it?”

“The decision is yours.”

“I can’t tell you how grateful I am,” Harry said quietly.

“I don’t need your gratitude,” Snape snapped.

Harry shrugged, and came over. “You have it anyway. You know how much this means to me.”

“Will it be enough?” Snape asked, with unexpected uncertainty. “She said she would never marry you. Perhaps you could have persuaded her –”

Harry checked to see that Snape wasn’t holding any ingredients, or stirring in any odd way, and then leant forward and kissed him on the mouth.
There was a cough at the door.

Hannah. “You’ll do it?” she asked.

Harry nodded. He stayed standing by Snape, reluctant to leave him. “Yes. Thank you.”

“I was going to ask if there was a member of your family you wanted, as witness, but it seems you already have one,” she looked at Snape.

Thoughts of Albus and James and Lily flew through his head. But Snape – would Snape want – and what about Kingsley?

“Thank you, I am honoured to witness as well as brew,” Snape said. He looked at Harry. “If that would be acceptable?”

Harry nodded, swelling with emotion. “Thank you.”

“You will not mind if – I believe – Minister Shacklebolt –” Hannah swallowed. “But my step-mother –”

“Kingsley is busy today,” Snape said smoothly.

“Ah.” Hannah said, looking relieved. “I – I’m going to get my own place,” she said. “It will be easier in future.”

Harry felt like he was being given gifts beyond measure.

And then there were footsteps on the stairs, and soon, everyone was there, and the little ceremony took place, and then the house elves brought them all lunch, and then it was all over.

“Right,” Ron said, “I’m afraid I need to get back to work,” and he kissed Hermione on the cheek, and Hannah, and his mother, and shook his father’s hand, and then Hannah’s step-mother suggested they do a little shopping in Diagon Alley, and Hannah hugged Hermione and then Harry and promised to be in touch, and Harry found himself sitting with Molly and Arthur and Hermione and Snape.

“Did you want to do a bit of shopping, dear?” Molly asked Hermione.

“What I really want to do is put my feet up,” Hermione confessed. “Why don’t you go shopping, Molly?”

“I need to get back,” Snape said, “if you’ll excuse me. It was good to see you, Arthur, Molly.”

“It was good of you to do this,” Molly said. “Poor girl!”

Snape merely nodded.

“Arthur, would you like to go for a walk?” Harry asked. “I could take you around, and we’ll meet up with Molly later? Or I’ll just bring Arthur back to the Burrow? How would that suit?”

And so it was. Except Harry took Arthur through into Muggle London, and pushed his chair like a regular wheelchair rather than a hover chair, and took Arthur on a London bus which had a lowering platform to enable wheelchair access, and they both had a marvellous time.

“I’ve missed you,” Harry said, sitting with Arthur beside the lions on Trafalgar Square, with coffee in cardboard cups and a Mars bar each. Harry had inserted a straw into Arthur’s coffee, and stuck
the cup itself to the arm of his chair, as his co-ordination still tended to send his arm flying out unexpectedly.

“Me t – too,” Arthur said. “These bars are w-w-w-good, aren’t they?” he said, looking at the wrapper that Harry had carefully peeled back and the layers of the bar where he’d bitten into it. “Can we b-buy some more? F-for the rabbits?” He blinked and shook his head. “Not – not –. G-grandchildren!” He rolled his eyes, and Harry laughed. “And M-Molly,” he added, “she’ll want to m-m- cook some, and I don’t know how she’ll make this blanket thing.”

“The wrapper?” Harry guessed.

“That’s it,” Arthur nodded genially.

Arthur took another bite, and chewed happily, watching the Muggles with evident delight.

A girl in pink jeans stuck her hand into the fountain and laughed as she flicked water-droplets at her mother.

Harry smiled, and took another sip of his coffee.


Harry choked.

When he’d finished spluttering, he found Arthur was patting his knee.

“What do you mean?” he asked, his stomach in his boots.

Arthur tapped his forehead. “See much more in this con – con – contraption. P-p-people think you’re stupid.”

“I don’t think you’re stupid,” Harry said gently.

“Nice boy,” Arthur patted again, and popped the last piece of his Mars into his mouth.

Harry waited impatiently as he ate it, wondering whether to pretend Arthur hadn’t said anything.

But Arthur had, and he’d be doing exactly what Arthur said if he acted otherwise.

“What did you mean?” he said, as Arthur licked his lips at last.

“Augusta was a g-g-good friend,” he said. “Saw a lot of her when the D–D-Death Eaters did – ” he shook his head sadly.

“Hurt Neville’s parents?”

Arthur nodded. “And Ne-Neville,” he looked sharply at Harry. “She said – last of line.”

“Oh god,” Harry said.

“Sure it wasn’t R-Ron,” Arthur said.

“Oh my god,” Harry said, “of course it wasn’t Ron! I – I’m so sorry – you must think so badly of me – ”

“Grief,” Arthur shook his head. “Saw a lot of w-wild people. First War,” he explained.
“It was just once,” Harry explained. “We both knew the next morning – it was a dreadful mistake. And then there was a baby. She – she won’t let me marry her.”

“Sev’rus wouldn’t have liked that,” Arthur’s head wobbled as he grinned.

“Do you know everything that’s going on?” Harry groaned, burying his face in his hands.

Arthur chuckled. “Good man. Did good thing today.”

“Yes,” Harry said, looking at Arthur. “While we’re at it, I’d better mention I love Kingsley too. Don’t know if it can work – it all fell apart over this –”

“Sev’rus helped,” Arthur said, as if that said everything.

“Yeah, he did, didn’t he?” Harry gave him a quick smile. “You – you’re not – disappointed in me? It’s so soon, and they’re –”

“M-men?” Arthur bent over and slurped some of his coffee up.

“Is it hot enough still? Want me to warm it a little?”

“P-please.”

Harry just put his hand to the cup, and allowed his magic to warm it.

“Strong,” Arthur said.

“The coffee?”

“Magic.”

A child sitting on the other side of them glanced round.

Harry grinned at her.

Arthur was wearing a wizarding robe, but it was amazing what you could get away with in a wheelchair. People seemed much more inclined to accept the odd: things Arthur said, his excitement, his clothes, the way the wheelchair moved a little strangely, the cup fixed on the arm…

Harry was very tempted to do a little spell just to amuse her, but then her mother pulled her round and told her not to stare at people just because they were disabled, and the moment was gone.

“Yeah,” he said, turning back to Arthur. “I don’t think Augusta ever told Neville,” he said. “They tried for years before he went to see anyone.”

“H-hope,” Arthur shrugged one-sidedly.

Harry sighed. He supposed it was understandable, but…”Did anyone else know?” he asked.

Arthur’s face screwed up. “Mediwizard. Don’t know about anyone else. Augusta only said w-w-w-” he held up one finger.

“Once?”

Arthur nodded. “D-drunk as a skunk!”
“Augusta?” Harry laughed.

Arthur grinned and nodded his head every which way. “Very hard time,” he said, sobering.

“Yes,” Harry nodded.

They sat in companionable silence.

Arthur had amazed Harry many times in the years since he’d first met him, back when he was just a boy, and today was another such occasion. Arthur really didn’t live up to the reputation of redheads: he was certainly excitable about his interests, but he was so calm about life, so accepting, and he had such a capacity for warmth and love, such a generosity of spirit…all encased in an exterior that even before his stroke had been so very unassuming.

“I’d better get us back,” Harry said reluctantly, once they’d finished their coffees.

Arthur nodded. “M-Molly worries.”

“You ok with that?” Harry asked, stepping behind the chair and beginning to wheel it away.

“She loves me,” Arthur said. “Lucky man.”

“Yes,” Harry agreed, although he’d hate to be smothered.

“You too,” Arthur tried to crane his neck back to look at Harry.

Harry bit his lip, and nodded once.

Arthur reached round and patted his hand. “Miss Ginny,” he said, “but second chance.”

Harry gripped his hand for a moment.

He had been given a second chance at happiness. He wasn’t going to waste it.

Later, he floo-ed into the kitchen at Villa Olorosa. He didn’t know whether he’d be welcome, but they needed to talk.

The anxiety bubbling in his stomach eased instantly, however.

Kingsley was sitting at the table with a glass of wine, Severus was at the stove.

And there were three places laid at the table.

Kingsley kicked the chair out with his foot, in invitation, just as Snape had done earlier in the day.

“Five more minutes and I would have come to get you,” he smiled.

Harry grinned, and sat.

“I think Severus made the invitation clear today, didn’t he?” Kingsley poured him a glass.

“I wasn’t sure,” Harry said, and Snape’s head whipped round. “I wasn’t sure whether you were just being kind, or whether I should have some hope.”
“We wanted to talk to you last night,” Kingsley said.

“I – I’m so sorry,” Harry said. “James –”

“Yeah. No worries. It just ended up being sprung on you. Not that I knew about it either till last night,” Kingsley said.

“I can’t tell you how I feel,” Harry said, looking at Snape’s back.

“Grateful?” Kingsley said suggestively.

Harry laughed, a huge burst of relief washing through him. “I’d love to be very grateful, but Severus said he wasn’t interested in my gratitude,” he risked joking.

Severus came over carrying a dish of salad and another of pasta, and put them down in the middle of the table. “I meant I wanted more from you that just gratitude,” he said, eyes dark.

“Oh ho,” Kingsley grinned.

“I’m in love with you both,” Harry said bluntly. “Is that enough of a start?”

Kingsley and Severus exchanged a look.

“What?” Harry said. “You – I can’t help it, but I can keep quiet about it –”

“Don’t be a prat,” Kingsley said. “It was just exactly what I said to Severus last night.”

“Really?” Harry looked from one to the other, and couldn’t help the grin that spread over his face.

Severus rolled his eyes. “Eat, before it gets cold,” he said.

They tucked in.

Later, they were tucked into bed together.

“It’s got much colder since I was last here,” Harry said, pulling the cover up over his shoulder.

“And I thought we’d just warmed you up,” Kingsley said, from behind Harry. His hand, large and warm, slid down Harry’s side.

“I’m warm inside,” Harry said, turning his head to look over his shoulder.


Harry dug an elbow in his ribs.

“You’re not hurting?” Snape asked, his hand too joining Kingsley’s on Harry’s body.


“Welcome home,” Kingsley said, and his eyes met Snape’s over Harry.
“Am I?” Harry said, shifting onto his back, and looking at them both.

“Welcome? Home?” Snape asked.

Harry nodded.

“Things will happen. We’ll get over them,” Kingsley said.

“Together?” Harry asked, swallowing.

“Only if you let me get some sleep occasionally,” Snape said, planting a kiss on his nose, a brush across Kingsley’s mouth, and then turning over. “I get grumpy when I’m tired.”

“You don’t say,” Kingsley said, grinning down at Harry.

Harry smiled back, then turned too, till they were all spooned together, drifting off, warmly, to sleep.
The Trial Begins

“All rise for Judge Anglehurst,” the court clerk’s Sonorous cut across the hum of a hundred conversations.

All around the arena, people lumbered to their feet.

It was the most magnificent setting for a court Harry had ever seen. The amphitheatre of stone seating slipped steeply down the hillside, crowded now with the members of the Wizengamot, and to one side, the public.

Harry sat there, with James on one side, Hermione and Ron on the other. Andy was sitting a couple of seats along from Ron. Josh Nott – was he Hinch now too? - sat two rows down, next to his grandmother, who had Minerva on her other side. Draco Malfoy was in the press gallery.

Theodore Hinch stood in the dock, elegant in a dark green robe, head held proudly.

On the flat area in front of the raised dais where the Judge would sit, was the Prosecution. The chair for the Defence was empty: Hinch was conducting his own.

Anglehurst made his way down the steps and took his place at the Judge’s bench, facing them all.

Behind him, the wild landscape of Cornwall dropped away, and there was only sea and sky and wheeling birds.

A protective bubble kept the squawking of the gulls and the buffeting of the wind from disturbing the proceedings. The site was inaccessible by land, and if any saw it from the sea, they mistook it for the Minack Theatre.

Harry loved it, loved how it felt part of nature, alive with plants and grounded in earth and stone and the elements. Despite the chill weather outside the dome, sunlight dazzled on the waves, ever-moving.

Security was very tight. Kingsley had teams prowling everywhere, and everyone present had been checked before being given the portkey to bring them to the site.

“Mr Hinch, you stand before this court accused of a number of crimes. These will be read to you by the clerk. You must plead ‘Guilty’ or ‘Not guilty’ to each count. Do you understand?”

“I wish to plead ‘Not guilty’ on every count,” Theodore Hinch said.

“‘You will do so after every charge is read, then, Mr Hinch. Is the process clear to you?’”

Harry could see Nott’s – Hinch’s – face tightening. “Yes, Your Honour.”

The case got underway.

Hinch – Harry found it hard not to think of him as Nott – had denied all charges.

An Auror had given evidence of finding items taken from the Department of Mysteries in Hinch’s vault.

Theo had called Head Auror Dowling, who had agreed, under questioning, that they had found nothing when they had first searched his property.
“Are you suggesting, Mr Hinch,” Harcourt asked, “that items were planted in your vault? Who would you imagine had done so? Who had access? Are you blaming your wife? Your son?” He pointed to the boy sitting in the public gallery. Harry glanced down, and realised, in surprise, that the wizard on his other side was Peter Brown, the Headmaster of Hogwarts.

There was no sign of his mother. Had Theo’s wife left him? Because he wasn’t a Pureblood? Because of the charges?

He was impressed to see the Headmaster, though – even if he only came for one day, it was good to see him supporting the boy.

His attention was pulled back to the case.

“I don’t have to prove who did it,” Theo said. “I am just saying that you have no evidence that it was me.”

Harcourt looked at some papers. “Unspeakable Turin – your boss – has examined the items recovered from your Vaults. He is of the opinion that several experiments have been conducted since the items left the Ministry.”

“Is that a question? I don’t hear a question,” Theo said.

“You have been working on these,” Harcourt looked down at a parchment, and then said, with some disgust, “brains, for three years. Your work on them was well documented. Further experiments have been made on the brains since the Ministry burnt.”

“So someone else is also interested? I’m not surprised.”

Harcourt was getting the measure of his man, Harry realised. He cast a glance at Hermione, who nodded at him.

“Well, I’m sure I’m not the only one in the court more than surprised, and should I say, glad we aren’t about to eat lunch?” Harcourt said, and several people nodded and laughed.

Theo’s face went stony.

Interesting, Harry thought.

“So,” Harcourt said, picking up another parchment, “according to your statement, you didn’t go near the Ministry on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day. Is that correct?”

“Perfectly.”

“But Mr Hinch, I have a witness to the contrary.”

“Produce them if you will: they’re lying.”

When the elf walked onto the stand, there were murmurs around the court.

The elf’s ears flapped in agitation.

Thankfully, Harcourt had already placed some steps within the witness box, so that the elf’s head was visible.

“This is a joke, right?” Theo laughed.
“No joke,” Harcourt said firmly, and then the elf was sworn in.

“Now,” said Harcourt, “if you could tell us when you last saw the man before you,” he indicated Hinch, “the wizard previously known as Theodore Nott, now known as Theodore Hinch?”

“I is seeing Mr Nott on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day,” Bobo said.

“And you remembered that because…?”

“Because he is being a wizard, and very few wizards is coming in on that day. But I is understanding it now, now I is knowing that Mr Hinch isn’t being a Pureblood after all, but I is surprised that his pretend-father isn’t telling him, all the same — ”

“Quite,” Harcourt said. “And was there any reason you particularly remember Mr Hinch?”

“Well, he is asking me for coffee, and he is being the only wizard working that day in the Unspeakables’ Department. And because I has been getting the Unspeakables’ coffees and teases and biscuits every day for the last seventy three years and nine months and four dayses.”

“A very long period of service,” Harcourt smiled at the elf. “So you know the wizards in your charge very well indeed?”

“Oh, yes, I is knowing every one of them.”

“Thank you,” Harcourt said, and sat down.

“Mr Hinch,” Anglehurst said. “Do you have any questions for the witness?”

“I do not regard a house-elf as a witness, Sir,” Theo said haughtily.

Anglehurst looked over his glasses at him. “Well, Mr Hinch, this court does, and the members of the Wizengamot must bear in mind that this evidence is every bit as valid as any other evidence that will be heard in this court. In case you are unaware, the Wizengamot recently passed the Beings Equality Law, and I will see that its tenets are honoured in this trial, as it will be in every case from now on. Now, do you have any questions for the witness, Mr Hinch?”

“I do not.”

“Very well. Mr Harcourt?”

“I’d like to call Dolph Peterson, Sir.”

The young man was obviously wearing his best robe, and went bright red just walking towards the witness box.

Harry recognised him at once.

“Mr Peterson, perhaps you can tell us what you do. Or, more to the point, what your job was on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day,” Harcourt asked.

“Er, yes, Sir. I was working on reception at the Ministry, Sir,” Dolph said, swallowing several times.

“A very important job,” Harcourt smiled at him. “How long had you been working at the Ministry at that point?”
“It was my first week, Sir.”

“Gosh, that must have been very frightening for you.”

“Er, yes, Sir,” Dolph said, looking around uncertainly.

“I hear you were a great help in the rescue, though.”

Dolph flushed bright red again. “It was Harry Potter, Sir, and the Minister what were amazin’, like. And Ron. Ron Weasley, that is,” he said. “Landlord at The Leaky.”

Harry smiled, and looked over at his old friend, who flashed a grin at him.

“He comes in for a pint,” Ron whispered.

“You’re very modest: you’ve been recommended for a medal, I believe?” Harcourt continued.

Dolph nodded, looking embarrassed.

“You have to answer for the record, Mr Peterson,” Anglehurst said, voice gentle.

“Oh! Er, sorry, Your Honour, Sir. I – my boss told me I’d been, yes. I didn’t do nothin’ special, though.”

“Well, I’m sure there are many people grateful to you,” Harcourt said. “Now,” he added, business-like, “can you tell me if the accused – that’s Mr Hinch over there – entered or left the building on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day?”

Dolph looked over quickly and glanced away.

“Do have a good look,” Harcourt encouraged. “You may need to know that Mr Hinch was called Mr Nott at that point.”

“I don’t recognise him,” he said warily, “but I’d need the log book to be able to tell you for sure.”

“Is this the book in question?” Harcourt asked, holding up a battered ledger. “May I show it to the witness, Sir?” he asked Anglehurst, who waved his hand to indicate that he could go ahead.

Dolph took the book and flipped the pages. “No – no Mr Nott or Mr Hinch recorded on that day, Sir,” he said.

“Thank you, Mr Peterson,” Harcourt smiled.

“Is there any point to this, Mr Harcourt?” Anglehurst asked. “Is there some reason you’re proving that the defendant’s statement is correct?”

Hinch raised an amused eyebrow.

“If you’d bear with me, Your Honour,” Harcourt gave a slight bow.

“Very well, very well, but don’t try my patience,” Anglehurst grumbled.

“Mr Peterson, can you tell me if you saw this man on the day of the fire?” he asked. He flicked his wand, and an image projected onto a large screen to one side.

It was of Peter Stubbins.
“I – I saw his pictures in the paper – he was the one what was found dead, wasn’t he?” Peterson stuttered.

“Yes, that’s perfectly correct. Do you remember seeing him on that day?”

“I – I don’t remember ‘im coming in, but after I ‘eard he was dead, and saw ‘is picture in the paper, then I remembered seein’ ‘im leave – ”

“You saw him leave, Mr Peterson?”

“Yeah, ‘cos he was the last one out before the lifts shut down. Except, that can’t be right, can it?” He rubbed his nose.

“It certainly seems odd. Can you tell us what time he arrived, and what time he left? From your log book?”

“Er, what was ‘is name again?” Peterson asked.

“Peter Stubbins.”

Peterson’s finger traced down the line of the records. “‘Ere he is. He came in at 8.40am, an’ he left the building at 11.57am.”

“And he didn’t come back in? Please check all the records for the entire day, if you’d be so kind, Mr Peterson.”

“N-no, that’s it,” Peterson said, looking up with relief. “A couple of wizards came in after lunch, like, but they left again when they realised the lifts’d been shut off for the day.”

There was some shifting and talking in the Wizengamot.

“I can see our Wizengamot are totally on the ball,” Harcourt conferred a pleased smile on them, which caused a few titters.

“Eh?” Peterson asked.

“As you pointed out, it doesn’t make sense, does it, Mr Peterson?” Harcourt looked around at the audience, all avidly following him. “Mr Stubbins was found dead the next day, in a locked room in the building, wasn’t he?”

“So – so the papers say,” Peterson nodded.

“So you couldn’t have seen him leave at 11.57am, could you?”

“I’ve recorded it,” Peterson said, running his finger along the line. “I saw him go – I joked he just had time to get out. Mr Potter would’ve looked for him if he wasn’t recorded as having left – it ain’t my fault he’s dead!” he said, wild-eyed.

“No one is saying it’s your fault, Mr Peterson,” the Judge said firmly. “You are not on trial here.”

“Oh! Er, good. ‘Cos I ain’t done nuffin’, Your Honour.” His hand shook over the book. “I was real careful about loggin’ everyone, ‘cos I was worried me writin’ wasn’t good enough. But ‘ere, look, it’s as clear as day – ” He held the book out towards the Judge.

Anglehurst gestured for a court clerk to bring him the book, looking up and silencing the people who were snickering. “Your writing is perfectly clear,” he confirmed. “Thank you, Mr Peterson.”
He returned the book to the clerk, who held on to it.

“Now, could you tell me how you know who’s going in and out?” Harcourt asked. “I’m sure we’ve all visited the Ministry, but just so it’s clear from the business end, as it were.”

“Well, we check everyone’s wand, like, and takes their names too.”

“Do you test for Polyjuice?”

“Wha - ? No, no-one’s never told me I needed to do that!”

“I’m sure it isn’t done as standard,” Harcourt said calmly. “I just wanted the court to be absolutely clear, because it’s quite obvious, isn’t it, that a man who was found dead in the building could not have left it.”

“Ohjection, Your Honour,” Hinch stood up.

Anglehurst looked at him.

“It’s being implied that I was able to get into the building and leave it without passing through reception. I can vouch for the fact that Mr Potter can enter and leave the building without passing through reception, as I saw him there myself one day and checked the records. It is, therefore, quite possible that Mr Stubbins was also capable of entering and leaving the building without registering.”

Harcourt paused, straightening his robes.

Harry thought it was a pretty good defence, and wondered what Harcourt would do.

“Mr Hinch,” Harcourt said, “everyone here knows that Harry Potter can apparate into and out of the Ministry, and there are well over a hundred wizards and beings who are grateful for the fact, as he saved them from a horrible death amidst the spitting heat and roaring flames. Not to mention,” he said, looking round at the grim faces his words had evoked, “the husbands and wives and children and friends who must have feared, on hearing word of the fire, that they would never see their loved ones again, and will therefore, forever hold Mr Potter in the highest esteem.” He continued to look round, acknowledging the occasional nodding head, and then whipped back to Hinch. “Are you suggesting that Mr Stubbins, who, it is claimed, wrote a note saying that he had deliberately caused the fire that might have killed them all, was similarly capable?” He paused fractionally, his tone changing as he turned to include the Wizengamot in his address. “Peter Stubbins, I should inform you, is a man who gained only two Acceptables in his OWLs, and did not achieve any NEWTS. This is a man who was unemployed, until he managed to get a post working as dogsbody – sorry - as assistant in the potions’ labs at the Ministry,” he paused to allow a snicker or two to pass. “Does it seem likely to you that such a man would have the capacity to apparate into and out of the Ministry?

“Mr Hinch, however, is a man who managed to achieve outstanding results in not only his OWLs, but also his NEWTS – NEWTs taken in the year when Death Eaters were running riot in Hogwarts and Voldemort attacked the school and met his end in the Great Hall itself. This is a man who is so cool and collected that despite that, he achieved the highest marks in Arithmancy that had been awarded for over fifty years! A man who has been holding one of the most highly respected jobs in the Ministry for over fifteen years, a job he managed to keep secret from his own family throughout that time.” He looked around again, his gaze encouraging people to look at Hinch. “Mr Hinch is not someone to underestimate, ladies and gentlemen, and yet I do not suggest that even Mr Hinch is, or was, able to apparate into, or out of the Ministry.”
There was a sussuraton of surprise.

“Mr Hinch did not need to apparate into or out of the Ministry, because Mr Hinch had a very rare object in his home. A twin item to one in the Department of Mysteries. Known as a vanishing cabinet, these cupboards allow the transfer of goods, or people, between two locations, without the aid of a port-key or the need for apparition.” He looked around at his audience, who were exchanging various looks.

“I can see some of you have heard of such items before; to others of you, they may sound unusual and strange. But Mr Hinch’s job was dealing with unusual and strange objects, investigating the furthest reaches of magic.” He pulled forward a file. “One half of the pair of vanishing cabinets was in the inventory of the Department of Mysteries, ladies and gentlemen. It had been retrieved from Borgin and Burkes’ shop in Knockturn Alley: it had been used, during the Voldemort years, to allow Death Eaters into Hogwarts on the night that Headmaster Albus Dumbledore was killed.”

There was a huge gasp.

Hinch sat with his eyes narrowed, watching.

“You’re all wondering, of course, if Mr HInch managed to steal the second cabinet from Hogwarts, in the chaos that followed. I have to tell you that I have it on the highest authority that the cabinet was burnt by Fiendfyre, the day of the Final Battle against the Dark Lord.”

There was a disappointed sigh.

“Such a problem, however, was not likely to be an impediment to Mr Hinch: I would like to call Thomas Babcock.”

Harry sat up straight: he knew that name.

“Mr Babcock,” Harcourt said when the man had taken the stand and the formalities had been conducted, “could you tell the members of the Wizengamot what you do for a living?”

“I’m a furniture maker, Sir,” the man said, with some pride.

Hermione glanced at Harry, who nodded his head at her.

“And do you know the man in the dock, Sir?”

“Well, I recognise him, if that’s what you’re asking,” Mr Babcock answered. “He asked me to make a cabinet for him a couple of years ago.”

There was some whispering in the court.

“Can you describe that cabinet to us, Mr Babcock?”

“I’ve got a picture of it,” Mr Babcock offered. “I take pictures of all my pieces.”

Harry nodded to himself; he did the same.

“That would be most helpful,” Harcourt said, and accepted the photograph that Mr Babcock removed from his robes. “If I may project this for members of the Wizengamot, Your Honour?” Harcourt asked.

“Yes, yes, we’d all like to see,” Anglehurst waved a hand.
Soon, the picture of the cabinet was projected on a screen.

“A handsome item,” Harcourt said. “Was the design yours, Mr Babcock?”

“No indeed, I had very precise instructions from Mr Nott,” Babcock said. He fumbled in his pocket and brought out a roll of parchment. “If you’d like to see…?”

Harcourt took the scroll, glanced at it and handed it to the Judge. “If I could project this, Your Honour? And this?” he added, walking back to his desk and retrieving another photograph.

“Go ahead,” Anglehurst said after a glance.

Soon, there were two pictures of identical cabinets on the screen, and nestled between the two the parchment which contained a precise diagram of the cupboard, along with measurements.

Everyone shifted in their seats, craning and muttering.

“The photo on the left,” Harcourt said, pointing at it, “is the cabinet made by Mr Babcock to the instructions, shown here in the middle, given to him by Mr Hinch – Mr Nott, as was. You can see his name in the corner of the parchment. The cabinet on the right is a picture of the cabinet taken for the inventory of goods in the Department of Mysteries. The back of the picture,” – he flipped it over – “shows the measurements of the cabinet, and a further picture of the interior. Did you know, Mr Babcock, that you were making a vanishing cabinet when you took this commission?”

Babcock jerked perceptibly. “I didn’t make a vanishing cabinet! No magic at all – Mr Nott specified particularly!”

“You made this cabinet without any magical properties?” Anglehurst leant forward.

“That’s right, Your Honour; Mr Nott didn’t want any special features.”

“Was that unusual?” Anglehurst asked.

“Not really, Sir, in my line of work. I do make furniture with small charms – self-oiling drawers, anti-ring protection, that sort of thing – but if a wizard wants a piece with a lot of magic – a travelling chest, or expanding wardrobe, that’s specialist work, that is. I’m a basics sort of man.”

“I see,” Harcourt said, checking first with a glance at Anglehurst that he was allowed to resume questioning himself. “I don’t quite understand why a buyer wouldn’t want those basic charms, though.”

“Oh, well, Sir, if a wizard was wanting the piece to have magical properties, he wouldn’t want my little charms interfering.”

“But if the wizard wanted magical properties, why would he have come to you at all? Rather than going to a specialist in the first place?”

“It’s cheaper,” Babcock said bluntly. “People buy my work – it’s good quality, good stout workmanship – and then they either do the spellwork themselves, if they know what they’re doing, or get in a wizard who can. Either way, it’s cheaper than buying a specialist piece.”

“So your deduction, on making this cupboard, was that it would have spells put on it by someone else?”

“Yes, that’s right.” His eyes darted to the pictures. “It never occurred to me to think of a vanishing
cabinet, though! I thought it might be for an expanding wardrobe….”

“Thank you very much for answering my questions, Mr Babcock,” Harcourt sat down.

“Mr Hinch? Do you have any questions for the witness?” Anglehurst asked.

“Just one, Your Honour,” Hinch said, leaning against the rail of the dock.

Babcock looked at him anxiously.

“Mr Babcock, you’re a man who knows the trade well. If you wanted to have a magical item of furniture made, and expense was not an issue, who would you go to?”

Babcock’s shoulders visibly relaxed. “That’s easy, Sir. Best man in the business is right here in London.”

“And that would be…?”

“Harry Potter, of course, Sir.”

“Score one to Nott,” Ron said, leaning over Hermione to whisper to Harry.

Hermione nodded. “Yes. Effective just linking your name in, even though there’s no reason you’d need a cabinet. I wonder what Harcourt will do?”

But Harcourt just stood up, and said, “If I could call the next witness, Your Honour?”

“Wise,” Hermione nodded. “He won’t want to get diverted, or put you on the stand.”

“Me? Not that I want to go up, but what’s wrong with me?” Harry whispered.

“You’ll distract the Wizengamot. People are already a bit afraid of you – but he needs to make sure that people are thinking only of Theo. You’ll muddy things up.” She patted his knee to show that she meant no offence.

They turned back to the auditorium as a whisper of interest filled the court.

Minister Benningdean was making himself comfortable in the witness box.

“Minister,” Harcourt said, “the news of the fire at the Ministry must have been a great shock to you.”

“Indeed it was,” Benningdean said. “Lives were lost, and our hearts go out to their families.”

“Yes indeed, although I gather that your own quick-thinking helped save the lives of the house-elves who work at the Ministry?”

“I wish I had been able to do more,” Benningdean said. “That everyone didn’t perish was entirely due to Harry Potter, wonderfully assisted by Mr Ron Weasley, many of the house elves themselves, and Mr Peterson, who did a remarkable job of remaining calm in a very difficult situation, in his first week of employment with us. I have recommended that they all be given Orders of Merlin, of course.”

“Even the elves?” Harcourt asked with a smile.

“Of course,” Benningdean said, face straight. “The passing of the Beings Equality Law helps us to
be aware of our brotherhood with other magical beings, and their generous acts of assistance in our
time of need and mortal peril is surely exactly what we need to acknowledge?"

“You’re right, of course,” Harcourt nodded. “The events that happened as a consequence of the fire
have shown many in a good light, yourself included, Sir, but, if you’ll forgive me, many people
will want to know why such dramatic intervention was needed in the first place.”

“Wow,” Ron whispered, “he’s really putting the Minister on the spot.”

“And rightly so,” Hermione answered, not taking her eyes from the proceedings. “In the Muggle
world, there would have been a huge inquiry.”

Benningdean obviously agreed with her.

“They would be asking the right question,” Benningdean said clearly, and people hushed and sat
forward.

He looked around the auditorium. “As Minister for Magic, I take full responsibility for the fact that
safeguards were not in place to prevent the deaths that occurred, nor the loss of one of our most
cherished buildings, the workplace of so many of our people.”

The silence was total.

“That’s very – brave – of you, Sir,” Harcourt said, “but what does that mean in practice?”

Several people took shocked breaths.

“There is nothing brave about it,” Benningdean said with some asperity. “There is something
wrong with our society if it takes bravery to own up to the fact that one could have done one’s job
better, to suggest ways that it could have been better.” He looked around again, engaging with his
audience. “I’m not pretending that I am better or worse than any Minister who has gone before me:
it was not as if I’d forgotten how to drop the wards, because I had never been told how to do so.
It’s not as if I could have activated a water system to put out the fire, because there was not one in
place. I stepped in to the job and got on with it, as, I’m sure, every Minister before me had done.
What I’m saying is, had I taken the time to think about it, I would have considered that those were
things that I, as Minister, or an appointed officer, needed to know. It was a failure in our system,
and I can only say that I will be ensuring that workers for this Ministry will never be put into such a
position again.”

“Well, Sir, I’m glad to hear it, but have you actually done anything about it?”

Again, gasps.

“If you’ll forgive me, Minister, this is not a place for political speeches,” Anglehurst looked over
his glasses at him.

“No, it isn’t, and I apologise if it has seemed so,” Benningdean bowed to the Judge. “But if I may
answer Mr Harcourt’s question, I believe it is entirely relevant to the case, Your Honour.”

“Keep it that way, please,” Anglehurst said curtly, looking from one to the other.

“Sir?” Harcourt nodded at the Judge and then looked to the Minister to continue.

“Nothing like this has ever happened, to my knowledge, before. Consequently, after the fire, I
called in expert help, and asked a Muggle Fire Investigator – a man who was present at the fire as
part of the cover-up we’d called in, and who was a great help in every way. He was outstanding in assisting with the cover-up, because, although working as a Muggle, he is, in fact, a Squib. In the Muggle world, investigators routinely work through buildings after fires, to ascertain the cause, and can advise on what issues made the fire worse, or prevented its spread, and so on. The excellent report I received from him was extremely helpful in pin-pointing major issues. On reading the report, someone who was familiar with the Department of Mysteries realised that items that should have been in there had been removed before the fire – that there weren’t the expected remains of these items. As a consequence, I asked Mrs Atkins, the Head of MLE, to investigate whether any member of staff had rescued items or whether a potential theft had occurred. Obviously, should it be theft, that then threw a different slant on the fire itself.”

“How so?” Harcourt asked.

“It meant that we needed to consider the option that the fire had been caused to cover up the theft.”

There were rumblings amongst the Wizengamot.

“I see. Thank you, Minister.” He turned to the Judge. “I would like to call my next witness, unless Mr Hinch has any questions for the Minister?”

“Mr Hinch?” Anglehurst asked.

Theo stood up. “Minister Benningdean, you’ve talked of the new Beings Equality Law. This act confers responsibilities, as well as rights, does it not? For example, if a house elf was guilty of theft, he could be prosecuted?”

“Yes, that’s so,” Benningdean agreed.

“Thank you, Minister,” Hinch said, and sat down.

“What’s that all about?” James whispered, looking across his father to ask Hermione.

“He’s clever,” she said. “If he suggested outright that the elves had stolen the stuff, it would be easy to dismiss it, because they couldn’t get out of the building. But he’s just planted the seed in people’s minds that they could be thieves, and left it at that.”

“This is going to be dirty, isn’t it?” James said, and Harry nodded.

“You were right to suggest Harcourt,” Harry said.

Hermione looked at him.

“I – I’m glad it’s not you,” Harry said simply.

She smiled and patted his knee.

Next in the witness box was Dowling. He made a bumbling job of explaining his actions. Hinch asked him to confirm that he hadn’t found anything on his first visit to his house, which he’d agreed. “But we didn’t know about the vault,” he’d said, in embarrassment.

Next, Harcourt called Dorothy Atkins.

Harry wanted to turn and look at Hermione, but it was as if all of them were scared to draw attention to the fact that she was of any particular interest.

“Mrs Atkins, you’ve been Head of Ministry Law Enforcement for how long?” Harcourt asked.
“Four years,” Atkins said, straightening her robe over her knee and looking entirely too at ease for Harry’s liking.

“And before that, you had a fiercesome reputation as a Prosecutor,” he prompted.

“Thank you,” she said, giving a coy smile.

“So how is it,” Harcourt went on, “and forgive me for this,” he turned and looked at the crowd, and said, “Mrs Atkins is my boss, so I’m hoping I’ll still have a job next week,” which promoted a huge laugh. “How is it,” he turned back to Mrs Atkins, “that such a shabby job was done in the search for the missing goods?”

Atkins’ back straightened only slightly. “It is my duty to be responsible for the actions of my staff, of course…”

“It is,” Harcourt said.

She flashed him a look. “Nevertheless, it’s clear that in this case, the first search was not satisfactory. I think it’s understandable that the Auror Team found the job difficult and embarrassing: any of us would find it difficult to treat our colleagues as if they were thieves.”

“But it was obvious, was it not, that one of them was a thief?” Harcourt pushed.

“We had the suggestion of a Muggle to go on,” she said stiffly.

“You didn’t believe the report, Mrs Atkins?”

“Muggles are not versed in wizarding ways.”

“Well, that’s true, but they are versed, I believe, in understanding fires, which unfortunately, is not a skill available in the wizarding world, is it?”

Mrs Atkins said nothing.

“Please answer Mr Harcourt, Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst prompted.

“As you say,” she said.

Harcourt paused a moment, allowing everyone to feel a moment of discomfort, and then moved on. “So, let us be honest here, Mrs Atkins: did you feel that the Auror Team had done a satisfactory job?”

“How do you feel their work could have been improved?”

“I am not familiar with the practicality of search techniques,” she said.

“Mrs Atkins, at the risk of appearing fawning, you’re known as a witch of huge acuity and intellectual ability. When you read the reports, and later found out that items had been found during the second search, what did you feel were the errors that had led to them being missed in the first place?”

Atkins looked at him, and then answered, “I believe it was an error that someone with experience of the items in the Department of Mysteries was not taken along with the Auror Team. And it appears from the report that the searches could not have been as thorough as one would have
wished.”

“Thank you, Mrs Atkins,” Harcourt said, and sat down.

“Is that it?” Ron whispered, outrage clear in his voice.

“I think - I hope – he’s doing it to put her at her ease, and to make people aware of her,” Hermione said.

“Put her at her ease?” James asked.

Hermione nodded. “He pushed her only a little – as an ex-Prosecutor herself, she’d expect some pressure. She’ll step down feeling that she’s hasn’t anything to fear. But the Wizengamot now know she exists, in the context of this case.”

“Well, I hope you’re right that that means something,” Ron shrugged, nudging his shoulder against Hermione to take away any sting from his words.

Hinch declined to question Atkins.

The case broke for lunch; all witnesses had been told that they were to remain on site, should they need to be called later in the day.

Harry and his friends joined the queue in a huge marquee set up in the field above the auditorium, where long trestle tables were set up and steaming cauldrons of food were at the ready.

“We’ll talk tonight,” Ron said, after one look at the jostling throng of people.

“Good idea,” Harry nodded.

He’d looked round before entering the marquee, but seen no sign of Kingsley or Severus, but there were numerous tents around the site, so he wasn’t surprised.

When they returned to the auditorium, the sky was grey and threatening over the spell protecting the court. Far below, white horses rode on the grey-green sea, curling and foaming over a rock formation out in the bay.

Harry wanted to get his broomstick and launch himself into that sky, to skim the waves and hear the roar of the ocean arguing with the earth.

He shook his head to dispel the fanciful thought.

Anglehurst had taken his seat and was just turning to Harcourt when a member of the Wizengamot raised their hand.

“Madam Browning?” Anglehurst asked. “You have a question?”

“Yes, Argus - Your Honour. Several of us have had a chat, and wondered whether things might be speeded up a bit if Veritaserum was used on Mr N – Hinch. Not that I want to try and be doing your job, for you, of course,” she said, simpering a little behind her hand.
Anglehurst shuffled his papers and then looked up. Everyone was watching him.

“Firstly, my apologies to anyone who is finding the proceedings – the first case of Treason to come to court since Borrowic in 1471 – to be tedious,” he said, casting a glare around the auditorium which caused several people to dip their heads and avoid his glance. “The prisoner is accused of a number of crimes, and I did indeed consider whether he could be tried separately for them, thus relieving the heavy duty that falls on you all, in terms of the length that this case is likely to take. However, careful perusal of the charges shows that they are inextricably bound together. The accused is innocent until proven guilty: I will not speed the course of this trial in order to provide less inconvenience to anyone here, at the expense of the defendant’s right to a fair and open hearing of all the evidence both sides wish to present. I hope that is perfectly clear?”

There was a silence, as in a classroom of children being told off by their teacher.

“Good,” he said. “However, bearing in mind that this may prove a difficult and lengthy case, if anyone is suffering discomfort I will consider shortening each session. Please see the court clerk at the end of the afternoon, if you have concerns.” He stared at everyone forbiddingly over his glasses. “As to suggestions that imply I do not know my job – ”

“No, no,” Madam Browning said faintly.

“A man has the right to conduct his own defence in our law. A wizard conducting his own defence cannot be given Veritaserum, because the side-effects have a deleterious effect that would be unfair. Moreover, Mr Hinch has been an Unspeakable for a number of years. Having consulted the list of skills that may be developed within that role, I have to inform you that some Unspeakables are able to withstand the effects of Veritaserum, and therefore, even if Mr Hinch were not conducting his own defence, I would not consider its use appropriate in this case. Do you have any other suggestions for how I run my court, Madam?”

“Not at all, I meant no offence,” the witch said, bright red and sitting down with a thump.

With a satisfied look, Anglehurst turned to the Prosecution. “Mr Harcourt. Proceed, if you would.”

“Thank you, Your Honour. I will try and be as succinct as I may,” he said, with a small smile. “Being entirely in agreement with Your Honour about the use of Veritaserum, I beg the court’s permission to use a new potion, called Veritavision.”

A murmur of interest ran around the court-room.

“You think Mr Hinch won’t be immune to this new potion?” Anglehurst asked.

“Oh, he doesn’t take it,” Harcourt said. “The witnesses do.”

There were gasps of surprise and shock.

“I’m sorry, you wish to force witnesses to submit to the use of a new potion?” Anglehurst frowned.

“Your Honour, the potion has been created and thoroughly tested by a world-renowned Potions’ Master – ”

“Who?” Hinch demanded.

Harcourt turned to look at him. “By the inventor of Veritaserox, and a number of other invaluable potions – Master Severus Snape,” Harcourt said.
“I’m not taking any potion created by Snape,” Hinch bit out.

“As I said, you don’t have to take it,” Harcourt said smugly.

“I object to a potion of his making,” Hinch said.

“On what grounds?” Harcourt asked. “Was he not your Potions Master when you were at Hogwarts?”

“Yes, but – ”

“And did you not achieve the highest possible grades in both your OWLS and your NEWTS?”

“Yes, but – ”

“And were you not having private tuition classes with Professor Snape whilst he was Headmaster in order to help you to achieve that grade?”

“I did,” Hinch said, after a moment.

“And would you have been able to get the job as an Unspeakable had you not achieved it?”

Hinch bit his lip.

“You will answer, Mr Hinch,” Anglehurst said.

“It was a requirement of my employment,” he agreed tightly.

“Then on what basis could you possibly object to the work of a renowned Potions Master, the quality of whose work you have first-hand experience of?”

Hinch’s face was red.

“If you have no good grounds,” Anglehurst said, “I see no objection in principle, if the witnesses are willing. However, I would like to hear more details first, Mr Harcourt. Is Master Snape here to explain?”

“He will be with us shortly, I hope, Your Honour,” Harcourt said. “And knowing the fact that he knew the defendant might be seen as in some way controversial, the Potions have been made to his formula by another Potions Maker, all of it supervised by the court Potions Master, Mr Davis, who is here with us today.”

“Well, it seems hard to see any objection to that,” Anglehurst said.

“No, Your Honour. If you would allow a demonstration of the effects of the potion?”

“That sounds a very sensible idea,” Anglehurst said.

Harcourt beckoned to a man at the side.

Harry felt his stomach lurching as he recognised Master Davis, the Potions Master who had dosed him with Veritaserum. Behind him, holding a tray with three small vials, came an extremely comely witch in a very low-cut gown. She was obviously walking carefully to avoid the vials slipping, Harry thought, although she appeared to look rather uncomfortable. He wondered if Davis insisted on her costume.
Dirty old man.

Davis gestured to her to put the tray with the vials down on Harcourt’s table, then murmured to her.

With a small nod of assent, she teetered off over the uneven stones, and returned carrying a pensieve. She staggered back with it underneath her bosom, the manner of holding it accentuating her assets even more.

“Honestly!” Hermione said, glancing at Ron, Harry, and James. “Men!”

“You’ve got to admit, that’s an eyeful,” Ron said.

Harry looked round. “Every man is staring, and every woman tutting,” he said slowly. He turned back to look at the assistant, but she had moved back to stand at the edge of the arena.

“Now,” Harcourt said, “I’d like three volunteers from the Wizengamot.”

There was total silence.

“Goodness me,” he said. “I am merely looking for three souls, not to take this potion, but just to allow their memory of the last three or four minutes to be put into a pensieve, and watched by all here.”

“Oh, for Merlin’s sake,” Anglehurst said, “I’ll start this off. It had better be worth it, Harcourt.”

“Thank you, Your Honour,” Harcourt said, taking over the pensieve. “I have no doubt of that.”

Anglehurst humphed, and then put his wand to his head, extracting a string of memory and putting it into the bowl.

Davis took it over to the teleconverter, and cast the image in front of them.

There were a few sniggers, as people realised that Anglehurst’s attention had been pretty much on the assistant the whole time.

Anglehurst rolled his eyes, as the scene came to a close.

“Two other volunteers, please,” Harcourt asked, as Davis returned the bowl to Anglehurst, where he dabbled his wand, pulling out the memory and returning it.

An elderly witch put up her hand, followed by a middle-aged wizard.

The witch had spent more time looking at Davis, after one obviously scandalised glance at the assistant, and the wizard had spent the entire time looking at the assistant’s chest. There was quite a lot of sniggering and amusement.

“Now,” Harcourt said, “Is everyone in agreement that these memories are a true recording of what we have all here witnessed? That should I ask any other among you to give their memory for viewing, the result would be more or less the same?”

There were general murmurs of consent.

“Thank you. I would now like three volunteers to take a dose of Veritavision, and repeat exactly what we have done here. There are no harmful ingredients in the potion, and it has been used in two other courts across the world.”
The wizard who had last given his memory put up his hand. “I don’t mind taking the potion.”

“Thank you, Sir. That would be very useful indeed.”

“Do you need all three of us?” Anglehurst asked.

“No, Your Honour. This is a demonstration, and I think the effects will be clear either way.”

Two others put up their hands.

“Thank you,” Harcourt nodded.

The three people came forward, and the assistant stepped forward too. Davis spoke to them briefly and quietly, checking for medical conditions.

A middle-aged witch was the first to swallow a dose.

“If I could ask the other two to stay where they are, but to wear a blindfold, so that we can all see them, but know that their results are not tainted by exposure to our first volunteer’s results,” Harcourt said.

Chairs were brought and the two sat in them wearing blindfolds.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying the unexpected proceedings.

The witch had her memory extracted, and put into the bowl. Davis took it to the machine.

A huge gasp rose from the crowd as the memory began to play.

“Oh my god!” Harry gasped, staring, along with everyone else, at the voluptuous assistant standing beside Davis.

The gasp was followed by giggles.

The two with blindfolds were turning side to side, wondering what was going on.

“Please don’t say anything,” Harcourt said loudly.

The memory was returned to the woman, and the next witness swallowed the dose and went through the same process. Again, the laughter.

The last candidate was the man whose memory had been used in the first round.

“Right, I’m dying to know what everyone’s laughing at,” he said, as his memory was fed into the converter once again.

“Oh lord,” he gasped, “really?” as the image began to play.

For there, instead of a young witch with her bosom bursting out of her robe as she hefted the pensieve in the memory, was Severus Snape, in a woman’s dress, hairy chest evident in the low neckline.

“You can’t ever let him forget that,” Ron whispered, grinning from ear to ear.

“What people do in the name of science,” Hermione chuckled.

Everyone was laughing. And staring at the witch beside Davis, who suddenly doubled over.
Everyone fell silent.

And then, as she straightened, there stood Severus Snape, in woman’s robes and shoes, six inches of hairy legs on display under the hem. With a bow to the Judge, and a quick word, he cast his wand over himself and stood in severe black robes.

Harry’s heart gave a little jump.

He looked magnificent.

“Thank you, Master Snape, for that inspired demonstration,” Harcourt said.

“This potion seems remarkable,” Anglehurst said. “A revolution in detection.”

“Thank you, Your Honour,” Snape said.

Harry felt so proud of him, his heart swelling with it.

“And if you would clarify what we’ve just witnessed?” Anglehurst asked.

“Of course.” Snape turned and addressed the Wizengamot. “In the first images projected from our volunteers, what the eye perceives was clearly demonstrated. Veritavision, however, allows you to see through disguises such as glamours or Polyjuice. I had dosed myself with Polyjuice prior to this demonstration, taking a form that was likely to attract sufficient attention to make the experiment clear.”

There were a few sniggers, quickly muffled.

“It certainly did that,” Anglehurst agreed. “And you say this has already been used in other courts?”

“Yes, in two cases in the last month,” Snape said, “in China and Australia.”

“Well, it’s not often you live to see the invention of one great development, let alone two,” Anglehurst said. He looked around the court-room. “This has been an excellent demonstration, but I do not wish anyone to be in awe of what may come of it. The evidence that we may see as a result is only part of the evidence that may be presented to you, and it is your duty to weigh everything you see and hear in this case.”

The courtroom nodded silently.

“Look at Nott,” Ron said.

“Look at Atkins,” Hermione hissed.

Harry had already been watching her: her hands were gripped tightly in her lap, her legs almost strangling each other, they were so tightly crossed.

“All the witnesses who’ve seen her – she must be thinking through them all,” Harry said urgently. “She’ll –” he began rising from his seat.

“You can’t apparate out of here,” Hermione said, hand on his knee, “and Kingsley has the security in hand.”

Harry determined not to let her out of his sight.
“And now,” Harcourt said, “if you would bear with me, I would like to recall Dolph Peterson.”

Hinch’s face went as pinched as a hag’s.

Everyone watched as Peterson took the potion and his memory was replayed.

There were gasps as they heard the same words that had come out of Peter Stubbins’ mouth as he left the building, but the person they now saw talking to the receptionist was Theodore Hinch.

As the memory stopped playing, Harcourt turned to the court. “I don’t think any of us can be in any uncertainty about this, but for the record, Mr Peterson, can you tell me if the man you now see in the memory is in this court?”

“Y-essir,” Peterson said. He pointed his finger at the dock. That’s ‘im, Sir.”

“Please note for the record that the witness is pointing at the accused, Mr Theodore Hinch,” Harcourt said. “Thank you, Your Honour, I have no further questions,” and he sat down.

“Mr Hinch? Do you have any questions for the witness?” Anglehurst asked.

“I do not,” Hinch said.

“Very well, let us continue. Mr Harcourt?”

“Thank you, Your Honour.” Harcourt swung his gaze, slowly and deliberately across Hinch, and then around the court. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have just seen Mr Hinch leaving the Ministry, whilst Polyjuiced to appear as Peter Stubbins. This simple act leads us, does it not, into the heart of this case. Although Peter Stubbins apparently wrote a suicide note, and apparently accidentally set fire to the Ministry, it shows us that Mr Hinch was perfectly aware of Peter Stubbins’ presence in the building. On Centennial Maintenance Day. There were only four wizards in the building who were Purebloods. At least, Mr Hinch thought at the time that he was a Pureblood, had been brought up as a Pureblood. I’ll come back to this,” he said, looking around, a heavy expression on his face. “Let us move first to the obvious question: if Peter Stubbins had indeed committed suicide, why did Mr Hinch leave the building pretending to be him? Why did he not report that he had been in the building himself? Why did he not report that he had seen Mr Stubbins? Or, if he was suicidal, make any attempt to save him? I think, one might need to remember, that Mr Stubbins’ body was found in a room that was locked from the outside. A room in the Department of Mysteries, and utterly familiar to Mr Hinch. A room that Mr Stubbins would have been unable to access without the help of an Unspeakable. No Unspeakables are recorded as having entered the building that day, but we have incontrovertible truth that Mr Hinch was there.” He paused. “It is the Prosecution’s case that Mr Stubbins did not, in fact, commit suicide, but was murdered by Mr Hinch.” He allowed the weight of that to sink in, a moment for the evidence to embed, before he went on, “And one more small fact is of great importance to us here: Mr Hinch had the vanishing cabinet copied two years before the fire. He had a secret vault built at about the same time.” He looked around, and knew he had everyone in the palm of his hand.

“Mr Hinch and Mr Stubbins worked on the same floor of the Ministry, and I’m sure, any Ministry employees here who have taken the lifts to their department will know that it doesn’t take many days before you meet every single one of the fellow employees on your floor.”

Many people were looking at each other and nodding.

“He’s good,” Ron breathed, fingers locking with Hermione’s as if in congratulation.

Harry nodded, relief in his gut that it wasn’t him up there.
“I put it to you,” Harcourt said, his eyes jumping from one member of the Wizengamot to another, “that not only did Mr Hinch steal all the artefacts that were listed earlier from the Ministry, but that he had planned to do so for at least two years, and that he had worked in conjunction with Mr Stubbins to achieve this. I’m sure several questions are springing to your minds even as I speak,” he paused, and then raised a hand, and then began ticking off the questions on his fingers. “Why, you might ask, did Mr Hinch kill Mr Stubbins? Was it an accident? Remember though, if you will, that Mr Hinch must have gone to the Ministry that day, ready and prepared with Polyjuice. He knew that he was going to walk out of that building as Mr Stubbins, and that he was going to leave his colleague in the building, either already dead, or to perish.” He paused again, taking a sip of water.

“I’m sure you’re wondering, though, why such an act would have required setting the entire Ministry on fire. Although it hid the robbery, by anyone’s standards, it was excessive. Moreover, the goblins who had come to service the lifts did not just die from the smoke, ladies and gentlemen, but were all attacked by a blasting spell, their bodies falling to the bottom of the deepest shaft in the Ministry to ensure their deaths. Had the accused just wanted a small fire to hide a robbery, this action was entirely unnecessary. A fire starting in the Potions Department could have been confined to that floor alone – the floor it shared with the Department of Mysteries. But whoever set the fire – or shared in the plan – deliberately set about destroying any means by which the staff in the building would either be able to access the fire, in order to put it out, or to escape. The persons who did this intended to kill the people in the building.”

There was a huge gasp, partly of shock, partly because it seemed as if this case was going to be rather exciting after all.

“I can see you’re all shocked, and I’m afraid you are going to be even more shocked,” Harcourt shook his head.

“This is a court of law, Mr Harcourt,” Anglehurst cut in sharply, “not a stage for theatrics.”

“Your Honour,” Harcourt bowed his head towards the Judge, and then looked around again. “The Ministry was destroyed on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day,” he said. “We have interviewed every single person who was in the building that day. Every single one, apart from the gobstones players who had inadvertently remained in the building, immersed in a game, and Mr Stubbins, was either Muggle-born, or raised.”

There was an astonished muttering from around the Wizengamot.

“I have checked with staff who worked in the Ministry in the week leading up to Centennial Lift Maintenance Day: not a single warning sign was placed anywhere in the building, or owled to staff. The estimable Mr Peterson on reception was himself Muggle-born, and in his first week of employment. He had no idea what Centennial Lift Maintenance meant. But the people who chose to set the Ministry on fire did. And let me leave you in no doubt as to whether this was an accident: it wasn’t.” Again, he looked at the rapt audience.

“The cauldron was not a forgotten error: the ingredients did not belong to any known potion. They were, however, highly volatile. Ladies and gentlemen, they were chosen to explode, sending an unquenchable fireball through the potions workrooms. Whoever had set the potion going hadn’t stayed around to see what would happen: they knew what would happen. They had deliberately, callously and without remorse removed the possibility of escape, and set the Ministry alight, knowing that it contained many dozens of Muggle-born witches and wizards. They attempted mass murder.”

He was silent, head bowed for a moment.
A dark cloud passed overhead, its shadow edging over the people below, swallowing them up, before regurgitating them as it flowed on.

Harry shuddered.

He could not take his eyes from Theodore Nott – he still found it impossible to think of him as Hinch, and wondered, bizarrely, how women ever coped with changing their own name at marriage – and felt shocked beyond reason, given that he wasn’t hearing anything he didn’t know, to think that that familiar face had plotted to do anything so terrible.

How could he?

How could anyone?

But people did.

He thought of Muggle history, even in the last hundred years.

How could people do such awful things to others?

He really didn’t understand it.

He had fought: he had killed Voldemort, but he had never felt filled with hate.

It had just felt…necessary.

Did this wholesale annihilation feel necessary to Nott and Atkins?

And how were they going to get Atkins?

Now that she was forewarned? Now that she must be thinking of all the possible witnesses to what she’d done and what she’d said, and surely must be plotting to silence them.

To kill them?

“As for the charge of treason: not only did the conspirators aim to destroy the fabric of the Ministry itself, its Muggle-born personnel, but the Minister himself,” he raised a hand and pointed at Benningdean, “was in the building.”

Everyone turned to stare at the Minister.

“I would like to call the Minister,” Harcourt said.

The Minister was in the box for some little time, while Harcourt asked him to detail his experience, including the fact that the fire and smoke seemed to have accessed their floor, despite the distance from Floor 9 where the fire had started.

Overhead, rain was falling, dissipating over the dome, but the light was failing too.

“Thank you, Minister,” Anglehurst said, when Harcourt had finished his questions.

Again, Hinch declined to ask any questions.

“Mr Harcourt,” Anglehurst asked, “would this be a good time to break for the day? Or do you have any witnesses you need to call this afternoon?”
“I wanted to call Forbin, the goblin who survived that attack, Your Honour, but I am sure he will be happy to give his evidence in the morning,” Harcourt said, shuffling his papers.

“Look at Theo!” Hermione hissed.

“Oh, that’s put the wind up him,” Ron grinned. “Excellent!”

Harry was silent. Kingsley was walking across the floor.

“What’s he up to?” James asked, as Kingsley leant forward, an elbow on the rim of the Judge’s bench, having a word with Anglehurst.

Harry didn’t know, but there was something immensely reassuring about seeing Kingsley in the flesh, resplendent in robes, relaxed and in control.

Harcourt nodded, and Kingsley stood to the side.

“We’re going to call it a day,” he said. “Everyone, please make your way a row at a time to the port-key tent, starting with the back row. I apologise for the time this will take, and we’ve arranged for the tea-trolley to come round to provide refreshments whilst you wait. However, witnesses are to remain here for their own protection. Each witness has been assigned their own accommodation and protection officers. If you would wait in your present positions, your officer will come and find you. I’m sorry, Minister, that means you too,” he said, as Benningdean stood up.

Dorothy Atkins was walking towards the exit steps.

“Mrs Atkins, your further testimony is also required. I’m sorry for the inconvenience, but please wait for your protection officer.”

“Oh, excellent,” Ron beamed.

It was evident that Atkins was furious, but seeing the Minister standing there accepting the dictates of the court, she bit her lip, and nodded her head in assent.

As they waited to leave, Harry worried. He looked for Kingsley, and then Severus, but neither were in sight.

As they stepped out into the field above the auditorium, Harry turned again. There were people everywhere, a queue to the port-key tent in front of them, others milling by the refreshment tent, deciding to have a bite to eat before heading back.

Outside of the bubble, the wind tore across the hillside, a hint of sea-salt in the sting against his face. Harry felt a sense of calm enveloping him, and it was aided when Ron touched his arm.

“Stop panicking: Kingsley has everything in hand. His people are all over the place.”

“You know them?” Harry looked around.

“I’ve met some of them because of Rose, and I know the tactics, Harry,” Ron said, his stance suddenly reflecting all his years as an Auror.

Harry nodded. “I’m just worried about the witnesses.”

“Trust him,” Ron said, and Harry realised how awful it was that Ron was telling him he needed to trust the man he loved.
It was a strange feeling to shrug off the anxiety and …responsibility that always seemed part of him.

He turned to Ron and smiled. “Yeah. I do.”
Back at Grimmauld Place, they were all tucking into the hearty steak and kidney pie and mash that Mitty and Dinky had prepared, when Kingsley strode in.

Harry found his face breaking into a smile, and glanced across at Severus, whose lips too were quirking.

Kingsley grinned back, and slipped into place along the table, between George and Minerva.

Mitty popped a loaded plate in front of him.

“Thanks, Mitty,” Kingsley laid a hand on the elf’s shoulder. “I’m starving.”

They ate and drank and discussed the events of the day, a sense of anticipation that it had all got going at last.

After forty minutes, though, Kingsley got up.

Harry looked at him. “You’re going back?”

“Yeah,” Kingsley said. “I’m going to stay there until the trial is over. I’ll feel happier with my eye on those two.”

Harry nodded, and stood up.

Severus too.

“Sort tea and coffee for everyone, James,” Harry said, as they left the room.

In the parlour by the floo, Kingsley said, “I’m sorry to have to go so soon.”

“I’m glad you came,” Harry said. “Do you want us to come and stay there with you?” He glanced at Severus. “Maybe you’ve talked about this already?”

“No,” Severus shook his head.

“I knew we’d have to play this by ear,” Kingsley said. “I didn’t expect Harcourt to call Severus today. I thought we’d have another day before Atkins started to think about it all.”

“Can we trust him?” Harry frowned.

“We have to,” Severus said. “We’re committed to whatever happens now.”

They were silent a moment, and then Kingsley reached forward, a hand to each of their arms. “Look after each other while I’m gone, hmm?” and then he kissed them, a brief brush of lips on cheeks, and was gone.

Harry looked at Snape. “Will you stay here? Shall I come back to Spain?” He paused, feeling awkward. “I – would you rather not…?”

“I’ll stay here, if that’s alright.”

Harry nodded, strangely uncomfortable.
Snape took his chin. “We’d better get back down to the hordes,” he said, and then, instead of moving away, leant in and kissed Harry slowly and thoroughly, and as if nothing else mattered.

There was a very deliberate cough from the doorway.

Severus slowly released Harry’s mouth, his hand still holding the back of his neck.

“I’m sorry to interrupt, but if you must canoodle by the floo…” Minerva said.

“Sorry,” Harry said, going bright red, and then cursing that he was. He felt like he was in school again.

She chuckled, walking over, her gait rather stiff, Harry noticed, and Chucked him under the chin. “No need to apologise in your own house,” she chided, “and I wouldn’t have disturbed you if I wasn’t feeling my age.”

“Can I do anything for you, Minerva?” Severus asked, and his voice was gentle and brisk at the same time.

“Only if you can turn your talents to curing old age,” she shook her head. “I never find the floo very easy after eating.”

She gave him a surprised smile. “Aye, that would be grand,” she nodded. She paused. “I think I’ll not come tomorrow. I know I suggested the place, but I’d forgotten how hard the seating is. There seems a chill that comes right off the stone, don’t you find?”

“Do you want to be there?” Harry asked, taking her hand.

“Want and can are two different things at my age,” she said, not looking at him.

“Minerva, if you were uncomfortable, I’m sure there were many members of the Wizengamot who also were,” Harry said, “and we don’t want them hurrying a decision because of a cold bottom. I can perhaps do some heating and softening charms, if I can persuade them to allow me.”

“Well, I’ll send Anglehurst a letter, if you like,” she said, “but I think I’ll rest tomorrow. If you can do something, I’d like to come along the next day. Now,” she said, “home please.” She looked from one to the other. “Good to see you boys happy,” and she patted Severus on the cheek.

Later, Harry was cleaning his teeth, still feeling a little awkward about his first night alone with Severus.

Snape was already in bed, and lifted the duvet as he came over.

Harry slipped in, and then lay facing Snape as the cover dropped over him. “I can’t believe you made that potion,” he said. “Did you – did you do it – for this case?”

Snape turned on to his back, and sighed. “Is this gratitude?” he said, voice devoid of emotion.

“What?” Harry blinked.

Harry sat up. “Well, I should hope so!”

There was an awkward silence.

Then Harry smacked his hand down hard on Snape’s stomach, the hollow sound echoing in the room.

“What the fuck?!” Snape swore, jack-knifing into a sitting position and swinging round to face Harry.

“You implied I’m in bed with you out of gratitude!” Harry yelled. “You stupid fucking prick!”

They stared at each other, Harry kneeling facing Snape, tempers hot and breath fast.

And then Snape raised an eyebrow. “You aren’t grateful?”

“Of course I’m grateful! And it has nothing whatsoever to do with this,” he snapped, waving a hand between them. “As if you didn’t know that!”

Snape’s smile widened, and then they were kissing, hard and angry, biting at each other’s lips and tongue.

Snape had his fist around Harry’s cock, and Harry didn’t know when he’d got hard, but he was, the flesh straining as if it was too large for the skin that Snape was working so effectively.

He shuddered, his head dropping, his mouth finding the old ridge of scars where Snape had been bitten. He knew the skin there was a little numb at the core, yet sensitive around the wound, and he lapped it, his tongue flat and cat-like.

Snape hissed.

Harry was sitting across his lap, and Snape’s cock was trapped under him. He shifted, bracing his legs and lifting so that Snape’s cock sprang free, and Snape groaned as Harry stuck his fingers in his mouth, coating them with saliva, and then reached down, smearing them over the head.

Snape kept hold of him as Harry leant over, reaching for the lubricant on the bedside table. He smeared it down Snape’s shaft, more onto his own, his fingers tangling with Snape’s.

“God, fuck, yeah,” he grunted, as Snape enveloped them both in his hand.

He was getting close, so close. His head dropped forward, and then, deliberately, he pulled away, lifting a leg and scooping one of Snape’s up in his arm, shifting so that he knelt between Snape’s thighs.

“Want to fuck you,” he whispered, bending forward, nipping at Snape’s ear. His slick fingers traced the ridge down the centre of Snape’s balls, sliding backwards…

Snape spread his legs further…an invitation…Harry’s breath stuttered, and his finger brushed forward, circling, teasing…he curved his back, bending to get the head of Snape’s cock in his mouth, flicking his tongue at the frenulum.

He looked up at Snape, lips against the spongy head. “So you do make some decent tasting potions,” he grinned, licking the lubricant as if Snape was a lollipop.
“Forethought,” Snape looked down at him, eyes dark.

“Of course,” Harry smiled, setting to work with hands and mouth.

“In,” Snape grunted, minutes later. “Now.”

Harry took his time, sliding his lips slowly off, his fingers crooking.

Snape’s whole body arced off the bed. On the outside of Snape’s leg, where Harry’s hand was still under it, Snape’s fingers scrabbled at his, pleading.

“Harry.”

Snape’s eyes were black, and Harry felt his heart sing, a loud clear note, because making Snape so desperate, almost wordless, was just brilliant.

Harry grasped at Snape’s fingers, a reassurance, and then he lifted his leg over his shoulder, stroked a soothing hand down Snape’s quivering belly, and then he was sliding home.

They both groaned. Harry stilled a moment, and then pulled back, slamming in. And then it was all movement, and guttural sounds, and wet kisses, and Harry’s brain doing everything it could to hang on, to keep going, because seeing Snape unravelling, trusting him to do this was just more than amazing, and then Snape bowed, and made an extraordinary sound, which was awful and marvellous and unbelievable and Harry was just coming and coming.

He grinned, head dizzy, thighs burning and heart pounding and sweat sheening both of them, and Snape reached up, and lips met, and then he was slithering out, and he wasn’t ready to, he wanted to be part of Snape but then Snape pulled him onto his chest and stroked a hand down his back, and Harry collapsed, and it was bloody brilliant again.

“Maybe we ought to keep a pensieve of all the best times,” Harry said, mind wandering a little later, as his hand played with Snape’s chest hair. “For when we’re ancient, and can only get it up once in a blue moon.”

Snape’s breathing paused for only a fraction, and then he said, “If you think I’m a Potions Master and am not going to ensure that that is never an issue, you really are a twit.”

Harry grinned, warm and content, and then he slid off onto the other pillow so that he could look at Snape.

“So, now that we’re back to talking about potions...”

Snape rolled his eyes.

“I had initial thoughts for the potion several years ago, when I considered what potions would be useful in a court of law. Veritaserum already existed. I sketched out ideas for Veritaserox and Veritavision, and one or two others. I made notes. That is how I work. Veritaserox presented the least difficulties, so I worked on that first, until I had mastered the formula. I was also working on other ideas for healing potions, and of course, there are the regular potions that I make and supply. However, when it became clear that use of Polyjuice was an important factor in this case, I started work again on Veritavision.”

“You did it for me,” Harry said, a triumphant grin on his face. Under the covers, his hand was on Snape’s leg. He found the soft patch of hairless skin at the top of Snape’s inner thigh to be enthralling, his fingers sliding from the hairy part to the smooth skin over and over again.
“The case was a catalyst,” Snape conceded.

“You never said anything.”

“No, of course not. Then the investigations might have depended on it. And I could not guarantee success – not in the time frame, anyway.”

“You didn’t even tell Kingsley?”

“No. And just as well, because almost all of the useful evidence is from Lucius, and we can’t use it.”

Harry’s face darkened.

“I know,” Snape said, reaching out to rest his hand on Harry’s forearm, “but I meant it when I said before that I won’t talk about Malfoy in bed.”

Harry smiled. “I’m really grateful,” he said, and his voice was teasing, the back of his hand just brushing Snape’s balls.

“You’ll be the death of me,” Snape said, and pulled him into a kiss.

The next night, though, the atmosphere around the table was more one of frustration.

It had been a long day in court, and it rather felt as if they had taken three steps backwards.

“It’s normal,” Hermione said. “The case is started, there’s a bit of excitement to get the Wizengamot interested. And then there’s always the more – necessary bits.”

“The boring bits,” Ron said, round a mouthful of fish pie.


The boring bits had included lots of witnesses talking about the financial estimates of the cost of the damage to the Ministry, and the costs of housing the departments elsewhere in the interim. More interesting had been various Ministry employees who’d been in the building on the day recounting their experiences, but they added little in terms of moving the case forward. The head elf had given his account, and then Forbin had been called.

Throughout, Theo had taken a different tack to the previous day: he had declined to ask questions of any of the witnesses.

Harry had had a bad feeling about it.

When it became clear that Forbin had not seen his attacker, Harry had seen the flicker of a smile that had curled Theo’s lips.

“We can’t win this, can we?” Harry said, to the table at large. “He’s too much in control.”

All eyes turned to him.
And then there was the sound of the floo, and footsteps on the stairs.

Harry was on his feet, and then the door opened –

“Nanette!” James leapt up.

“Scorp,” Andy’s voice was warm and relieved, and Scorpius headed straight over to his lover, then stopped.

They both stood there, looking at each other, beaming smiles on their faces, not touching, and Harry thought, if there was one more thing he hoped to achieve in life apart from sorting out this damn hell of a situation, it would be to try and make it alright that two men so in love should be able to embrace without fear of upsetting anyone.

“How did it go?” Gloria asked practically.

Beside her, Draco was pale, waiting patiently for the news.

“His widow said he had epilepsy,” Nanette said. “And for some reason he’d fallen into water regularly – it had induced his fits. His parents had warded the lake on their country estate when he was a child.”

“So – she wasn’t surprised at all? She didn’t put in the request for Father’s arrest?” Draco asked.

James had pulled out a chair for her, and Nanette sat down. “No, not at all. What’s more, she hadn’t even heard that Lu – Monsieur Malfoy - had been arrested in connection with his death. She has given me a letter explaining,” she said, gesturing to the bag at her side.

“So – any idea where this came from?” Bill asked. “It wasn’t like Malfoy was arrested right after the death.”

“That took a little more ingenuity,” Scorpius said, sitting down.

His chair was very close to Andy’s, but there were a lot of people at the table.

“It was not difficult,” Nanette said with a blush. “My uncle – well – he is not my aunt,” she said, with a glance at Harry at the odd statement. “I know he seems – oblivious, but he has always been good to me, in his own way. And he knows many people in government, so I asked him to find out who had laid the charges.”

Everyone was listening raptly.

“It was Artur’s father,” she said.

Gloria patted her knee.

“But,” Scorpius said, and they all turned to look at him, “a little further probing elicited the fact that Artur’s father was prompted by an anonymous letter from London.”

“Atkins,” Gloria said.

“We’ve no proof,” Scorpius shrugged. “Artur’s parents were just happy to be informed that even the hint of suspicion would be enough to cause Grandfather to be thrown back into Azkaban.”

Andy was frowning. He looked at Scorpius. “Will it be enough? The letter from the wife? It’s not proof,” he said, and one of his hands was missing from the table, and so was Scorpius’ next to him.
“I know,” he said.

“It should be enough, surely?” Harry said, puzzled. “They have to prove him guilty, don’t they?”

“It’s the other way round,” Hermione shook her head. “He’s still on parole, and always will be.”

“Yes, I understand the concept that they can be hiked back into detention until the problem is investigated,” Harry said.

“Not just that,” Hermione said. “The onus of proof changes. They’re considered guilty until proved innocent.”

“You’re kidding!”

Hermione shook her head.

“Oh. Shit.”

Harry stood up, and, as if uncertain what to do with his hands, went to fill the kettle.

Hermione glanced at Ron.

“What is it?” Draco asked.

“What it is,” Harry snapped, turning round, kettle in hand, “is that I had no idea I was putting him in that much danger when I asked him to spy.”

“He agreed to do it,” Kingsley said pragmatically.

“Maybe he was expecting you to uphold your end of the bargain,” Scorpius said.

There was uproar.

“What?” Harry said, looking round the table.

Silence.

“This is one of those things I don’t know because of my upbringing again, isn’t it?” he said. “I read everything I could before I accepted his life. What am I missing here?”

I don’t know either,” Snape said, shaking his head.

“If you stand up and say you own him,” Hermione explained, “the balance of evidence swings back to having to prove him guilty. In effect – and I mean really in effect – your innocence is put on the line instead.”

Harry leant back against the sink.

“Why didn’t you tell me this?”

“I didn’t know you didn’t know, as you said you’d read all that stuff, and – we didn’t know he was innocent. We still don’t.”

“I believe he is innocent,” Nanette said firmly.

Hermione looked at her down the table. “It’s not about belief: it’s about proof. You can’t expect Harry to put his life on the line without it. If Lucius was found guilty, Harry would go to jail too.”
“This is because Harry owns him?” Nanette said.

“Yes - ”

“Then can I buy him off you?” Nanette said, causing a storm of gasps around the table. “I am very wealthy. Very.”

“Nanette, you can’t – ” Gloria said, reaching across the table to pat her hand.

“I believe in him,” Nanette said, fierce spots of colour on her cheeks. “If he has done wrong, I will go to prison. But I don’t believe he has. And all my wealth is worth nothing if I am such a coward as to let an - an – honourable man – who has saved my life - go to prison, and keep suffering – have you ever been to Azkaban?” she said, dashing a tear from her face angrily. “It is – dreadful. And he has been there, all this time, whilst you sit here, and – ” she dashed away another tear. “And you’re going to leave him there? Non. Not if I can do anything about it,” she said fiercely.

“You – your kindness is wonderful,” Draco said into the silence, carefully not looking at Harry, “but you don’t understand – ”

Nanette went to interrupt, but to Harry’s surprise, Draco held up a finger to stop her. “There is history between my father and the people in this room,” he said quietly. “I would not expect them to trust him.”

“History?” Nanette said. “I understand that, and I know I am too young to have been around for it, but I have read…..” She paused, and then looked directly at Harry. “The question is, do you plan on changing history? You will never work together, Muggleborns and Purebloods, unless someone – someone trusts,” she said. “Lucius placed himself into your hands,” she went on. “How much more trust do you need?” She got up, shakily. “I am tired,” she said. “Here is the letter. My offer stands,” and she swept out of the room.

“I’m in love with her,” Andy said, into the shocking silence, making several people bark a laugh.

Gloria got up.

“Yes, please, go and look after her,” Harry said. “She’s – brave.”

“A heart as big as an ocean in that one,” Gloria nodded. “And she’s not wrong either,” she said, looking hard at Harry.

“Mother,” Kingsley sighed.

“Let the man think for himself, why don’t you?” she said sharply. “Just because he has a soft heart doesn’t mean he doesn’t know how to make a good decision. Right, I’m off.” And she headed towards the door.

Draco’s hand reached out and brushed her arm.

She turned and smiled at him, and rubbed his shoulder.

The kettle whistled, cutting through the tension.

Gloria laughed, and was gone.

Harry sat down, and called Mitty to make tea.

He looked around the table.
“I’m sorry, Draco,” Ron said, “but you can’t expect Harry to trust your father.”

“What you mean is, you can’t trust him,” Draco said. His eyes flickered to Hermione. “I understand.”

“What else do I need to know?” Harry said.

There was a silence.

“For heaven’s sake!” Harry said. He looked up, eyes shocked. “Is this – is this why you never talked of using Lucius’ testimony? I mean, he’s the key to everyone, isn’t he? His word can damn Nott and Atkins.” He looked around the table. “I thought you weren’t using him because his word wouldn’t stand for much because of his past. Are you saying if I – if I said that I owned him, his word would hold as good as mine?”

“It’s too risky!” Percy said.

“Really? Would you feel your word untrustworthy?” Harry turned on him. He looked down the table. “Mione.”

She nodded.

“Mate, it could be a trap,” Ron said. “He could have intended this all along. He’s only got to lie and you’ll end up in Azkaban. If he’s joined forces with Nott – was all along – it would work, wouldn’t it?”

Scorpius leapt to his feet.

“Sit down!” Draco snapped.

“Father?”

“You don’t know the past, and all we went through. What Harry went through. I for one won’t put him in that position again.”

“Harry?” Minerva said, into the silence that followed, everyone looking anywhere but at each other. She’d come along for the evening, to hear how the day had played out, and Harry had informed her that the court had organised charms to make the seating warmer and more comfortable.

Now Harry looked straight at her. “I’m so cross, Minerva. How the hell are we ever to get on if we don’t learn these things? The Muggleborns knew nothing of Centennial Lift Maintenance Day, when every Pureblood does. I knew nothing of this, of my – obligations. What’s the point of education if we don’t learn the things that help us get through life, to live together properly? Education has got to be the basis for understanding, surely?”

“‘You can’t teach every single thing –’ ” she said, but her voice was weary.

“I didn’t mean it as a criticism of you,” he said quickly. “Just – we’ve got to work together. We’ve got to.” He stood up. “If there’s more I need to know, please tell me.”

No-one said anything.

“I need to think,” Harry said. He looked around the table. “Bugger off, then,” he gave a hint of a grin.
There were laughs, and Kingsley stood up. “I’m going, I’m going,” he said, shoving his chair in. He came round to Harry as people began to move. “One thing, Harry: if you change plans, we need to talk to Harcourt.”

“Ok. Tonight, or in the morning?”

“First thing, I’d say.”

Harry nodded. “I wish you’d told me.”

“I wish I’d been able to get enough evidence to back up everything Lucius found out. Don’t make a decision out of desperation,” he said, hand on Harry’s arm.

Hermione and Ron were lurking. Harry sat to talk to them, nodding to James to keep up the good job of seeing people off the premises.

“Are you mad at me?” Hermione asked.

“Do you distrust him so much?”

She shrugged. “Enough not to risk your life. I didn’t think it would come to it – you know, in this trial. That his word would be needed. And if we’d been able to get Atkins, we could argue she’d set him up.”

“Nott – Hinch – bugger, Theo – he’s not going to crack, I don’t think,” Harry said. “And without that, we’re not going to get Atkins.”

“You could wait and see how it goes: Harcourt’s good.”

“Harcourt will need a miracle, and I bet he knows it,” Harry said. “Okay, I’m going flying.”

“Want me to come with you?” Ron offered.

“You ought to look in on The Leaky, I would have thought,” Harry said. “You don’t want your business going down the drain while the case is on.”

“I’m knackered,” Hermione said. She looked up at Ron. “You ought to go and do a couple of hours in the bar: I expect there’ll be a lot to hear about the case.”

Ron slid his arms around her waist. “You’re probably right there,” he said, bending down to drop a kiss on her lips. “Alright, see you tomorrow, Harry.”

Snape, George and James were left.

“What are you going to do, Dad?” James asked.

“Think,” Harry said, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Are you coming to court tomorrow?”

“Of course I am.”

“Does that mean don’t ask about your employers?”

James grinned. “I’m going to tell Albus when he needs to come too – when we get down to it.”

Harry nodded, and gave his son’s arm a pat. He looked up at his brother-in-law. “What’s bothering you, George?”
“I can’t put myself in your shoes,” he said.

“But?”

They were all looking at him.

George turned and looked at Snape. “You must know Lucius better than the rest of us,” he said.

“Probably,” Snape nodded. “What’s on your mind?”

“Fred is dead,” he said.

It was something of a non-sequitur. Fred had been dead for thirty years, but his absence for George must stare him in the face every morning as he stood to shave in the mirror.

None of them said anything, waiting.

George’s hand stroked over the false ear that he had designed himself, first of a range of prostheses that he had developed, one of his quiet, unspoken sidelines.

Snape’s eyes followed the motion.

“You did this to me,” George said, looking at him unflinchingly. “A bad thing for a good reason.”

Snape said nothing.

James’ eyes darted from one to the other.

“I wanted to hate Malfoy. He was – is – a pompous git. But I – I hate to say this – but I can’t help feeling that in all his dealings, his recent dealings, with us, he’s been – honourable.” His bright blue eyes met Harry’s. He shrugged. “I keep wondering if I’m wrong, if he’s had an elaborate ploy going with the bitch and Nott, to get you put away after all, and if the case all goes to pot and you’ve stood by him, you will end up in prison like they wanted before, and society will be in chaos, and I suspect Kingsley will be pretty devastated, and maybe Snape’s reputation will be ruined by association with you on this case, and we still won’t have got those who killed Gin in prison, and Atkins and Nott and Malfoy could wreak havoc on our world.”

“That – that’s a shitty picture you’re painting,” James said, mouth slightly open.

“I know. And the stain spreads – I mean, if I go down thinking that route, I start wondering if Draco got involved with Gin on purpose, and then –”

“He was gutted – George, more than that, he was going to give up his life rather than ruin her reputation,” Harry argued.

“Except that he runs a newspaper, so he must know what goes on before the rest of us. He must have heard of Veritaserox, surely?”

“It’s a hell of a jump to think that he’d think I’d get as far as looking into it and wanting to save him,” Harry rubbed his hand around the back of his neck.

“If he was in it too, he might have expected Atkins to let him off if things got too close to trial. To have come up with an alternative.”

“Bloody hell,” James said.
“He was black and blue in the cells,” Harry said. “And - shattered.”

“He took up with Gloria quick enough,” James said. “What? It’s true, isn’t it?”

“I rather think Gloria did the taking,” Snape said, amusement in his voice.

“You know him best,” George said again, looking at Snape.

“Draco? Or Lucius?”

“Either, but yes, I meant Lucius.”

“What are you asking?” Snape asked. He was leaning against the wall, arms folded, looking relaxed, but Harry was aware of the slight discomfort, the sharp eyes watching George. And wasn’t it weird that they’d been working together all this time and he’d never thought about Snape having slashed George’s ear off? George had worn the prosthetic for so long that it hadn’t occurred to him.

“What’s your gut feeling, Severus? If Harry’s life weren’t on the line. Would you say to trust Lucius?”

Snape straightened. “Are you saying that your gut feeling *is* to trust him?” he spun the question round.

“I don’t want to say it. So much is at stake. Harry’s freedom. But – ” George glanced at Harry apologetically. “Yeah. It is.”

“Thanks,” Harry nodded. “For the honesty.”

George shrugged. “It’s a horrible decision.”

“Severus? Surely you’re not going to agree that Dad should trust him?” James frowned.

“Your father must make his own decisions,” Snape was looking at Harry.

“I value your opinion,” Harry said. “You didn’t know about what the acceptance entailed?”

“I didn’t,” Snape said. “For what it’s worth, my experience has been that the Malfoys have always felt personal honour second only to being Pureblood in terms of their self-worth. And the latter has been a given.”

“I thought you loved him!” James bit out.

“James – ” Harry cut in, embarrassed.

“If you think I would choose to endanger your father, you’re a fool,” Snape said. “But I do hold his integrity in the highest regard.”

“That’s one of the nicest things you’ve ever said to me,” Harry’s eyes danced.

Snape’s mouth lifted at the corners.

“Ho hum,” George said, looking from one to the other. “I’ll be off.”

“You staying here, James?” Harry asked.
“Come for a pint,” George said.

“Me?” James pointed at his chest in astonishment, after a second when he looked from George to Harry and Snape.

“You must’ve found some drinkable alcohol-free beer by now?” George raised an amused eyebrow.

“They’re mostly like piss,” James said, finding his poise again. “Not that I haven’t been trying to find something decent.”

“I bow to your judgement on the taste of pee. Even I draw the line at that,” George pulled a face, and they all laughed. He loped over to the stairs. “It sounds as if you need a hand in this endeavour?” he suggested.

“Why not?” James followed him, pausing at the door to look back at his father. “I know you’ll do what’s right – you always do. But it’s hard, having a father who’s so damned good, you know?”

“Two points to that one,” Harry chuckled. “One, you weren’t thinking that about me a couple of months ago, and two, would you really like a father who was a total shit?”

“Yeah, yeah,” James said. “We- we’ll make it work, yeah, whatever you do?” His eyes glanced at Snape, and back to his father.


“I don’t have my broom with me.”

“You can share mine. Or just fly,” Harry said. “I want to learn that. Can you teach me?”

“Don’t you get up to anything dirty!” James yelled back down the stairs. “I bet I’m not the only bird animagus: you don’t want to give an old biddy out for a night fly a heart attack.”

“Now there’s an interesting thought,” Harry called out the door.

“Nooo! Hands over ears! I am not listening!” James called.

Harry turned to Snape, grinning, and wagged his brows.

“How old are you, Potter?” Snape rolled his eyes.

He wasn’t rolling them later, when Harry lay sprawled naked along the length of his broomstick, face upwards, one hand over his head guiding the broom, an ankle curled lazily around the tail for balance, giving Snape a vivid and intense demonstration that it was perfectly possible to orgasm mid-air without losing control of his flight.

Placing his trust in Harry, Snape flipped over, parted his robes, and invited Harry to ride him all the way home instead.

A peregrine falcon that had been floating on the currents high above, glanced down, squawked, appeared to grow flailing legs as it plummeted, and then returned to form, batting its wings heavily
to regain lost height, its beady eye swivelling to stare at the two men.

Harry winked at the bird. “Glorious evening, eh?” He thrust down on Severus.

“Bugger off, you pervy old crone!” Snape yelled.

The falcon’s head jerked forward, looking every bit as affronted as a bird possibly could.

Harry’s laughter echoed through the moonlight.
Day Three

The court was assembled for the third day of the trial.

Overhead, a weak sun tried to fight its way through the clouds, but for once Harry was more conscious of himself, of his heart thumping, and the stiffness of the collar of his robe rubbing against his neck.

Harcourt stood up, nodded at him, and then turned to Anglehurst. “I would like to call a new witness, Your Honour: Mr Lucius Malfoy.”

Harry watched as Theo’s head jerked up from his notes. Although he was in the dock, he had a table and quill and parchment to hand, and wasn’t shackled.

“Your Honour,” Dorothy Atkins stood up, looking sternly at Harcourt, “perhaps the Prosecution is unaware that Mr Malfoy is in Azkaban.”

“I’m fully aware of it, Madam,” Harcourt bowed.

“On a murder charge,” she went on.

There was a buzz of surprise around the court.

“Yes. Mr Malfoy will be contesting that charge as soon as the Wizengamot is able to set a date, Your Honour,” he turned back to Anglehurst.

“Mr Harcourt, you cannot expect the Wizengamot to accept the word of a man on a murder charge,” Anglehurst said, looking thoroughly put out.

“No, Sir, but I have seen the evidence, and believe that Mr Malfoy was accused in order to prevent him giving testimony here.”

There were shocked gasps.

“Mr Harcourt,” Atkins said, “Mr Malfoy was arrested at the request of the French Ministry.”

“I am aware of that too, Madam,” Harcourt inclined his head towards her again, “but they were not in possession of all the facts.”

“And you are?” Anglehurst peered at him over his glasses.

“I have been given full details of investigations into the matter – ”

“I do not know how you might have obtained such documents,” Atkins said. “I can assure the court that as Mr Malfoy was on permanent parole due to his previous incarceration as a Death Eater, my department ensured that he was secured by removal to Azkaban as soon as we received the request from the French government. We have not yet received any further paperwork or request for the extradition of Mr Malfoy to serve trial in France.”

“I quite understand that there would be no sense of urgency in some quarters,” Harcourt said, with barely veiled sarcasm, “but as Mr Malfoy’s testimony is material to the security of this country, investigation into the murder charge has taken place, and documents relating to it have been presented to me. As a Prosecutor with over twenty years experience, I know that the service would not go ahead with a prosecution that it could not hope to win, in the face of the evidence I have
been given.”

“Given his record, the burden falls on Mr Malfoy to prove his innocence, not the Prosecution to prove his guilt,” Mrs Atkins said. “A fact of which I thought you would be aware, despite being too young to have been around at the Death Eater trials, Mr Harcourt.” She turned to Anglehurst. “Your Honour, may I approach the bench?”

Anglehurst looked at the two of them. “You may both approach the bench.”

Harry cast a small spell so that he could hear what was said.

“Your Honour,” Atkins smiled at the Judge, “I apologise for this squabbling in front of the court –”

“It is most unseemly,” Anglehurst said in annoyance. “Surely you’ve talked to your staff about proper conduct –” he glanced at Harcourt.

“As you know, Your Honour, although Mr Harcourt is Prosecutor for this trial, the case is being presented by the European Wizarding Alliance, as it involves treason, and Minister Benningdean felt it essential not to taint anyone else within the Ministry.”

Harry snorted. George too.

Hermione nudged him. “Are you listening in?” she demanded.

“Oi!” Ron hissed at George, “have you got extendable ears, or something?”

“Anglehurst has been giving them a bollocking,” Harry said quickly, “Atkins is trying to dob everyone else in it. Hold on, I’ll see if I can extend the listening spell.”

“…precisely because of that taint, Your Honour,” Harcourt was saying.

Hermione, Ron and James nodded pleased glances at Harry.

“…that we have had to tread very delicately here. But I assure you, it would be a grave disservice to our people not to hear Mr Malfoy’s testimony, given the importance of this case, and the fact that lives are at stake.”

“I’m not at all happy,” Anglehurst said, “and I will have to direct the Wizengamot on the reliability of the witness.”

“You’re not going to allow this?” Atkins frowned.

“Mrs Atkins, it may surprise you to know that I am not so ancient that I do not hear the current on dits, but I am not unaware that you are… a very good friend…of Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst peered over his glasses at her. “However, I cannot allow you to influence the behaviour of this court because you wish to hide your intimate indiscretions.”

Atkins gasped.

Hermione choked. “Go Anglehurst!” she grinned.

“It may serve Your Honour well to avoid listening to salacious and defamatory gossip! I have never had an affair with Mr Malfoy!”

“Indeed,” Anglehurst scratched something on a parchment, then nodded to the court usher who
hurried over. “Take this order to Mr Shacklebolt: he will arrange for Lucius Malfoy to be released into the custody of this court.” He turned to Harcourt and Atkins. “You may both stand down.”

The two went back to their places.

George looked across and gave Harry a thumbs up and a grin.

“The Prosecution wishes to call Mr Lucius Malfoy as a witness,” Anglehurst said, looking around the Wizengamot. “At this point, I must make absolutely certain that you are aware that the witness is part of the group of individuals whose crimes, after the fall of Voldemort, were considered so serious that even those who have served their sentences are on permanent parole: that is, they can be returned to Azkaban on suspicion of breaking the law, before trial. This is the situation in which Mr Malfoy finds himself. Mr Harcourt believes that Mr Malfoy has been deliberately indicted in a crime to prevent him testifying in this case. I cannot comment on that situation. It is only because of the very serious nature of the case before us, which involves treason against the state, and an act which could have led to the murder of over a hundred members of our community, that I am willing to allow Mr Malfoy to take the stand. I must warn you, however, that the weight you give to his evidence – ”

Harcourt coughed. “Your Honour?”

“Mr Harcourt, I am already allowing you – ”

“Your Honour, the Wizengamot need to know that Mr Malfoy seceded his life and all his holdings several months ago – ”

“I beg your pardon?” Anglehurst asked into the astonished gasps from the court.

“He is entirely owned by a man who is willing to put his own life and reputation on the line in support of Mr Malfoy. Mr Malfoy’s words, are therefore, of equal value to those of any man here.”

“Mr Harcourt, you are trying my patience severely. You did not think this information would be necessary for me to hear before we began today’s hearings?”

“Forgive me, Your Honour, but I had a reason for my reticence.”

“Hmmph. It had better be good. And who is this man who is willing to risk his life for Mr Malfoy?”

“I am, Your Honour,” Harry said, standing up.

Everyone turned to stare at him.

“Come down here,” Anglehurst demanded.

Harry made his way down to the front of the court. Anglehurst gestured at the witness box, and Harry stepped into it. The court clerk rushed through the formalities.

“Mr Potter,” Anglehurst peered over his glasses. “I cannot but say that I am extremely surprised. You do know that if Mr Malfoy lies before this court, that you will be equally culpable of perjury? Even if you say not a word?”

“Yes, Your Honour.”

“And you are utterly sure that you wish to follow this course of action?”
“Yes, Sir, for the safety of our country, it is essential.”

Everyone in the auditorium was rapt.

“It may be material to the acceptance of your integrity that the court knows just how you come to be Mr Malfoy’s owner, Mr Potter,” Anglehurst said. “I will make any further explanations for the court’s understanding if necessary.”

Harry nodded. He swallowed. He hated public speeches, but knew he’d just been given the opportunity he really needed.

“I – er.”

Fuck, he thought, that was a shit start. He looked around. Ron was giving him a thumbs up, Hermione smiling encouragingly. His eyes tracked along, and spotted Severus sitting next to the court Potions Master. Harry could make nothing of his expression, but he could feel that steady regard settling him….he started again.

“Forgive me if I cover ground of which you’re all aware, but despite what the papers think, I’m sure some of you have better things to do than read the gossip about me.”

That brought some laughs, which helped him on.

He gave a small smile, but then his face turned serious. “Earlier this year, my wife was murdered.”

He allowed the words to sink in, changing the tone.

“Ginny was a brilliant quidditch player for the Holyhead Harpies, and played for our national team on many occasions. She was also a wonderful mother to our three children. Our marriage had become one of friendship, and Ginny was looking forward to marrying Draco Malfoy when our youngest child left school. There was no subterfuge about this: I was aware that they were in love, and I had asked them to wait.” He paused again. “I regret that deeply, because I stopped them having happy years together. As it is, Draco was arrested for her murder. I’ll come back to that in a moment. When that prosecution failed, I was arrested.”

“Your Honour, I thought I was on trial, not subject to torture from this tedious tale of romantic intrigue,” Hinch yawned.

People sniggered, but Harry looked at him, and thought of what he had discovered that morning, and swallowed down bile.

“I have another charge to lay against Theo Hinch,” Harry said.

“You cannot go adding charges at this late date, Mr Potter,” Anglehurst said.

“It’s perfectly relevant, Your Honour,” Harry said. “I wish Mr Hinch to be charged with the murder of my wife.”

There was uproar.

“Mr Potter,” Anglehurst said, “this is a trial for treason and – ”

“Your Honour,” Harcourt said, “I have been given further information this morning, and the evidence points to the fact that Mrs Potter was killed as part of a conspiracy directly involved with the charge of treason.”
“This is sounding very far-fetched, Harcourt,” Anglehurst shook his head.

Theo Hinch was standing up. “It may have passed the Prosecution’s attention that the killers of Mrs Potter have already been found. I heard the announcement on the radio myself – ”

“We do not dispute, Your Honour,” Harcourt interrupted him, “that Daniel Poulter or Professor Samantha Donnelly were involved. The Prosecution argues that the third man was not, in fact, Peter Stubbins, the son of Mrs Donnelly, but Theodore Hinch.”

The whole court was silent, watching the by-play.

“You’d better have good evidence,” Anglehurst said, leaning back in his chair.

“Peter Stubbins could not have been the third person that day, as he was attending a birthday celebration in the French Alps, and I have a dozen signed statements supporting that incontrovertible fact. Furthermore, I will be calling an eyewitness who can place all three – Mr Poulter, who was tortured into madness shortly after the event, Mrs Donnelly, who died a horrible death trying to name someone on the day she admitted to murdering Mrs Potter, and Mr Hinch – at the Potter household on the afternoon in question.”

The court burst out in a frenzy of whispering.

Theo Hinch stood there, his face a mask.

Anglehurst banged his gavel. “Silence! I will have silence! I will come back to this claim in a moment, Mr Harcourt. Mr Potter, would you please continue your explanation with regard to Mr Lucius Malfoy.”

“Thank you, Your Honour,” Harry said. “Um, yeah. So I believe that Ginny was murdered not only because she was famous, and her death would make people nervous about what was happening in our world, but because it would upset me, and destroy Draco Malfoy, as he was fitted up for her murder. And of course, when Draco was freed, I was arrested, which probably suited the conspirators even more.”

“Mr Potter, you keep talking of conspirators. What evidence do you have for a conspiracy?”

“Treason isn’t usually a one-man offence, Sir,” Harry said. “But going back to Mr Malfoy, when Draco was on remand, Mr Malfoy - Lucius Malfoy, his father - came to see me. He offered his life for Draco’s. To cut a long story short, I accepted.”

“…and when Draco was found innocent, you held Malfoy to the bargain anyway?” Hinch sneered.

Harry looked at him. “I have no need of wealth,” he said calmly, “but I knew that Mr Malfoy would be an asset in finding out the truth; in finding out who had killed Ginny and set up his son.”

“But you didn’t trust him,” Hinch slid in.

Harry looked around the Wizengamot. “I’m sure many of you will know that Lucius Malfoy and I were opponents in the last war: of course I did not trust him.”

There was some laughter, and nods of assent.

“I felt that accepting his offer – an offer which he made, and continued to make even when I told him that I knew his son was innocent – was the easiest way to ensure that we could work together on this.”
“His money must have come in handy, though. And Malfoy Manor is not to be sniffed at,” Hinch said challengingly. “How many rooms are there? A hundred? More?”

“You’ve obviously thought about that a great deal more than I have,” Harry said smoothly. “As I was held a prisoner in it awaiting Voldemort, strangely I don’t feel any great affection for the place.”

Several people snorted.

“As for his money: certainly, it does come in handy.”

Hinch looked triumphant for a fraction of a second, and then wary.

“I’d given Mr Malfoy my authority to spend as much of it as he wished in pursuit of our objective. It was by far the easiest way to arrange matters, and I have no personal need of it.”

Hinch’s face tightened. “How very altruistic, and practical, you make it all sound. Nevertheless, it doesn’t say much for why the Wizengamot should trust his word, when you do not.”

“You’re mistaken,” Harry said. “Throughout recent months, I have come to appreciate that Lucius Malfoy is a man of honour.” He looked around the Wizengamot. “When I accepted Mr Malfoy’s offer, I did not understand the full ramifications, even though I believed I had read everything I needed to know about it. We’re here today because factions of our society are frightened of the influence of other members of our community, and it’s very true that we all come from very different backgrounds. We’re here because Theo Nott, as I knew him at school – who was in the same year as me, and who has been through the same period of history as me – felt that the only way to get the society he wanted was by destroying the one that was already there – and what that really means is by destroying witches and wizards who are, like me, Muggle-born or raised. It seems a terrible sadness to me that we’re separated by our differences, rather than by what we have in common, which is the wonder that is magic.”

“You’re making a speech, Mr Potter,” Anglehurst said.

“It’s relevant, Sir,” Harry said. He wasn’t going to let anyone stop him now. He looked around. “We all have magic. Thirty years ago, we were fighting even then, amongst ourselves, killing each other when there are so few of us, so few of us gifted with this wonderful ability. I think it’s fear that makes it happen, fear of what makes us different rather than recognition of what makes us so alike. And that fear is bred from misunderstanding. For example, I have let Lucius Malfoy down.”

There was a shocked exclamation in the court.

“I didn’t realise that because Mr Malfoy had ceded his life to me, I had the power to stand beside him and vouchsafe his word. Just as the Muggle Fire Investigator was able to help us understand what had happened at the Ministry, so Lucius Malfoy has been working for months to help us understand who is threatening our society. He has done this at great personal risk, and I did not realise the full impact of the rules regarding the change of proof of innocence for the paroled Death Eaters. Mr Malfoy never made any claim on me – indeed, I’m positive he had no expectation that I would stand by him. I failed him,” Harry said, looking round. “Because over the last months I have been a witness to Mr Malfoy’s honourable conduct. Now that I know my role in this, I have no hesitation in standing to vouchsafe his word.”

“Have you finished, Mr Potter?” Anglehurst asked.
“Yes, thank you, Sir,” Harry gave a slight bow.

“Good, because Mr Malfoy’s waiting to get in the witness box,” Anglehurst said.

Harry looked around, startled, and saw Malfoy waiting in a small enclosure to the side, his face inscrutable.

He was still wearing a prison robe, and his hair hung lank and filthy around his head. He looked gaunt. Harry felt guilt washing over him.

A guard shoved him, and Malfoy staggered, then shuffled forward. His ankles and wrists were shackled.

Harry wondered how they’d got him from Azkaban so fast: he could have apparated there himself, of course, but hadn’t wanted to make any show of that. But it was obvious that the boat trip was totally unnecessary: just something to make the prisoners heading towards the bleak fortress feel totally aware of their isolation.

“Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said, when Malfoy was settled in the witness box beside him, “Mr Potter has claimed that you ceded your life to him: is this correct?”

“Yes, Your Honour,” Malfoy said, and coughed, to clear his voice, the scratch of disuse grating his chords.

“Sir,” Harry said. “Mr Malfoy is not on trial in this case, and stands here, his word as if it were mine, if I am right in understanding the situation?”

“That is correct, Mr Potter. His word is as if spoken by you, and his lie is yours.”

“Yes. You can all see,” Harry said, looking around the Wizengamot, “the privations Mr Malfoy has suffered in order to assist me in finding my wife’s murderers and the traitors who destroyed the Ministry. Honourable as the evidence of these are,” Harry went on, looking at Malfoy and giving him a small bow, “I ask that he be allowed to dress in a manner that befits a man representing me. And that he be free of shackles whilst in this court. You have my word that he will not try to escape.”

Anglehurst cast narrowed eyes at him.

Harry was conscious that everyone was staring at them, and held his head high. It didn’t sit easily with him to demand respect, but the case would go better if people didn’t misjudge Malfoy purely because he was wearing prison garb.

And Malfoy deserved the respect.

He lifted his chin.

“Granted,” Anglehurst said. “We will have a forty minute recess for tea and biscuits. Mr Malfoy is your responsibility, Mr Potter.”

Harry bowed his head. The minute they were out of the dome and inside one of the witnesses’ tents, he called, “Hetty!”

Within seconds, the Malfoy house-elf appeared. “Masters!” Hetty said, her smile fading as she took in Lucius.
“We have half an hour,” Harry said. “Can you bring hot water and clothes for Mr Malfoy? Lucius? What do you want to wear?”

Lucius stared at Harry, and then quickly gave his orders to Hetty.

“You need to shave,” Harry said. He looked around. There was a room across the tent, and Harry realised there was a bathroom within it. A quick glance showed that there was a razor and soap. He’d been wondering whether he ought to offer to spell Malfoy’s chin clean for him, which seemed unduly personal, or whether he ought to offer Malfoy his wand to do it himself, which was something he was glad not to have to contemplate. He might trust Malfoy, but a wand was a very personal thing.

Hetty returned while Lucius was in the bathroom, and Harry gestured for her to take the clothes through. “Are you able to get him a cup of good coffee and something light and fast to eat, Hetty?” Harry asked, when she reappeared in front of him.

The elf nodded and bowed at once, and returned with a tray in moments.

“Thank you,” Harry beamed at her. “I don’t know if Master Malfoy will be kept here, under guard, or somewhere else, but will you take care of him, Hetty, if you can?”

“Of course, Master Harry,” Hetty beamed, and disappeared.

Harry helped himself to coffee too, and one of the sandwiches whilst he waited for Lucius.

It was not long before the wizard came out of the bathroom, looking much more his normal self. He’d obviously had a quick shower too, his hair damp.

“Here’s coffee; have something to eat: you don’t have long,” Harry said, handing him a cup.

Harry could see Lucius savouring the aroma before he took a first sip, and felt an unexpected kinship.

After his own incarceration the simplest things had seemed so wonderful.

Harry helped himself to a small pastry, so that he didn’t look like he was hovering.

Malfoy finished the coffee and took a sandwich, eating it slowly.

“I’ll talk while you eat,” Harry said. “I don’t know what you know, but Severus has invented a potion that means you can see through Polyjuice.”

Malfoy looked up sharply.

“Even in a memory,” Harry went on quickly. “I know Kingsley has a record of your conversations, but you know what you’ve seen, as opposed to having heard. Can you jot down any key moments when you know Polyjuice was involved?”

“This is Nott’s trial,” Lucius said. “Are you hoping to get Atkins?”

“Yes,” Harry said, “I am. If we can get her into custody today, you and every potential witness will be safe.”

“They’ll have to halt the trial, surely? To give her time for her defence?”

“If we can get as far as getting her into custody today, that’ll probably work well for all of us.
Harcourt will need to know what you have.” Harry shook his head. “Everyone worked on the assumption – that is, I didn’t know I could stand for you. I’m sorry.”

“I did not expect it.”

“Nobody expected it!” Harry snapped. “We could have moved this forward before if I’d known –”

“They have told you you will go to prison if I lie?”

“Yes.”

Malfoy stared at him. “I should call you a fool.”

“You’ve acted with honour throughout the last months. I judge a man on what I see,” Harry said. “I’ve changed: I don’t doubt that you have too. Which is not to say,” he added quickly, “that you were not a man of honour before. I’ve come to realise that perhaps you were, but just on the other side of the fence.”

“You are mad,” Lucius said.

“Am I wrong?”

There was a long silence. “No.”

Harry nodded. A sense of relief washed through him.

“Can I come in?” A voice asked at the tent flap. “It’s Harcourt.”

After brief introductions, Lucius sat down at the table, quill moving rapidly across the parchment, while Harry spoke fast to Harcourt.

“Merlin’s scrote,” Harcourt said. “We’re really doing this?”

“With Malfoy’s evidence, and what we discussed this morning –”

“There’s so much that’s new,” Harcourt said. “New potions, goblins and elves and whatnot in the witness box – and it’s two hundred years since a man did what you’re doing, Harry. It’s on the statutes, but the Wizengamot won’t have experience of having a sponsored prisoner.”

“If we can show them Lucius was set up –”

“This is not his trial –”

“It’ll help his credibility.”

“If I could suggest…?” Lucius looked up from the table, and outlined his thoughts.

“That might work,” Harcourt nodded. “I’ll do my best. But if she gets arrested, I’m going to ask for some time to work on this, even if she doesn’t. Which she will. I need to know exactly what we can use.”

“Will that mean Mr Malfoy goes back to Azkaban?”

“He’s still a prisoner –”

“It’s alright –” Lucius began.
“Of course it isn’t!” Harry snapped, startling both men into silence. “Do what you can,” Harry said to Harcourt.

The man nodded, glancing between the two of them.

“Before you start getting concerned that there is any sort of relationship between us,” Harry added, his voice steely, “there is none.”

Harcourt looked at Harry. “If there was, it would be information I would be wise to avoid in this trial. Or that could be exploited. I was at your trial, Harry.”

“Yes, your ruthlessness is why you’re here now,” Harry said bluntly. “But if there is anything to be exploited – Mr Malfoy – is there anything Mr Harcourt should know about Dorothy Atkins? And you?”

“I didn’t sleep with her,” Lucius said, his eyes on Harcourt, deliberately not looking at Harry. “There was flirting.”

“On both sides?”

“Yes. After the gala, that changed.”

“What –”

“Court has been recalled,” a guard said, knocking against the post beside the tent flap and entering without permission in the same breath.

Lucius and Harry once again took the witness stand.

“Mr Malfoy,” Harcourt said, “you’ve been called here as a witness in the case against Mr Theodore Hinch, whom you may have known as Nott. Could you identify him to the court, please?”

“Mr Nott – Hinch – is the gentl – person - in the witness box,” Lucius said.

Harry watched Nott’s face tighten a fraction at the insult, as Lucius paused over the word ‘gentleman’ and replaced it.

“Thank you,” Harcourt inclined his head. “Now, I believe you’ve been in contact with Mr Hinch recently. Could you tell the court about that, please.”

“Yes,” Lucius said calmly. “Dorothy Atkins asked me to get him in line.”

A wave of murmuring ran around the court, causing Anglehurst to raise his gavel. Hush descended quickly.

“Dorothy Atkins?” Harcourt said in an astonished voice. “Head of the Ministry’s Law Enforcement department?”

“That’s correct.”

“Why would Mrs Atkins ask you to get Mr Hinch in line, Mr Malfoy? You’re not an employee of
“Are you suggesting that Mrs Atkins and Mr Hinch knew each other in a capacity not related to their work at the Ministry?”

“Oh, it was related to it,” Lucius said calmly. “They want to destroy our government in its current form.”

Harry had to give it to him, Lucius knew how to make a statement.

The court was in uproar.

“I will have silence!” Anglehurst banged his gavel.

Slowly the court settled down.

It was extraordinary, Harry thought, how people’s posture said so much. Half the court were leaning forward. There was a sudden air of camaraderie, as there was in an audience about to witness an exciting play, a mutual bonding of the interested.

“Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said, “I am not unaware that you have been seen – socially – with Mrs Atkins. If these allegations are a malicious attempt to implicate Mrs Atkins because, due to the nature of her job, she had to send you to Azkaban – ”

“My contact with Mrs Atkins was purely to find out information about her purpose,” Lucius said clearly. “I believe the charges laid against me were a deliberate attempt to stop me speaking in this trial. Mrs Atkins as well as Mr Nott – Hinch – should be on trial for treason. They were working together.”

Again, the court rumbled with whispering.

Anglehurst stared at them fiercely.

Dorothy Atkins was sitting in her usual position, shaking her head as if amused. She ignored the stares and mutterings, the fact that Dowling had sat close to her on the first day, and had now edged along the stone seating, leaving her in a little pool of isolation.

“It is not for you to judge who should be on trial, Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said. “Mr Harcourt, I suggest you tell your witness that he is here to answer questions, not to spout his own ideas.”

“Your Honour,” Harcourt gave a small bow.

Harry felt Lucius stiffening beside him, and then forcing his shoulders to relax.

Harcourt shuffled his papers. “Your Honour,” Harcourt said, “as Mr Potter stands in the box beside Mr Malfoy, may I – and the court – ask him questions pertaining to Mr Malfoy’s role? I could recall him separately, but – ”

“Yes, yes, let’s not make a meal of this,” Anglehurst said testily.

Harcourt looked at Harry. “Mr Potter, you stated earlier that you had accepted Mr Malfoy’s life so that you could work together to find the killers of your wife, and therefore, from Mr Malfoy’s point of view, the people who had set up his son. You asked that Mr Hinch be charged with the murder of your wife, and stated that her murder was part of the conspiracy of treason. Could you please
“Yes,” Harry nodded. He gathered his thoughts. “Ginny was murdered by three people: we know that Daniel Poulter was one of them: he’s in St. Mungo’s suffering from the effects of torture, and is unlikely to regain his mind. Samantha Donnelly said just before she died that she’d killed Ginny – in fact, she was killed as she tried to speak of another person. Mrs Atkins announced on the radio that Samantha Donnelly’s son, Peter Stubbins, had left a suicide note saying that he was the third person. The note itself was never made public, and it seemed extraordinary to me that a mother would involve her own son in a gruesome murder,” he said, looking around the court, watching to see how people reacted to that. “However, when we began looking into my wife’s death – this was before I was charged myself – we didn’t know about Samantha Donnelly, so we started with Daniel Poulter. He was involved with a group of Pureblood activists in France. Mr Malfoy has a home in France, and connections, and was known for his Pureblood leanings. That seemed a good place to start.”

“And did you infiltrate this group in France?” Harcourt asked Malfoy.

“I did.”

“And are you telling the court that this group led you to Mr Hinch?” he asked, gesturing to the dock.

“No,” Lucius said, “it led me to Mrs Atkins.”

Sounds of astonishment and interest whispered through the court.

“Mrs Atkins, Head of Ministry Law Enforcement, was openly cavorting with a French activist group?” Harcourt queried.

“She came in disguise,” Lucius said. “As a man, but I realised something wasn’t right. When she was revealed, she made us all take a vow of loyalty.” He turned towards Hinch. “I would not be surprised if Mr Hinch has taken a similar vow, and therefore cannot speak out against her.”

Everyone turned to look at Hinch.

Harcourt waited to see if Anglehurst would say anything, but after a moment continued, “Mr Malfoy, if you’ve taken a vow of loyalty to Mrs Atkins, how is it that you’re speaking now? It obviously only has a minor effect?”

“I believe Mrs Donnelly, who was a good friend of Mrs Atkins, died when trying to speak,” Lucius said.

“Are you suggesting that Mrs Donnelly was killed because she was trying to reveal the involvement of Mrs Atkins?”

“I was not at the funeral of Mrs Donnelly’s son: you would have to question someone who was there.”

“Yes, thank you, I’m sure we shall,” Harcourt said. “Perhaps you could explain your own ability to speak?”

“I thought I might die at any moment,” Lucius said, “as the reason I was there was at odds with a vow of loyalty, but it seems that my prior ceding of my person, and thus loyalty, to Mr Potter, negated the effect of the vow.”
A number of people around the court raised their eye-brows and nodded.

“And did you find out Mrs Atkins’ purpose in her involvement, Mr Malfoy?”

“I did.”

Harcourt looked at him, and then prompted, with a hint of a smile, “Perhaps you’d care to share that with the court?”

“Mrs Atkins wishes to have our country ruled by Purebloods.”

There was a rustle of murmurs.

“I’m sorry,” Harcourt said, “but why was Mrs Atkins in France, then?”

“Mrs Atkins was in France because she needs to court her continental allies, as she wishes to become Supreme Mugwamp.”

There were gasps of astonishment. Everyone turned to look at Dorothy Atkins, who sat very upright, her face a mask.

“That is quite an allegation, Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said. “The last time you obliged the Wizengamot by appearing as a witness, you refused to accept Veritaserum. Do you hold fast to that right?”

Malfoy was quiet a moment. “I prefer not to undergo Veritaserum, Your Honour, because Theodore Nott is conducting his own defence, and I do not trust that he will keep to matters relevant to this court.”

“You’re suggesting you have secrets, Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said.

“I believe most of us have personal matters on which we prefer to keep our own counsel, Sir,” he said.

Anglehurst looked at him, and then around the court. “Well, be that as it may, we have both yourself and the defendant unwilling or unable to use Veritaserum. It makes matters very difficult,” he said, shaking his head.

“I see there is a pensieve in the corner, if the court would wish to see a memory?”

“Would you be willing to take Veritavision, Mr Malfoy? It’s a new potion, which will enable the court to see the identity of anyone using Polyjuice or glamours.”

“I have no objection to that.” Lucius paused, thinking. “There is a small scene – after we left the meeting where I exposed Mrs Atkins, she followed me wearing a glamour. It’s a lot briefer than the whole meeting, it’s in English, and it gives a flavour…”

“Then please show us, Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said. “Watching everything twice is somewhat time-consuming. You’ll need to show the memory first, then take the Veritavision….”

Lucius was taken over to the pensieve by Potions Master Davis, and put the memory in. The court watched as the scene played out:

*Lucius was walking along the street, and turned, hearing footsteps. A man approached.*

“*Mrs Atkins; couldn’t have enough of my company*?”
“You recognise me?”

“You’re wearing a glamour, Mrs Atkins, but still the robes and shoes you had on as Duncan.”

“Well observed,” the man said. “I’m glad I caught you,” he went on. “Do you live near here?”

“I’m sure you know exactly where I live.”

A laugh. “You can’t possibly be planning to walk all the way there?”

“No, but if you’ve been studying me, you’ll know that I enjoy walking. I find it a good opportunity for thinking.” A pause. “Would you care to join me?”

They walked side by side for a few minutes.

“Is something going to happen?” Hinch yawned.

“It would be helpful to shrink the irrelevant bits,” Anglehurst said. “Is that possible?” he looked at Davis.

“Er,” the Potions Master began, but was then interrupted, as the man in the image spoke:

“I didn’t want to say this in front of the others,” he said, “but I plan that you should be First Minister in France.”

There were gasps in the auditorium.

“Instead of in Britain?” Malfoy said.

More shocked outrage.

“Before Britain. You can make your mark here, and then you’ll be in a far better position to take charge in England.”

Several members of the audience hooted, darting glares at Atkins.

“You’ve had experience as a temptress,” Malfoy said. “But what you really want is to have me in your power, is it not?” He looked across at the man. “You want me in power so that you can control me. I’ll be your puppet. The Death Eaters are like your little army, aren’t they? You can pull all our strings, and if we don’t dance to your tune, no-one is going to listen to us, or stop you throwing our evil little arses back in Azkaban.”

“Yes,” the man said. “And you’d do the same in my shoes.”

“If I was in your shoes, I’d spell them to fit,” Malfoy said.

Several people laughed at the last comment, as the memory faded.

“Mr Malfoy, if you would take the memory back, and then take this,” Davis said, now rather flustered, handing him a vial.

Lucius nodded, and retrieved the memory, then downed the contents of the little container.

“If you’d just show us a second or two, it will be enough to confirm the identity of the person to
whom you were talking,” Anglehurst said.

Malfoy nodded, and moments later the court hissed as they watched the section where Atkins, now in her own form, offered Malfoy being First Minister in France.

“Thank you, Mr Malfoy,” Anglehurst said.

Everyone fell silent as Anglehurst steepled his fingers, looking out at them. Finally, he spoke. “Mrs Atkins, please stand up.”

A sunbeam burst through the cloud, bathing the court in an eye-dazzling brightness. It seemed ridiculously inappropriate, Harry thought, and felt himself relax when it was snuffed out by the looming storm.

Mrs Atkins rose to her feet gracefully.

“From what we have seen, it is quite clear that you have misused the dignity of the office which you hold. On those grounds, I must place you under arrest.”

He turned to look to the top of the auditorium, and two officers came down the steps, wands drawn.

“Please surrender your wand,” Anglehurst said.

Harry held his breath as Atkins withdrew her wand, and started patting it across her palm.

“Am I to be charged with treason? Because an accusation of failing to do one’s job satisfactorily is not an arrestable offence,” she said, throwing her head back and facing the court proudly.

Anglehurst turned to Malfoy. “Are you able to give similar evidence that shows Mrs Atkins is guilty of plotting against this government?”

“I am,” Lucius said.

Anglehurst nodded, and turned back to Mrs Atkins. “I believe we have seen enough to give credence to Mr Malfoy’s allegations. It is not for me to decide what you will be charged with, and this is, in fact, Mr Hinch’s trial, and it is therefore inappropriate to spend time on considering further evidence against you. I have seen enough to consider your arrest to be necessary. You will wish to see a lawyer, Mrs Atkins, to discuss your defence once the charges are laid against you.”

“I am sorry, Your Honour, but I cannot be arrested without being notified of a charge,” she said sweetly.

“Your Honour, if I may?” Kingsley said, strolling down to the front of the court.

“Mr Shacklebolt,” Anglehurst said.

“Please excuse my tardiness: I had to organise protection for various witnesses when I heard that Mr Malfoy would be able to give evidence. As you know, I work for the European Wizarding Alliance. Mr Malfoy has been wearing a recording device, which my team has been monitoring, for many of his meetings with Mrs Atkins and others. I have no hesitation in laying a charge against Mrs Atkins for treason.”

Atkins turned her head to look Kingsley up and down.

“If that is the case, I would like to be tried now.”
“Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst began.

“It’s quite obvious that evidence is going to be laid before this court during Mr Hinch’s trial that will impact on any case against me – indeed, it is because of his trial that I have been accused. The proceedings will be reported in the press, and members here will talk about it. It would be impossible for me to get a fair trial unless I am allowed to counter any allegations made here and now.”

“Mrs Atkins, are you asking to stand trial alongside Mr Hinch?”

“It seems logical, if the evidence is going to be the same. I do not want to miss any of it, because it will be important to my defence.”

“You’ll need time to verse a lawyer in – ”

“No. I am completely innocent, and will defend myself.” She turned to Shacklebolt. “With what am I charged?”

Kingsley straightened. “I would like the opportunity to discuss this with the Prosecution, Your Honour.”

“Very well,” Anglehurst nodded. He turned to Mrs Atkins. “Mrs Atkins, you may wish to take the time to reconsider your position. You will be held in custody. Your wand, if you please.”

Atkins twirled it again, and then handed it over.

Anglehurst passed it to the court clerk, who looked at it, cast a quick embarrassed glance at Atkins, and hurried away.

Harry supposed he had worked with her when she had been a Prosecutor. It was certainly hard to think that someone that you should be able to trust could betray you so.

Anglehurst looked up. “Due to the events that are now transpiring, we are going to call it time for today. Court will reconvene at 9am tomorrow,” and he banged his gavel.

“Oh, thank god,” Harry said. “I hope to Christ Harcourt can nail that bitch.”

“Oh, my sentiments exactly,” Lucius nodded, and stood up, stretching his legs, his head lifting to look at the open expanse of sky above.

They all had far too much to lose, Harry thought, and he didn’t doubt that Atkins would fight dirty.

What were they prepared to do?
Harry stepped through the floo into Grimmauld Place.

“Albus!” he said in delight, seeing his son’s head appear around the door. “What are you doing here?” he added, coming over, a hand on his son’s arm, unsure whether to hug or not.

Albus grinned at him. “James called. I gather it’s all happening. I’ve got some leave.”

“And me,” Lily said, breezing in.

“And they let you?” Harry said, stepping forward, even more awkward now that he hadn’t hugged Albus.

There was a moment’s dithering, and then he suddenly had one in each arm, and was hugging them both.

“Not cross are you?” Lily said, her hair tickling his chin.

The floo flared and Harry disengaged himself and hurried back to help Hermione step out.

“Not cross,” Harry said, as Lily gasped, “Hermione! Look at you!”

The floo flared again and they moved out of the way for Snape.

Lily had been kissing Hermione on both cheeks, French fashion, and then just stepped up to Snape, reached up and did the same.

“Kissing time?” Kingsley said, stepping through. “Excellent.”

Lily laughed, and plonked one on his cheek.

“Bloody hell,” Ron said, from the doorway. “Did you just kiss Snape?”

“Of course,” Lily said. Ron’s surprise made her turn worried eyes to Snape. “I’m sorry, you didn’t mind, did you?”

“You would not have been able to do it, had I objected,” Snape said. “School is going well?”

Lily grinned, relaxing. “Yeah, great, thanks, specially with that book you sent. It’s miles better than the set text.”

“You sent Lily a book?” Harry asked.

“They’re using Brandieu for their text,” Snape rolled his eyes. “Hopeless.”

“Everyone’s ordered copies,” Lily said, “once they’d seen mine. They’re really impressed that I know you.”

Kingsley grinned, and bumped Snape’s shoulder.

Hermione shut Ron’s mouth with a finger under his chin. “Take me home,” she said.

Ron’s face was instantly concerned. “You alright?”
“Tired.” She smiled a reassurance.

“I can’t get you a cup of tea, or anything, first?” Lily said, going back over.

“Thanks, but I just want to get home and put my feet up,” Hermione smiled at her.

“You were amazing, Hermione,” Harry said. “What would we do without you?”

“Well, Harcourt does have a hell of a job in front of him,” Hermione said, her face becoming worried.

“Is – is it not good?” Albus asked.

“I’ll come and tell you all about it,” Harry said. “I presume Draco isn’t here?”

“No, he’s working,” Albus said.

“We’d better call him. Go on, then, Hermione,” Harry said, shooing her to the floo. “You’ll tell Ron everything, won’t you?”

“You can stay,” Hermione said, hand on her husband’s arm.

“Nah,” Ron said, eyes smiling down at her. “Let’s get you tucked up. Then I’ll probably get back behind the bar. You pick up an awful lot of gossip on what people think there.” He turned to Harry. “I only just got here. Lots of Wizengamot members have been in – and other members of the public, talking over today – ”

“Honestly, they’re hopeless!” Hermione said, shaking her head. “In Muggle courts, the Jury have committed an offence if they talk about the case outside of the Jury room.”

“Well, wizards and witches love to natter,” Ron shrugged. “Which is what Atkins was saying, really. The general feeling at the moment seems a bit of distrust for her, but they feel that she really must be on the level. She comes across as respectable, and they think she’s just becoming the scapegoat, and that someone was going to get the blame for the Ministry, whether they deserved it or not.”

“They’re sympathetic to her?” Harry was tight-lipped.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Ron grimaced.

“We ought to let Harcourt know, it might change his tactics,” Hermione said. “I’ll send him a note.”

“With your feet up,” Ron said.

“Definitely,” Hermione agreed, then stepped into the floo with Ron, giving a little wave even as her head dropped onto his chest.

His arms slipped around her protectively, and he nodded his goodbye as the flames flared.

The moment they’d gone, Albus bent down to fire-call Draco.

“I’ll go get Mitty to make some tea,” Lily said, heading to the door.

“You’re a darling,” Harry said, and she threw him a grin as she disappeared.
Harry had been aware of Snape and Kingsley standing quietly whilst the conversation had flowed around them.

He’d also been aware, all afternoon, of a simmering, building tension, as they’d sat in Harcourt’s tent, going over the case against Atkins.

There had been nothing overt. Nothing too distracting. Just… Severus had stood up to reach over the table to jot something on the parchment Harcourt was using to take notes, and Harry’s eyes had been snagged by the hairs at Snape’s wrist, as his cuff rode up, and he’d looked away quickly, but in so doing he’d seen Kingsley’s gaze, tracking over the line of Severus’ spine, over the curve of his arse, and he must have made a tiny sound, or movement, because Kingsley’s eyes met his, and they were hot and burning and Harry felt it like a jolt straight to his cock, as if Kingsley’s desire for Severus was his, and it was, it was, wasn’t it? Harry felt utterly connected with both of them, and his mouth had broadcast a huge smile that he just couldn’t control.

“What’s so funny?” Hermione had asked. “Harry?”

And then everyone was looking at him, and Harry’d blushed, and shaken his head, and apologised, but Severus’ eyes had met his, briefly, enquiring, and Harry couldn’t stop the smile, and the swell of love in his heart, and the sense of joy that washed through him, ridiculous in the situation, but wonderful.

And then he’d been aware of them throughout the whole meeting, every movement, every slight shift of Kingsley’s hips, the way Severus looked when he was pausing, thinking, and the way he held the room, as if his silence held them all in a spell, and he was transported back to the classroom, to the first time he’d heard Snape speak, Professor Snape, and the memory was somehow thrilling, not full of the hurt at being misunderstood, of having his youthful keenness crushed.

He wondered how Lucius and Hermione and Harcourt could fail to be aware of it, of the throbbing undercurrent of – of - desire wasn’t a big enough word; of need, and belonging.

Harry stood there in his parlour, and he wanted them both so badly that he felt his skin was too tight for everything that was inside him. But…..

“Why don’t you two go home?” he said quietly, stepping up to them.

Both of them turned to him, and their gazes felt physical as they touched his skin.

“You can’t stay, right?” Harry said to Kingsley.

“No, just an hour, max. They’re all in the cells, under the auditorium, but – I want to be sure – Atkins will know people, I’ve got my own staff on, but - ”

“Yeah,” Harry said. His hand just touched Kingsley’s arm briefly. “You could do with a bit of Spanish air,” he said. “I’ll tell everyone here what’s going on.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Harry,” Kingsley said.

“I know,” Harry said, fast and quiet, seeing Albus step back. “I want to be there with you. But – next time, yeah? Severus’ll take care of me tonight, hmm? I’m going to be so – ” he glanced across at Albus again, and the flare of the floo. He dropped his voice. “Needy – thinking of you together. Thinking of when we’ll all be together again. I love you both. Go,” he said.
Kingsley pressed a hot, hard kiss to his mouth. “Yeah,” he said. “All that.”

They all turned as Draco stepped out.

“Draco,” Kingsley said, businesslike at once. “Your father’s in custody, but we’re keeping him safe, and making sure he has decent food and facilities.”

Draco looked at him, and nodded. “Thank you.”

“Harry’ll tell you what’s going on. Albus, good to see you.” He stepped to the floo.

“Yeah, same, Kingsley. And you, Severus. Good to see you both.”

Harry gave Albus a quick look, and noted his son’s understanding gaze.

Felt warmed that Albus approved that they were together again.

“Come through,” Harry said to Draco, casting a last glance at his two lovers.

He smiled at Severus’ hand on Kingsley’s rear, as Kingsley bent to step into the floo.

He headed along the corridor to the sitting room, Draco in front of him.

In a moment, he’d have to talk about death, and murder, and horrible, horrible people.

And Ginny’s death.

His step faltered.

He didn’t know how life came to have changed so much in such a short time.

He wished – he wished, looking at Draco ahead of him, that things were different.

That Ginny – the laughing, happy Ginny he’d known when they were first married, the older Ginny, once she’d found Draco, and was less – less – lying, less pretending – was still here.

Here with Draco.

Here as mother of his children.

A friend.

A loved friend, like Ron, and Mione.

He wondered what she would have thought of him being with Kingsley and Severus. Would she have objected?

She was from a traditional family. But she’d hardly been the hardcore regular wife, had she? She’d slept with other men, left, right and centre. She hadn’t felt contained by society’s rules.

Even if she’d objected…

It would’ve been tough.

He still –

He missed knowing she was alive.
He’d never be enough for the children; they needed her. A mother.

But…

He’d do his best.

He loved them.

And he’d do right by Ginny: he’d make sure those who’d hurt her wouldn’t be around to do it to anyone else.

Later that night, Snape slipped into bed beside him.

Harry turned over, gasping. “Your feet are freezing!”

“The rest of me isn’t,” Snape said, a hand snaking across Harry’s belly.

“You have any energy left after Kingsley?”

“We missed you.”

“Yeah?” Harry stretched up for a kiss. “Not much, I bet. I hope you gave Kingsley everything he needed?”

“Do you doubt me?” Snape said against his lips, then took Harry’s mouth.

It was some minute’s later before Harry surfaced for air.

“Well?” Snape said.

“Well what?” Harry gasped, as Snape bit at the tendon on his neck.

“Have you forgotten the question already?” Snape’s voice was warm with laughter, and husky with desire.

Harry’s brain fumbled for sense. All the blood had rushed elsewhere the moment Severus had started kissing him. “Umm, yeah?”

Snape chuckled, deep and low.

Harry couldn’t think of anything but the warmth of Severus’ breath against his throat, his hand, cool and firm, slipping beneath his pyjama bottoms.

“Do you doubt me?” Snape repeated, his hand sliding further down, cupping the curve of Harry’s buttock, hauling him closer.


A quick tug, a wriggle from Harry, and the pants were kicked out of the bed.

“Doubt I can take care of Kingsley. And you,” Snape said, sliding underneath Harry and pulling Harry to sit straddling him.
“Oh god,” Harry said, shifting, feeling his balls dragging over Snape’s legs. “Oh god.” His hands dropped forward, his thumbs rubbing over Snape’s nipples. “Please. Please. I’ve been thinking about you all evening.”

“When this is over,” Snape said, his hand reaching awkwardly to get the pot of lube from Harry’s bedside, “you are going to fuck Kingsley,” he slid a hand under Harry, encouraging him to lift, and then slid a slicked finger in.

“Oh god,” Harry said, pressing down. “Yes. Want that. And – and I’ll suck your cock?” He swallowed, as if tasting it in his mouth already.

Snape’s eyes darkened. “Maybe I’ll let you do that later. But first I’m going to fuck you.”

“While I’m fucking Kingsley?” Harry began moving, loving the stretch of his thighs, the stretch in his arse, the tightness in his chest, trying to drag in enough air, enough Severus.

“That’s right,” Snape said, thrusting slowly. “All of us together, all of us being together, all of us coming together…” His hand grasped Harry’s cock, slick and firm and demanding.

“Yes,” Harry grunted, mind blown but wanting so much…wanting Severus to feel just as he did, just as desperate as he felt, even though he knew Severus had probably come at least twice already, come with Kingsley, and the thought of that just made him hotter, not jealous or sad, just wanting them both so much, and he deliberately tightened his muscles around Severus, reaching down to bite at his nipple, right over the mark that he could see there already, and Kingsley’s teeth had been there, and just the thought was enough to make Harry lose it, his whole body tensing, spasming, and Severus still kept on moving in him, and it made Harry’s heart feel so joyous, that Severus was doing this not just for him, but for his own pleasure too. As the aftershocks slipped into oversensitivity, he pulled off, grasping Severus with his hand before Severus could feel the loss of him, and then shifted alongside him, finding Severus’ mouth and kissing him as his hand stroked and pulled and twisted, loving the feeling of Severus’ cock against his palm, hot and tense and his.

“You’re amazing,” Harry said, when they’d both got their breath back. “Truly amazing.”

Severus turned, smiling. His hair was stuck to his head with sweat, reminding Harry for the second time that day of the old Snape, the ‘greasy git’ that they’d used to call him.

It was good knowing that he’d caused it, that Severus’ normal control and demeanour could cede to him.

That Severus willingly gave himself to him.

Kingsley – Kingsley gave of himself easily, as if his person, his love, wasn’t an incredible thing, something to be treasured.

But Harry treasured them both.
“Mrs Atkins, Mr Malfoy has told this court that you asked him to see Theodore Hinch to ‘get him in line’, as it were. Did you ask Mr Malfoy to do so?”

“I did,” Dorothy Atkins said.

There was a hiss of surprise around the court.

Like Theo Hinch, by defending herself, Atkins had been able to refuse Veritaserum, and therefore people were, perhaps, expecting her to deny everything.

Harcourt, however, didn’t miss a beat. “Because you were in league with Hinch to destroy the Ministry?”

“Oh please,” Atkins’ voice tinkled. “I’ve dedicated my life to serving my country. I’ve worked for the Ministry for almost all of my adult years; I’ve risen through the ranks, as a lawyer and Prosecutor, and now as Head of the Ministry Law Enforcement Department. Why would I want to destroy that?”

“Well,” Harcourt said, “because you want to be Supreme Mugwamp?”

There was some laughter at the outrageous suggestion.

“Do you expect me to deny that I would love to be Supreme Mugwamp?” She looked around the court, quelling the noise. “What wizard or witch would not be honoured, should they be elected to such an office? The chance to serve wizardkind is a privilege.”

Several heads nodded.

“Bugger,” Harry said to Hermione, who was sitting beside him once again. “She’s so bloody – credible.”

“Yes. Harcourt’s got to break her,” Hermione nodded. Harry looked at her, surprised at the tough words. But she was right.

“So you do not deny that you are involved with a terrorist organisation?” Harcourt asked Atkins.

“I think terrorist is a rather – excessive word,” Atkins gave a sweet smile.

As the court rumbled, and Harcourt was about to speak again, Atkins added, “Of course, ‘involved’ is an unhelpful word too.”

“Perhaps you’d like to give us another?” Anglehurst suggested.

Harcourt bit his lip.

“He’s cross that Anglehurst is giving her the opportunity to play the court,” Hermione whispered.

“Yeah,” Harry nodded.
“I’d say – ‘monitoring’,” Atkins said.

“You’re suggesting, I take it, Mrs Atkins, that you offered Lucius Malfoy the role of Minister for Magic, and attended a group in France, for more than three years, because – you were ‘monitoring’ them?”

“Yes.”

The sense of people shifting, wordlessly responding, filled the auditorium.

“Mrs Atkins, perhaps I ought to point out,” Harcourt said smoothly, “That you aren’t Supreme Mugwamp yet.”

There was a wave of laughter.

“And forgive me if I’m wrong, but the Ministry pays you – quite well – to look after Law Enforcement in England, not in France.”

Mrs Atkins’ face was red. “Mr Malfoy was correct in thinking that matters on the continent affect our security here in England,” she said stiffly.

“I see. And you felt it necessary to - investigate – personally, did you? Despite the fact that you have an Auror department at your disposal?”

“My concerns about the Auror Division led me to pursue my own investigations, yes,” she said, regaining her poise.

“And what concerns would those be, Mrs Atkins? The sort of concern that means that every single member of new staff that you’ve employed since you joined the Ministry has been a Pureblood?”

There was a sound of shock from the assembled gathering.

She folded one leg over the other, flicking a speck of dust off her knee, untroubled. “I employ the best candidate for the job. I am talking about concerns that there is corruption and unacceptable behaviour within the department. I sacked the warders who had mistreated Mr Potter, here, for example. And the Head Auror, who had actually watched Mr Potter stripped naked and abused by other Aurors.” She shook her head sadly. “I don’t know if that is what turned him into a homosexual, of course, and if that was the case, I can, perhaps, understand the lack of gratitude.”

Harry felt as if he’d been turned to stone.

“Oh. My. God.” Hermione said. She glanced at Harry’s frozen face. Her hand came out, fluttering above his leg, about to touch and then hesitating.

“They raped you?” Ron’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

Harry was aware that the every single person was staring at him. He turned his head, to see James, and Albus, and Lily, all with varying emotions on their faces.

Pity featured large.

“They did not!” he bit out.

“Then – ”

Hermione glanced from him to Atkins.
“She – she’s an utter bitch!” he hissed. “They – she’s making me out to look – she’s making sure they know I’m queer. Making me look pathetic – ”

“You’re not pathetic if you were raped!” Hermione said quickly, the hand dropping onto his knee. “You must never feel – ”

“They didn’t,” Harry repeated. “Dear God, Malfoy was right not to take Veritaserum. She’ll twist anything – ”

“But – she sacked Felton – ”

“Yeah, but not right after my imprisonment, was it?” Harry said. He looked at all the faces of his friends and family, and said quietly, “Alright, alright. They did strip me. They – they body-searched me,” he bit out.

“Wh – what does that mean?” Lily asked. “Dad?”

Harry could feel the heat pouring off his face, the sweat chill on his brow.

“They can do that with a spell,” Ron said. “Who were they, Harry? I’m going to kill them.”

“It means,” Harry answered his daughter with as much dignity as he could pull together, “that they said they thought I might be hiding a wand up my arse. So they went looking for it.”

“Oh Dad,” she reached across Albus, who was sitting next to Harry, and grasped his hand.

“Listen,” Hermione said with a gentle tap to draw his attention back to Harcourt.

“…reprehensible behaviour in our officers is of course a matter that appals us all. Nevertheless, it does not answer the question as to why you would be in France, Polyjuiced into a man.”

“Well, I thought it was obvious,” Atkins said. “I did not feel I could trust the members of my department to carry out such a delicate operation.”

“Forgive me, Mrs Atkins, if I’m wrong, but my understanding is that your background is entirely in dealing with court cases, not in the practical side of covert operations.”

“That is perhaps,” she nodded quietly, “why I didn’t take some of the precautions that, in retrospect, would have been sensible. It didn’t occur to me, you see, that anyone would doubt my word, and hence that I would find myself in court, for trying to protect my country.”

“Oh, she’s good,” Ron said bitterly.

“Mrs Atkins, can you tell us why you suspected Mr Hinch, and what exactly you suspected him of?”

She paused. “Mr Hinch’s behaviour has always been somewhat – odd. To be honest,” she gave a small smile, “that isn’t unusual amongst Unspeakables.”

There were several titters from the audience.

“But I felt there was something inherently – unstable – about him. Having gone to France when I heard that Lucius Malfoy had been seen allying himself with political activists, I thought the easiest way to flush out the views of both of them was to put them together and see what happened.”

“I see,” Harcourt said. “That necessitated you having a romantic relationship with Mr Malfoy, did
A gasp went around the courtroom.

“I beg your pardon?” Dorothy Atkins said, drawing herself up.

Harcourt looked up. “Have I said something untoward?” he asked, as if surprised. “Only the incident at the Benefit Gala was widely reported, wasn’t it? A young man took you hostage, I believe, as he understood that you were Mr Malfoy’s…ladyfriend.”

“He was suffering from a misapprehension,” she said tightly.

“But didn’t you attend his wedding? As Mr Malfoy’s partner?” Harcourt queried.

“The young man was part of the French group under suspicion,” she said. “It seemed a sensible way to see the sort of people he was mixing with.”

“So you did attend his wedding?” Harcourt pushed.

“…Yes.”

What possible sort of misapprehension could the man be under to take you hostage, Mrs Atkins?” Harcourt asked.

Atkins turned to the Judge. “Mr Anglehurst, I fail to see how this line of questioning is relevant – ”

“Mrs Atkins, you are perfectly aware of the correct term of address for a Judge,” Anglehurst said, peering over his glasses.

Atkins flushed. “I beg your pardon, Your Honour. I fail to see – ”

“Two people died at that Benefit, Mrs Atkins.” Anglehurst turned his head towards the Prosecutor. “I’ll allow this line of questioning a little longer, but make it pertinent, Mr Harcourt.”

“Of course, Your Honour,” Harcourt bowed. “Mrs Atkins, perhaps you could answer the question?”

“…He thought that Mr Malfoy and I were in a relationship.”

“And why would that make him decide to take you hostage?”

“He believed that Mr Malfoy had taken his wife away from him, and so he decided to take me from Mr Malfoy. I understand from the reports that he was drunk, or had used drugs – ”

“And that wasn’t obvious at the time?”

“I’m sorry?”

“You couldn’t smell alcohol on him?”

“Your Honour – ” she turned to the Judge.

“It’s a simple question, Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst didn’t look up from the notes he was making.

“His behaviour was obviously erratic. I – I do remember the smell of alcohol – ”

“And yet, knowing that the man was upset about his wife, and inebriated, you told your Auror
guard to kill him, did you not?"

An instant silence fell. Taut anticipation filled the air.

She bit her lip. “I was under a great deal of stress. I can’t be sure now – ”

“Oh, I have the official paperwork here, Mrs Atkins,” Harcourt said, lifting a sheaf of parchments. “There were an awful lot of witnesses. There was particularly careful documentation, as not only was the young bridegroom killed, but also the father of the bride.”

There were gasps of shock, whilst other people murmured, nodding.

The incident had been front page news in the press, Harry thought, and, of course, a number of the members of the Wizengamot had been there.

Harcourt looked up. “I understand the widow is in court today,” he said quietly, “and I do not wish to cause her any further distress. I believe I am correct in saying that the young woman – who is only seventeen – never gave consent to the marriage herself. Is that correct, Mrs Atkins?”

“The wedding was something of a shambles. Her father collapsed at it: I imagine a weak heart had more to do with his death at the Benefit than the actions of my Aurors,” Atkins said, face tight.

“I see. And did the bride give consent?” Harcourt pushed again.

“Her aunt gave it on her behalf.”

“That is acceptable in old, Pureblood families, is it not?”

“Yes. Certainly, no-one objected.”

“Except the bride,” Harcourt said.

“I’m sure her family knew best – ”

“But she ran away, with Mr Malfoy’s help. Why was that?”

“I am not Mr Malfoy; you will have to ask him,” Atkins said tartly.

“Yes, thank you, I will. Your Honour, if I may call Mr Malfoy?”

“Aren’t we getting off the point, Harcourt?” Anglehurst demanded.

“It is necessary, Your Honour,” Harcourt bowed again.

Lucius took the stand, with Harry behind him.

“Mr Malfoy, you are a Pureblood, are you not?”

“Yes.”

“Steeped in tradition?”

“I would say so,” Lucius said, with hauteur.

There were some snorts of agreement.

“Is it true that you helped a legally married young woman to escape from her husband?”
“I did.”

Gasps ran around the court.

Lucius’ face was implacable.

“Mr Malfoy, why would you do such a thing?”

Lucius stayed silent.

“Please answer the court, Mr Malfoy,” Harcourt said.

Again, Lucius said nothing.

“Might I speak, Monsieur?” said a trembling voice from across the auditorium.

A tiny figure stood up.

Everyone turned to stare.

“And you are, Miss?” Anglehurst demanded.

“I am the woman he rescued,” she said quietly. “I believe Mr Malfoy is not speaking to protect my honour.”

There was a lot of murmuring.

Nanette looked far too young to be married, Harry thought. It gave credibility, certainly, to Lucius’ actions.

“If you would allow me to explain?” she asked.

“We would be obliged, “Anglehurst said. “Your name, Madamoise - Madame?”

“Well, I do not use the name Brouchard, because I did not wish to be married to Artur. I am Nanette Odont.”

“Please proceed. Briefly, if you would,” Anglehurst said. “You may stay standing where you are. I believe everyone can hear.”

“Yes. Thank you, Sir - Y- Your Honour,” she corrected. “Mr Malfoy knew that the marriage – that it was against my will. My aunt – I did not consent, but my aunt made the vow. The – my husband – it was supposed to be a marriage of convenience only, but – my husband took – took a potion – ” she began to shake. Her hand crept to her cheek.

“This is unnecessary,” Lucius said, his jaw muscle snapping.

“Are you able to continue?” Anglehurst asked, more gently.

Gloria was seated on one side of Nanette, Scorpius and Andy on the other. Gloria was holding her hand.

Nanette nodded. “I beg your pardon. Artur – he – he had hit me, and –”

Several people exclaimed.

“Anyway, Mr Malfoy offered to help me escape, if I wished it, and I did, so he did, and Mr Potter
and his family – I had met his daughter before – they were so kind, and I lived with them until Lily went back to school. But Artur was angry with Mr Malfoy. He made a hostage of Mrs Atkins at the Benefit, and then he tried to kill me.”

“I see. Thank you for being good enough to clear that up, Mademoiselle Odont,” Anglehurst nodded.

“If I could say one other thing, Mon - Your Honour?” Nanette asked.

She looked so doll-like, Harry thought, with her cheeks flushed and the fervour of youth on her.

“I – I know this is not Mr Malfoy’s trial,” she said, “but you – the court,” she spun around, looking at everyone, “need to know that Monsieur Malfoy did not kill the man he is accused of.”

“I understand your loyalty – ” Anglehurst began, but she cut him off.

“Of course I am loyal to a man who has saved my life,” she said, “but the man who he is charged with killing – he was a friend of my father. As – as were Artur’s parents. Anyway, I have just come back from France, as I went to see Madame Benôit – the widow of the man he is accused of killing. But she says his death was natural, and that she knew nothing of Monsieur Malfoy being charged. So she went to ask at the French Ministry, and it seems that someone from England had told Artur’s parents that Mr Malfoy could be thrown back in prison if there was just a suspicion against him. So they accused him. To pay him back, you see.”

The court did see. There were looks and nods, and sympathetic smiles for the young girl.

Harry wanted to cheer, and clap Nanette on the back.

“Mr Malfoy will still have to stand trial, my dear,” Anglehurst said, apparently forgetting his court manners.

“Oh yes, of course. But I thought you should know,” Nanette said simply, and sat down.

“Artur Brouchard’s parents: these were people in the French group you were investigating, Mrs Atkins?” Harcourt asked.

“Oh yes,” Hermione whispered to her husband. “Nice. Just the implication of the connection is enough.”

“I met them at the wedding,” Mrs Atkins said, raising her chin, “if you’re trying to find out whether I knew them.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Harcourt chided.

Atkins stared at him. “I had met Monsieur Brouchard previously, but not his wife.”

“Good,” Ron said, “she’s naming people. Good.”

“And you suspected him of terrorist leanings,” Harcourt pushed.

“I repeat – I think ‘terrorist’ is a strong word,” Atkins said primly.

“Oh, so do I,” Harcourt nodded. “Quite.”

Hermione grinned.
“So the Benefit sounds as if it was quite traumatic for you,” Harcourt went on. “And with the French invading our shores – ” he turned towards Nanette, and said, “with apologies to Miss Odont, who is of course, most welcome -”

There were a few laughs.

“- and attacking you, you decided that you’d put two potential threats together and see what happened. Do I have that correctly?”

“Quite,” Atkins mimicked him.

“And what was the outcome of this experiment, Mrs Atkins? What did you find? Who did you tell? How did this autonomous action prevent the biggest disaster the Ministry has ever known? Oh – pardon me: it didn’t.”

More people laughed.

“People are beginning to doubt her,” Hermione whispered.

“My efforts might have failed, Mr Harcourt, but I’ll be damned if I’ll have you laughing at me for trying,” Atkins said.

“I will not tolerate such language in my court,” Anglehurst said severely, staring at Mrs Atkins.

She bowed her head. “My apologies. I find it very hard to accept that my word should count for nothing, after all the years of service I have given to this country.”

“Well, there’s an interesting point,” Harcourt said. “You argue that you were monitoring both Hinch and Malfoy in the interests of national security: an admirable activity, I’m sure we’d all agree. And yet, this – personal approach – was not part of your remit, Mrs Atkins. Did you conduct your - interactions - with these gentlemen during work time?”

“Oh, good one,” Hermione said.

Atkins paused. “My working hours were already completely filled with the onerous duties - ”

“So you felt the need to use your private time to investigate these men,” Harcourt cut across her. “That seems rather – overstepping your bounds as a private citizen, to deliberately spy into the private lives of others.” He looked around the court. “I’m sure such actions would, to most of us, feel rather – creepy.”

Atkins’ jaw tightened, and she lifted her chin.

“It’s funny, isn’t it?” Harcourt went on, “I can’t help feeling that it is rather odd, that when a situation arose that provided a legal necessity to investigate one of these men, you did not do so.”

“If you’re referring to the thefts from the Ministry, the Unspeakables were investigated,” Atkins leant forward.

“Mrs Atkins, it’s clear that the investigation was minimal - given your concerns, you had a perfect opportunity to instruct the head of the Auror Division to be as thorough as possible. Did you do so?”

“I did not wish to undermine his authority.”

“But Mrs Atkins, I’m sure all of us are finding such hesitation on your part – inconceivable.
You’ve already told us you were concerned about Mr Hinch. A grave matter concerning his department comes to light, linked to just the sort of terrorist activity that you tell us you’d been hoping to prevent. Did you pass your concerns on to Head Auror Dowling?”

“To do so might have incorrectly focused his investigations in one direction, ruling out a proper study of other possibilities.”

“But Mrs Atkins, you appointed Mr Dowling. Surely you had every confidence in his abilities?”

She looked at Harcourt, eyes narrowed. And said nothing.

Harcourt nodded. “And when it was clear from the reports that the investigations had been minimal, you didn’t think to raise your concerns then? Ask Head Auror Dowling to take a closer look at Hinch in particular?”

Atkins turned and took a long look at Hinch. “To be honest,” she said, “I was rather scared of him.”

“Look at Nott!” Ron hissed.

“She’s going to dump him,” Hermione said.

Harry looked at her, then back.

“You were scared of him, Mrs Atkins? Would you care to explain that?”

“I had got – closer to him – than I would have wished, during my investigation – not – intimately, of course,” she said quickly. “But in terms of appearing to go along with his views. When I heard about the Ministry fire – that was the day that I was at the wedding with Mr Malfoy in France –”

“She’s got her alibi in,” Ron whispered, and Hermione nodded.

“ – I – well, I felt – uncertain. I thought I was being silly. But then when I heard about the missing items from the Department of Mysteries, the shocking truth dawned on me, that perhaps Nott had had a hand in it. But I had no evidence, and Dowling had found none. Nott’s father was a Death Eater – well, the man he had thought was his father – and I should call him Hinch, of course - I thought if anyone could keep him under control until we had proof, it would be Lucius Malfoy, who was the Dark Lord’s right hand man. Malfoy was with me at the wedding, so I assumed that at least he wasn’t involved in what had happened at the Ministry, especially as he seemed more concerned about the girl. I thought I could use them against each other to get the evidence I needed.” She gave Hinch a little glance and away again quickly, as if she were still scared of him. “Unfortunately this has backfired on me.”

Harcourt looked down at his papers.

“Mr Harcourt?” Anglehurst prompted. “Do you have any further questions?”

“Oh, I beg your pardon, Your Honour: not at the moment.”

“He’s backing down?” James leaned across and asked Hermione.

“Biding his time, I expect,” she said, but she was biting her lip.

“I would like to ask Mrs Atkins some questions, Your Honour,” Hinch said, standing up.

“Go ahead,” Anglehurst said.
“Firstly,” Hinch said, “I am most grateful to the court for arranging the removal of the loyalty spell that had been placed on me by Mrs Atkins.”

“Oh ho!” Ron grinned. “Here it comes!”

“But how can he say anything without implicating himself?” Albus asked.


“Mrs Atkins, did you ever speak to my superior with your concerns about my – ‘unstable,’” he made quote marks with his fingers, “behaviour? Bear in mind that I am asking you only to save the court the trouble of calling Unspeakable Turin, who is the Senior Unspeakable in the Department,” he added, looking around at the court as he explained.

“No, I decided to investigate myself.”

“By doing which, you deprived me of the opportunity to discuss such an allegation officially, didn’t you?”

“I was more concerned with the bigger picture.”

“That would be the bigger picture where you bribed my father – or the man who I thought was my father – to work for you, under the threat of throwing him back into Azkaban.”

There were gasps from the audience.

Harry looked at Hermione and Ron. This was new.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Atkins said.

“My father – I’m going to call him that, because he was, to me – died on a mission you’d set up to kill Harry Potter,” Nott said.

There were more astounded gasps.

Ron looked across at Harry, and gave a look of sympathy, whilst at the same time giving a discreet thumbs up.

“Martin Nott’s body was found in the North Sea, I understand,” Atkins said. “I had an Auror team searching for him after he went missing, in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Why would I send an Auror team after a man who, you’re suggesting, was on a mission for me?” she sneered. “And why on earth would I want to kill Harry Potter? Or think Martin Nott, who, to be frank, was not the brightest button in the box, and it’s no surprise to anyone, I imagine, that he wasn’t your father – why would you even think that I would suppose him capable of killing the most powerful wizard in England?” Her face declared her outrage and astonishment.

Hinch, however, didn’t react. “My father told me that you were forcing him to act, that he couldn’t refuse because he was terrified of being sent back to Azkaban – exactly as you’ve done to Lucius Malfoy,” he said coolly, making everyone’s eyes dart to Lucius, and Atkins, and back again. “Mr Malfoy’s testimony confirmed what you’d done to my father – that you were raising your own army of Death Eaters.”

Someone shouted out. There was a wave of noise.

Anglehurst banged his gavel twice, hard, the noise like a gunshot. “Allow Mr Hinch to speak,” he
ordered. “He is acting as his own defence here, and must be allowed to be heard.”

People quietened down.

“You may proceed, Mr Hinch,” Anglehurst said.

“Thank you, Your Honour,” Hinch bowed. “My father said that Potter would be sent to Azkaban for killing his wife, but his job was to raise power in the North Sea, so that Potter was killed on his journey there. She didn’t want any chance of him resurfacing to counteract her plans,” he said, pointing at Atkins.

“Your Honour, these allegations are absolutely preposterous!” Atkins said, standing up. “I said that Hinch was unstable. I was quite aware from my investigations that he did not admire his father, but was nevertheless proud of his Pureblood heritage. Indeed, he told me that he had refused to follow the Dark Lord not because he disagreed with his aims, but because the Dark Lord was a half-blood.” She shook her head. “I suspect the discovery that he is a half-blood himself has thrown his mind. I suggest that an investigation by the mental health team at St. Mungo’s might be more appropriate for him than these proceedings.”

Anglehurst tapped his quill against his mouth, drawing the feathers through his fingers.

A hush fell, waiting.

“There had been no call prior to this case for a mental assessment of Mr Hinch,” Anglehurst said. “If, however, I feel that that view changes, I may reconsider. For the present, proceed.”

Harcourt stood up. “If I may?”

“Yes, yes,” Anglehurst said, waving the quill.

“Mr Hinch,” he said, “you are suggesting that Mrs Atkins was plotting to kill Mr Potter.”

“Yes.”

“And you did nothing about this?”

“What could I do? Mr Potter might be a hero, but I think any son would choose his father’s life over someone else’s,” he looked around at the Wizengamot.

Several people were nodding, with some sympathy.

“Oh please,” Ron said, rolling his eyes.

“I see. And did you know any other details, Mr Hinch? Was the case against Mr Potter a set-up?”

“I don’t know the details. I’m not particularly interested in Harry Potter.”

“But you went to school with him, Mr Hinch – in the same year, were you not? You must have had lessons together?”

“Being in the same class doesn’t make you friends,” Hinch said. “He was widely regarded as a twat.”

There were some laughs, some looks of embarrassment.

“I see,” Harcourt said. “Who were your friends in school, Mr Hinch?”
“In what way is that relevant?” Hinch demanded.

“I could ask the same question,” Anglehurst peered at Harcourt.

“Well, I find it interesting, Your Honour,” Harcourt said, “that the gallery is full of Mr Potter’s friends and family, and yet I only see Mr Hinch’s mother and son here, on his behalf. His wife is not here. There is not a single friend or colleague to support him.” He looked round at the court.

“Mr Hinch is undoubtedly an exceptionally clever man, but he has allowed his feelings of superiority - both because of his intellect and his belief that he was a Pureblood and that Purebloods are better - to alienate himself – quite willingly, I’m sure - from others. In a nutshell, I believe Mr Hinch is a man who sees a goal and is quite capable of being able to go about it, without thought – no, no, I’m wrong – I’m sure he thinks of it – but without care – for the suffering of others. This is a man who can casually steal objects from the Ministry whilst knowing that others within it will burn and perish in agony. This is a man who can lead a young lad to the filmy horror of the Veil and push him through, and then take his identity and calmly walk out of the building. This is a man who by his own admission, just moments ago in front of you all, told you that he had ignored a plot to murder Harry Potter.”

Silence gripped them all.

“Mr Potter asked earlier that his wife’s murder be added to the charges against Mr Hinch. I’m sure many of you felt surprise and disbelief. You have heard of Hinch’s connection with Mrs Atkins, and her connection with the terrorist group in France.” He turned to Anglehurst. “I would like the court to replay the evidence of the murder of Mrs Potter, Your Honour.”

Anglehurst looked at him with a beady eye, and nodded. “Master Davis, we have a record of that memory? Mr Draco Malfoy’s memory?”

The Potions Master nodded. “I have it ready, Your Honour.”

Moments later the memory was playing.

Harry had somehow not prepared himself for the fact that this would need to be shown again. His hand reached out, and then he found that Albus was holding one of Lily’s hands and James the other, and Albus had his and Hermione his other, and it was like a chain of support against the terrible images.

As the last scream faded and only a sob or two in court could be heard, Harcourt turned to the silent audience. “I am sorry for the distress caused by the playing of the memory. I know some of you have seen it before, and some not; I can only say that such scenes do not get easier to watch for anyone. Nevertheless, I want to call to your attention the masks that were worn. The same masks have been used on the continent by a group there working for Pureblood supremacy. The masks led Mr Potter and the European Wizarding Alliance to ask Mr Lucius Malfoy to infiltrate the group, which led him to Mrs Atkins and thereon to Mr Hinch. No doubt the wearers thought that they were perfectly safe from identification because of them, but as we know, Mr Poulter, who was allied with the French group, has been identified, and Samantha Donnelly, the close friend of Mrs Atkins, identified herself as another of the murderers. Mrs Atkins produced a ‘suicide note’ on the night of Mrs Donnelly’s death, apparently found in the room of Mrs Donnelly’s son, Peter Stubbins. Mrs Atkins gave a press statement on Wizarding Radio to say that Peter Stubbins admitted being the third accomplice in the death of Mrs Potter, and that his guilt had driven him to suicide, a suicide which had accidentally resulted in the fire at the Ministry.”

Everyone was listening intently.
“Even the radio presenter was astonished, as Mr Stubbins’ body was found without burns, and had been in the Death Room, only being discovered because the water had washed the bodies back out of the ether of this artefact. You will not be surprised to hear that the suicide note has ‘gone missing’.” He rolled his eyes, and then returned to a more serious face. “I can assure you all that Peter Stubbins did not take his life out of guilt for having murdered Mrs Potter. I mentioned before that Mr Stubbins was not there, ladies and gentlemen.” He turned to Anglehurst. “If I may call Mademoiselle Odont, Your Honour?”

“Oh, he’s thrown Atkins a curve,” whispered Ron. “She wasn’t expecting that.”

Anglehurst had waved Nanette to come down to the witness box this time.

“Mademoiselle Odont,” Harcourt said, “I’m afraid I need to be blunt with you.”

“Yes, Monsieur – I mean, Sir,” she nodded.

“You seem to have been mixed up with a bad lot. Your husband, father, and the people you mixed with all seem to be involved with a rather dodgy elitist group in France.”

She nodded. “Yes. There were two groups, really, although they thought the same. The older ones, and the younger ones. The younger ones talked a lot, and were more radical, I think. The older ones – well, they knew Ministers, and so on, so it was probably easier to get things they wanted done.”

“Like get the French Ministry to send false papers accusing a man?” he looked at Malfoy.

“Yes.”

“And you, Miss Odont? Would you regard yourself as a political radical?”

“I – I know I ought to be, but I am not very interested in politics,” she said shyly. “My father had dinner parties, and they all talked politics, and I always thought it a bit boring, to be truthful.”

“But your father made you attend?” he said in surprise. “You cannot have been very old. Surely your mother sent you to bed?”

“No, because my mother died when I was little, and I have always been my father’s hostess, of course.”

Several people nodded and sighed.

“So – you attended these dinner gatherings from – what age?”

“About twelve, I think,” she said. “Obviously, once I stopped going to school, I was always home. Before that it was only holidays.”

“You stopped going to school?”

“Oh – I had a tutor,” she explained. Her face dropped a little. “I had an accident at school – a fall from my broomstick – and it was quite bad – and Papa wanted me at home after that.”

“She’s getting everyone’s sympathy,” Lily said. “Good.”

“But you didn’t agree with the things they said?”

“Well, I was more concerned with being sure that the next course was ready, and that people were happy, and so on,” she spread her hands.
“Of course. But then you became involved in the younger group?”

Her face grew pale. “My father wanted me to marry Artur Brouchard. So – so he wanted me to be around him and his friends.”

“And these were radical people too? Political?”

She nodded.

“You didn’t enjoy it?” Harcourt queried.

Nanette gripped her hands together. “At first I did,” she said quietly. “I hadn’t had many friends since I left school, so I was glad to go out.” She bit her lip, then said in a rush, “they drank very heavily, and smoked, and were silly about politics and everything, and I came to dread it.”

“I see. And there was no one you liked? No friend to make?”

“Exciting as this tale is, Your Honour,” Hinch said in a bored voice, standing up to object, “is this at all relevant?”

“Harcourt? Keep it brief,” Anglehurst said.

“Your Honour,” Harcourt nodded. “Let me get to the point: did you meet any English people through the group, Miss Odont?”

“Yes. Two men: Daniel Poulter and Peter Stubbins.”

There were murmurs of surprise.

“I see. And did you see them often?”

“A bit,” she nodded. “Daniel Poulter was very clever. Peter not so much, but he was – he was easier company. His French was not very good, so we practiced our languages on each other.”

“And is there any particular occasion you can remember doing so?”

She nodded. “On Artur’s birthday. It was a long day. We were due to go to the Alps to go ice-skating, but…” she paused. “Artur made us all miss the portkey. He – he’d had a lot to drink at breakfast. So I spent a lot of time with Peter Stubbins. We went to the skating eventually, and then to eat and drink – a whole day.”

“Yes, thank you. And I presume you remember the date, as it was a birthday?”

“Yes,” she nodded. “It was March 2nd.”

The sound of indrawn breaths could be heard over Harcourt rattling papers in front of him. He looked up. “March 2nd. I have Artur’s birth certificate confirming that,” he said, looking around. “And the records from the port-key station for the port-keys there and back. As you know, with port-keys, they are issued in the name of the wizard or witch, just in case there is any problem with the travel. This is all confirmed in the statements which I mentioned before, and which I would like to enter into evidence.”

He handled a bundle of parchments to the clerk, who carried them over to the Judge.

Anglehurst whipped through them, and then looked up at the court. “These statements are as described. Unless you wish to go into them in detail, please continue, Mr Harcourt.”
“Thank you, Your Honour. All the evidence – incontrovertible evidence, ladies and gentleman, show that Peter Stubbins was in France, for the whole of the day of 2nd March. The day when according to Mrs Atkins and the missing ‘suicide note’, he had apparently taken part in the brutal murder of Mrs Potter.” He let that sink in. “We do not know if Mr Stubbins may, or may not, have been involved, accidentally or deliberately, in the fire at the Ministry. Mr Stubbins had no reason whatsoever to commit suicide: it is far more likely, on the evidence, that he was murdered. But what we do know for certain is that Mr Stubbins did not kill Mrs Potter.”

He allowed the silence to weigh heavily again, before continuing. “Three people killed Mrs Potter. We know the identity of two of them. Given the change in the law since the day when Harry Potter was charged with her murder, I am now able to call a witness who was denied the right to give evidence at that trial. I call Mitty.”

A few moments later, Mitty came trotting down to the stand, and stood there, shaking.

“A house elf?” Hinch laughed. “You have to be joking!”

“No joke, Mr Hinch,” Anglehurst said sharply. “And if you cannot treat witnesses with respect, I will ask you to find yourself a lawyer so that you can be restrained.”

Harry stood up. “May I speak to Mitty, Your Honour? She’s obviously frightened.”

“Sit down, Mr Potter,” Anglehurst said firmly. He turned to the elf. “Mitty, you must understand that along with the right to acceptance in this court, comes the duty to tell the truth. Do you understand?”

Mitty’s head nodded wildly.

“You must answer for the record,” Anglehurst said, his voice a little less stern.

“Yes, Judge, Sir,” Mitty’s head kept nodding back and forth.

“The title given to a Judge is ‘Your Honour’. I have already told Mrs Atkins the same,” he said, taking the reprimand out of his words.

“Yes, Your Honour, Sir,” Mitty said.

Anglehurst allowed himself a slight smile. “And you must tell the truth, whether or not it is damaging to your master. You can decline to speak if you prefer. You are not on trial here: your role is to give evidence that may help this court reach a decision. Do you have any questions?”

“Can Mitty be doing a spell to see over this thing?” Mitty asked, pointing up at the front of the witness box.

Anglehurst pointed his wand, and the legs of the chair in the box elongated. “My apologies, we should have seen to that at once. Is that better?”

“Yes, thanking you, Your Honour, Sir.”

“Very well. Harcourt?”

“Thank you, Your Honour. Mitty, could you tell us whose household you work in?”

“Mitty is being house-elf to the Potter family,” Mitty nodded.

“And were you a house-elf there when Mrs Potter was alive?”
“Yes, Mitty is being a house-elf then, after Kreacher is dying.”

“So let me get to the point, Mitty. Did you let anyone into the house on the afternoon of March 2nd?”

“They is telling Mitty they is from the paper! Mitty is not knowing that the appointment is being cancelled!” Mitty burst out, getting flustered.

“No one is blaming you,” Harcourt soothed. “I do need you to confirm that you let someone in to the house that day.”

Mitty’s head wobbled backwards and forwards, tears forming and dropping in fat blobs down her cheeks.

“I need you to answer clearly for the record, please,” Harcourt prompted.

“Yes, I is letting in the three people,” she whispered.

“Thank you. Now, I wonder if you could give us the memory of that,” Harcourt said, working hard to keep everything to the point.

Mitty did so.

Everyone watched as Mitty answered the door, and showed the men into the library.

“Thank you,” Harcourt said, when the memory had been restored to Mitty. “Now, I am assured that Veritavision is safe for you to use. You understand the nature of the potion? Will you take it?”

“Yes, Mitty is understanding,” the elf said, taking the bottle from Davis and throwing it back in one swallow. With her finger, she lifted the memory out again, and put it in the pensieve.

Moments later, the court was in uproar as they watched the images not of three strangers, but of Daniel Poulter, Samantha Donnelly and Theodore Hinch casually entering Grimmauld Place.

“You made this possible,” Harry whispered to Hermione, a lump in his throat.

He had felt swollen with - not hatred - but horror and fury and disgust at Theo Nott ever since breakfast two days ago, when Mitty had heard them talking and asked if she could take Master Snape’s potion, just to see. There had been discussions about affects on feeding mothers, with Harry desperate to find out, but unwilling to risk Allie’s health, but Mitty had said Allie was already eating solids, and judging from his teeth Harry was probably sure Mitty was quite glad about that.

“Thank you, Mitty,” Harcourt said. “No further questions, Your Honour.”

“Mr Hinch?” Anglehurst asked. “Have you any questions?”

“Surely I am not the only one who thinks this is a farce?” Hinch said. “We’re supposed to take the word of a house-elf? You’re all going to judge me on the evidence of a house-elf?” He laughed, harsh and almost hysterical.

“Mitty is fully aware that her evidence is subject to the rule of law,” Anglehurst said.

“Right,” Theo snorted. “Like a house-elf wouldn’t go to jail to save its master.”

“When Mr Potter was erroneously accused, this elf was not permitted to stand to give evidence on
behalf of her master,” Anglehurst pointed out. “Do you feel there is any particular reason why this elf should hold a grudge against you?”

“It’s quite obvious that Potter has used Malfoy to set up a case against me,” Hinch said. “Given insufficient evidence, he’s scraping the barrel, trying to throw mud anywhere he can, by any means –”

Harcourt looked around the court, assessing. He paused. Then he turned to Hinch. “So, Mr Hinch, you’re still denying that you murdered Mrs Potter?”

“Yes, of course –”

“That you murdered Peter Stubbins?”

“Yes –”

“That you had any hand in destroying the Ministry?”

“Of course –”

“That you had anything to do with the theft of public property? Of course you didn’t. Perhaps your wife crept through the vanishing cabinets, eh? Not you, of course, even though the goods were found in your house. It’s never you, is it? So maybe it was your son.” He turned, a hand sweeping out to point straight at the boy sitting on the public benches. Everyone turned to look.

So did Hinch.

Josh’s face was as white as chalk.

Harry’s hand clenched in his lap. Oh god. What was Harcourt playing at? Oh no. Oh, no, no no. The murder. Josh had just watched the murder. What his father had done… He started to rise to his feet. That poor boy…


“Stop it,” Harry said. His voice cut through the auditorium.

Everyone swung to look at him.

“I agree entirely,” Anglehurst said. “Though you will allow me to run my own court-room, Mr Potter. You are out of order, Mr Harcourt. Young man, please accept my apologies,” he nodded at Josh and then stood.

Everyone rose.

“We’ll have an early lunch. Court will reconvene in an hour,” and he stalked out of the auditorium in a swirl of robes worthy of Snape.
“What the hell were you thinking?” Harry demanded.

“You chose me because I’m ruthless,” Harcourt said, one hand on the desk, the other rifling through his notes.

“He’s a boy,” Harry said in outrage.

Harcourt looked up at him. “There’s no easy way to know your father is a murderer,” he said. “He can at least hope that his father might have some honour.”

“Jesus!” Harry swore. “You used him!”

“Yes. Because unless we put Hinch away there are going to be other boys, other orphans, and I’m not going to be responsible for them when I could do something about it.”

“You –”

“He killed your children’s mother,” Harcourt looked up and stared at him. “Your children, Harry. How much has that changed their lives? They’re grown up, more or less, but they’ll never be able to bring their own children to tea at their granny’s, or have advice on teething, or their own mother watching them when they walk down the aisle. He did that, don’t you see?”

Harry turned away, running a hand over his face. He looked at Hermione.

George pulled the tent flap aside and said, “Can I come in?”

“Where is he?” Harry asked. “Is he alright?”

“He’s talking to his father: Anglehurst allowed him to visit.”

“Oh good.”

“I want to punch you on the nose,” George said to Harcourt.

“Thank god!” Harry said. “Not that I want you to do it,” he said, seeing everyone’s startled reactions. He looked at the Prosecutor. “You’re better than this. Leave the boy out.”

“I think you should anyway,” Hermione said. “You’ll alienate the Wizengamot if you harass him.”

“I had no intention of harassing him,” Harcourt said wearily. “I just wanted Hinch to remember he was there. To see the consequences of his actions, if only from a selfish standpoint.”

“What’s going on?” James said, looking at his watch for the fifteenth time. They had reassembled in the auditorium after lunch, but neither the Judge, nor the Prosecutor, nor Hinch had reappeared.

Forty minutes had passed.

Suddenly an usher came up to them. “Mr Potter? Could you come this way? And Mr Weasley?”
“Which one?” several answered, and the attendant’s gaze darted from one redhead to another, before looking down at his sheet of parchment nervously. “Er, Mr William Weasley?”

“He’s making a plea bargain then,” Hermione said. “You’ll have to decide between you if his terms are acceptable.”

Bill had stood up and edged along in front of people to come and stand by Harry. Various members of the Potter and Weasley families and their friends were spread out along the stone benches.

“We know you’ll do the right thing,” George said.

Everyone nodded in agreement.

All around the court, a sense of excitement built as people watched Harry and Bill go.

Harry was pleased to see that Bill had his wand dropping from the end of his sleeve into his hand. He’d seen the usher around court, but they’d be silly to take chances.

They were led into Anglehurst’s tent. Kingsley was standing to one side of the large desk, and gave Harry a quick smile. Harcourt, Hinch and Benningdean looked up as they entered.

“Thank you for joining us, gentlemen,” Anglehurst said, rising to shake their hands. “Do take a seat.”

When they were settled, he continued, “Mr Hinch wishes to plea bargain.”

“Oh yes?” Bill said. “What’s on the table?”

“He is willing to admit to the murder of your wife, Mr Potter, to the murder of Mr Stubbins, to theft, and to conspiracy to commit treason. He pleads unintentional manslaughter on the two gobstones players.”

“And the goblins?” Harry asked.

It was clear that they hadn’t been discussed, which infuriated Harry. “You plead guilty to murder on three counts and intent to murder on the fourth, or I’m not even going to listen.”

Hinch stared at him. “Goblins?” he said. “I’m offering to give you Dorothy Atkins and you care about goblins?”

“Yes, I do care about them,” Harry nodded.

“Well, it makes fuck little difference to me,” Hinch said. He looked at Anglehurst. “If I admit to them, will you extend the tariff?”

“A year extra for each one,” Anglehurst said, looking from Hinch to Harry, “including the injured one.”

“A year! Is that all?” Harry leapt to his feet.

“Sit down, please, Mr Potter, and let us explain to you what is on the table so far.”

Harry looked at Kingsley, who gave a slight nod at him.

Harry sat.
“Mr Hinch is willing to plead guilty to the charges as discussed, in return for a total sentence of twenty five years. I propose a sentence of one year for each death,” he looked at Harry, “that is, seven years in total, one year for one count of attempted murder, plus one year for the theft, totalling nine years. For suffering caused to those who were trapped in the Ministry, five years. I am willing to subsume the charge of arson under the charge of treason: tariff fifteen years. All sentences to run consecutively.”

“That’s twenty nine years,” Hinch said.

“Just so,” Anglehurst said, looking to Harry again.

Harry bit his lip. Was Ginny’s life worth only a year in prison? A single, sodding, year? He could not help but feel furious and frustrated and angry. He agreed that her life was worth the same as the goblins’ lives, but still…one year? He spun round and said, “Why did you decide to plea bargain?”

Hinch’s eyes narrowed.

“I want to know. One fucking year for my wife’s murder? Give me a reason why I should even consider it.”

“Atkins –”

“We’ll get her anyway –”

“Oh, she’s slippery. You might, but can you rely on it?” Hinch cocked his head.

“I want more,” Harry looked at him. “Is this about your son?”

Hinch stared at him.

Harry turned back to the Judge. “No,” he said, standing up.

Bill stood too. “I agree. It’s an insult.”

Harry pulled back the tent flap and walked outside.

Standing hunched and shivering a few feet away, under the beady eyes of the guards, stood Josh Nott – Josh Hinch, he supposed.

Josh started forward, looked at Harry’s expression, and his face fell. “Oh. Oh, please.” He looked away, biting his lip, then turned back, a look of determination on his face. “I’ll – I’ll beg. I’ll do that Malfoy thing – you know, give you my life.” He dropped to his knees on the cold ground. “I - not that I want to die. But I can be your – your property, or something, like Malfoy, couldn’t I? I’ll give you all my wages – when I’m old enough to work – ”

“Get up, Josh,” Harry said, reaching out to cup his arm, his gut hollow and horrified.

The guards were staring.


“My tent’s this way,” Kingsley said in Harry’s ear. “Up you come,” he said briskly to Josh, all effortless muscle and authority.

Harry looked at Bill. “Come?” he asked.
Bill wiped a hand over his face, and nodded.

Josh sat on the sofa in Kingsley’s tent, looking small and forlorn.

“I’ll send some hot chocolate,” Kingsley said to Harry and Bill as they stood near the entrance. “He didn’t eat anything at lunch, he was in persuading his father. I think he’s in shock, a bit.”

Harry nodded. Kingsley’s hand pressed against his spine for a fraction of a second, and then he was gone.

Harry walked across the tent and sat down in the comfy chair opposite Josh, and Bill swung his leg over a dining chair that stood beside a small table.

Harry took in the flavour of Kingsley’s quarters: utilitarian but comfortable. Some of the tension left him. Three cups of hot chocolate appeared on the dining table, and Bill reached round and handed them out.

Josh’s hands shook, only just managing not to spill any.

“Drink a bit whilst it’s hot,” Harry said. “Then you can tell us about it.” He looked across at Bill. “This is Bill Weasley, by the way, in case you haven’t met him before? Roxanne’s uncle.”

Josh’s eyes shot up at that.

“I haven’t forgotten that you were friends,” Harry said gently. “I saw you at the class together, remember?”

Josh nodded. “She – she won’t talk to me after this,” he said. “No one will. Not that that’s – I mean – I’ll cope. It’s Dad -”

“You and your father are not the same person,” Bill interrupted. Harry glanced across at him, relieved. He felt so sorry for Josh, and so proud of the man who, in the other future, had changed time to help them.

“You’ve been with your Dad over the lunch-break?” he prompted, seeing that Josh had drunk down at least half.

“I – yeah. I told him –” he looked up. “I told him that if he had done those things, that he – he ought to be man enough to own up to them. That trying to wriggle out of it was just – lying, not being clever. That – that – I don’t know what he really believes in, but whatever: he isn’t a Pureblood, and if he lets that Atkins lady get away with it, well. He thought he’d be dead,” he said, biting his lip, “so he didn’t care. So I asked him – I said didn’t he care about me, now that I wasn’t a Pureblood either?”

“That was very brave,” Harry said.

“It wasn’t brave,” Josh snapped, “he gets all big-headed about being clever, but sometimes he just doesn’t see the ordinary things, you know? He just – he hates losing an argument. He might not get into one, but if he does, then he has to win it, you see?” He spread his hands, looking at them. “He’s always been like that, it’s infuriating, but I could see him getting stuck in, just like he does, there in court, and it’s stupid. I – if – if he did that to – to Mrs Potter –” he gulped, and put a shaking hand over his eyes. “It doesn’t feel real, and maybe I’m wrong, because – I – why would he do that?” he whispered. “He – he never hit me or anything. Other boys – I know sometimes their
parents – but Dad – he’s never done that – I mean, he’s not – he’s not very – he never was into cuddles or anything, not – not ever, I don’t think, but – but – I – how – why - ?” he dropped his hand, staring up at them with imploring eyes.

“I know,” Harry said gently. “It seems impossible to believe. But…”

Josh nodded.

“He – he didn’t admit anything,” he whispered. “I don’t know if – but – and I asked him if he cared more about that toad woman than me, because if she gets into power, well, she’ll probably have it in for me personally, but even if she doesn’t, she just – people like me – she doesn’t want us to exist, does she?”

“No,” Harry said. “She wants a world where there are only Purebloods. But there aren’t only Purebloods,” he shrugged. “Muggles are always going to give birth to magical children now and then, and Wizarding folk are going to meet great Muggles and fall in love and have children. They’ll always exist. So if you don’t want them around, you’ve got to banish them or kill them, haven’t you? That was part of what destroying the Ministry was about. A start on the killing. We have to stop her, Josh. Because I don’t feel I should have to excuse myself for being alive, and I hope you don’t feel that too.”

“No, you’re right, but – Dad can help convict her, can’t he? If he knows what she’s been doing? And –” he swallowed, and looked away.

“What is it?” Harry asked.

“I know – I know he’s a mo – monster, if – if he’s –” he looked around, and then his shoulders hitched. “He’s still my Dad,” he choked. “How can I want him to die? Because – because they’ll kill him, won’t they? For – for – all those things –”

Bill got up and walked across the room. He leant his hand against the door-frame to the bathroom, standing there, head bowed.

“Bill?” Harry said.

Bill looked across at him. “My kids still love me;” he said.

Josh frowned with incomprehension.

Bill straightened, leant his back against the jamb. “I’m something of a monster at times too.”

“You’re not,” Harry said.

“Would you think less of me if I were? Did you think less of Lupin for attacking you?” Bill asked.

“It’s not the same,” Harry said. “It’s – neither of you were like Fenrir –”

“I know. It was just the word. I appreciate that you still love your father, Josh,” Bill said.

Harry had thought Bill would be implacable. It was funny how people could surprise you, even after years.

“He might prefer death to decades in Azkaban,” Harry said quietly to Josh.

“He – he deserves to be punished. I know that. But – you’ve changed Mr Malfoy, haven’t you? I mean, he was a Death Eater, like Grandfather, and…and so was Mr Snape, and –”
“Snape was a spy,” Harry said.

“Ye – yes,” Josh stuttered, looking at Harry apprehensively, “but he – he was a Death Eater first, wasn’t he? And then he changed. And maybe my Dad can change. He will, I promise, I’ll make him change –”

“You can’t make people change who don’t want to,” Bill said, coming over and sitting down.

Josh slumped. “I don’t want him dead.”

“What about your mother?” Harry asked.

“She – she’s left. She’s a Pureblood – I mean, Dad liked that about her. She – she’s disowned us both.”

“I’m so sorry –”

“It’s not your fault.” Josh shrugged. “Professor Brown says the school is my home, if I want, and Gran says that I can live with her.” He bent in on himself.

“What?” Harry said.

“I – I’ve always liked her best, of my grandparents, you know, but – I mean, it’s her fault, isn’t it?” he whispered. “If – if she hadn’t – if Dad wasn’t –”

“If your father was still a Pureblood he would have acted exactly as he had done, because he thought he was a Pureblood when he did all this. It’s not being a Pureblood that gives him a glimmer of hope,” Harry said. “And you mustn’t blame your grandmother. Is there anyone you can’t stand at school?”

“What? Yeah, sure –”

“Imagine being forced to marry them,” Harry said. “Imagine if you can, if you loved someone else, and then were forced to spend your whole life with someone you couldn’t stand?”

“Oh. Urgh. I didn’t think of that.”

“No. Don’t blame her for loving someone, and still trying to do her duty. It’s possible she didn’t know that your father wasn’t her husband’s child for a long time. What could she have done when she realised?”

“Oh. Yeah. Grandfather Nott was – even Dad said he was violent, and wouldn’t let me stay with him ever.”

“So.”

“You – you said – a glimmer of hope –” Josh looked from one to the other.

Harry looked across at Bill.

“Ginny’s dead. Nothing’s going to bring her back,” Bill said, “whether he’s executed or in for a hundred years or thirty.”

Harry nodded.

“Alright,” he said, standing up. “I’ll go see Judge Anglehurst again and see if anything is still on
the table. It’ll be a long time in prison at the least. You’ll be my age before he’s out. A middle-aged man. You’ll spend your whole life knowing that he’s there. That he might come out and do something else bad – ”

“I’m not going to forget him. I need to make him see different. And anyway, my life is yours now, isn’t it? I’ll be doing whatever you tell me – ”

Harry laughed. “Josh,” he said. “You are one of the bravest chaps I’ve ever met. I’m not going to take your life. I want you to go out there and live it, and be happy, and make other people happy, and if I have any instruction for you, it’s to keep an open mind and to do everything you can to look for and to work for equality. But that’s what I want: you have to find what you believe in, and I have to trust you to make the right decisions. I believe in you,” Harry said, ruffling his hair as he put an arm around Josh’s shoulder briefly, turning him towards the doorway. “You must have a ton of schoolwork to be catching up on.”

Josh snorted a surprised laugh. “Roxy’s been making notes for me in the classes we share,” he said, “and Lurgan’s in the others.”

Harry met Bill’s eyes over his head, a hint of a smile in both their faces.

“Good friends make all the difference,” Harry agreed, pulled back the tent-flap and stepped out into the bracing wind.
Everyone in the auditorium sat with bated breath as the amended charges were read out, and Hinch pleaded guilty on all counts.

“My god,” Hermione said. “How did you manage that?”

“Josh did.” Harry looked over at George, who raised his brows, but said nothing.

“It’ll be Azkaban rather than death, I take it?” Hermione guessed.

“Not death. You might not like the sentence,” Harry said to Ron. “I was gutted, but – think before you go ballistic, will you?”

Ron looked at him and sighed. “She’s dead,” he said, repeating Bill’s thoughts. “I know you and Bill wouldn’t make a stupid decision.”

“He’s going to give us everything he’s got on Atkins,” Harry whispered, “and all the other conspirators. That’s his side of the bargain.”

And Hinch was true to his word.

He accepted the use of Veritaserum, given that he was no longer defending himself.

Atkins had remonstrated that, as an Unspeakable, Hinch might have been trained in overcoming it, but Head Unspeakable Turin was called, and said that according to Hinch’s records, he had never received any such training, or worked on any project involving truth serums.

Anglehurst had announced that Hinch would be sentenced later, and that the trial of Dorothy Atkins would continue.

Hinch described meeting after meeting.

He held nothing back – not that that was possible with Veritaserum.

“Mr Hinch, you say that Mrs Atkins knew about the plan to murder Ginevra Potter.”

Silence.

“Forgive me, let me rephrase that: Did Mrs Atkins know about the plan to murder Mrs Potter?”

“Yes.”

“And is there anyone else who can corroborate that statement?”

“Yes.”

“And their names are?”

“Daniel Poulter, Samantha Donnelly, Thomas Wilkes –”

Harry turned to stare at his children.

“Bastard,” James bit out.
“…Oliver Brighton and Peter Sharples.”

Anglehurst called the court clerk over. “They are to be arrested,” he said. He looked up, and Harry tracked his gaze to Kingsley.

It left a sour taste in his mouth to think that Thomas Wilkes had known all along. Had spoken to him as cool as a cucumber when he had gone to buy Dinky off of him …he shuddered in distaste.

“Mr Hinch, you’ve already told this court that the purpose of the murder was to cause destabilization. Did you not feel any remorse about murdering a well-loved national quidditch player, and a mother, to do so?”

“No.”

There was a shock of surprise in the auditorium.

“I see. I understand that you didn’t know Mrs Potter personally, but you were in the same house, in the same year, as Draco Malfoy, who was deliberately framed for the murder. Did it not trouble you at all that he should be falsely accused?”

“Oliver Brighton was going to buy out The Prophet so that we had a mouthpiece. We needed to get rid of Draco. Brighton had already made overtures to buy it, but Draco’d refused.”

“But you knew him, Mr Hinch.”

Hinch shrugged. “He never had any time for me at school: why should I have cared about him?”

Harry’s breath was taken away. Surely there must be something wrong with Nott – Hinch. People weren’t that cold-blooded, were they?

“And you are positive that Mrs Atkins knew and approved of what you were doing?”

“Yes. It was her idea. She was quite right about the power of the press. Look what it did for Fudge. He’d never have stayed in power for so long if the paper hadn’t been in his pocket.”

“And was it Mrs Atkins’ idea that you should kill Peter Stubbins?”

Hinch laughed. “No.”

Harry looked at Ron and Hermione, whose faces were as shocked as he felt.

“You find that funny, Mr Hinch?”

“Yeah,” he smirked.

“Why is that?”

“I knew she wouldn’t be pleased, but Sam needed to be put in her place. She was stupid.”

“Could you explain that?”

Potions Master Davis stepped forward. “The Veritaserum should wear off in five minutes, Your Honour.”

“It’s wearing off already, but I’ll tell you anyway,” Hinch said. “Sam destroyed Daniel Poulter’s brain. She knew I wanted him to be my apprentice; he was extremely clever. Dorothy Atkins had
already agreed to it. It was a complete waste.”

“And so you killed her son in retaliation?” Harcourt kept his voice steady.

“He was useless. All he had to do was set a delayed reaction in a cauldron, and he couldn’t even get that right. He came to find me. It was quite clear that if push came to shove, he’d give me away by his stupidity.”

“So you killed him.”

“Yes.”

“And did Mrs Atkins know this?”

“Yes, I told her.”

“What was your purpose, Mr Hinch, in stealing from the Ministry?”

Hinch stared at him, and for the first time he appeared gobsmacked. “I think,” he said, “that you’re under a misapprehension about my actions.”

“Yes? Perhaps you could enlighten us.”

“Who owns those things doesn’t matter. But they bear research.”

“Yes?”

Hinch scratched his head and leant forward. “Unspeakable Turin has blocked me at every turn. Atkins promised me that I would be in charge of my own research facility.”

There was a stunned silence in court.

“Are you saying, Mr Hinch, that your motives weren’t related to Pureblood supremacy?”

“That is Dorothy’s motivation. What matters is the research. Magic has so much to tell us. We only know the tip of the iceberg, I’m sure – just look at Harry Potter. He can do so much more than the rest of us. It’s quite extraordinary. But is it because the rest of us just don’t try? Is it innate? He isn’t a Pureblood, and really, we need to study people like him. There’s so much to learn. And the brains from the Department – I needed them: they increase the capacity for complex thought – ”

“Merlin’s bollocks,” Ron said, “those brains made me go peculiar in just seconds. Do you think he’s deliberately been immersing himself with them or something? He’s completely bonkers.”

“He’s a psychopath,” Hermione said.

“A what?” Ron looked at her.

She turned her head to explain, took one glance back at Hinch, and said, “Bonkers’ll do.”

“We just made an agreement that he can get out. In twenty nine years,” Harry whispered. “Oh shit.”

“Maybe he’ll get normal again – you know, if he’s not got brain tendrils wrapping into him,” Ron said. “I mean, I got back to normal – ”

George, who’d been listening in, gave a deliberate cough.
“Hey!” Ron said.

“Sounds to me like he wants to tie people like Harry up in his lab and experiment on them,” Teddy said. “I saw a television programme when I was a kid about a doctor who did that to prisoners in one of the Muggles’ Wars,” he shuddered. “I had nightmares for months and months.”

Harry turned to look at him. He knew what Teddy was referring to. He thought how terrified Teddy must have been, when he was younger and didn’t have control over his hair changing colour, and knowing that he couldn’t hide the fact that he was different, and what a target he must have felt should there be more dreadful people around like Josef Mengele. He vaguely remembered a period when Teddy had insisted on sharing with James when he came to stay, and his grandmother saying that he’d been having nightmares. He’d remembered his own nightmares, of his own possession by Voldemort. Maybe he hadn’t pressed enough to find out what was wrong at the time, what had been bothering Teddy….

“Oh god,” Hermione cut across his thoughts. “You’re right, Teddy. We have to make sure that he never gets the chance – ” she quietened as Lily put up a hand to draw them back to Harcourt’s questioning.

“…so you’re telling us that you destroyed the Ministry just to steal items from the Department of Mysteries?”

“I’m not saying that at all. Firstly, it was Peter Stubbins’ job to create the explosion, because he had access to the potions’ labs. Dorothy Atkins had got him the position in the Ministry in the first place – I don’t know whether it was always her intention to use him as a tool, or whether she just felt sorry for her friend having such a thicko for a son. I shouldn’t have been involved in that part, and if Peter had done his job properly, he’d be wandering around today, no doubt. I’m not quite as into Pureblood heritage as Atkins. My father – the man I thought was my father – was hardly a bright spark. But I could see that the Ministry really did need sorting out, and obviously our plans coincided.”

Harry’s mouth just dropped open.

He had killed Ginny, all the others and destroyed the Ministry because their plans coincided?

Other people obviously felt the same.

Hinch looked at them, his head to the side. Harry felt hugely relieved that part of Hinch’s bargaining was that his son was sent back to school, and didn’t attend the rest of the trial. Harry didn’t know how a son could cope with seeing his father like this.

On the down side, Josh would have a lot more hope that his father was redeemable than seemed to be the case right now.

“You’re obviously thinking that at least Dorothy had higher intentions in her reasoning to destroy the Ministry,” he said. “But it was her idea to do it on Centennial Lift Maintenance Day. She wanted to kill as many Muggleborns and Half-bloods as possible. She wants rid of them. And she didn’t mind losing a few Purebloods in her plans – she’d planned other deaths after Ginny Potter, you know. Once she’d got the press, and Potter out of the way, she planned three more Pureblood murders. She saw them as ‘necessary’. She has them all planned out, knows exactly which half-bloods will be blamed for their murders. She appointed Dowling, as Head Auror. He’s due to get his pension soon, can’t risk alienating her. After that she’ll have a Head Auror who’s right under her thumb. She’ll have half-bloods and Muggleborns leaving this country as fast as their little legs will carry them.”
“And you were perfectly happy with all that, were you, Mr Hinch? Just as long as you got your research establishment?” Harcourt raised an eyebrow.

“Why shouldn’t I have been? I thought I was a Pureblood. It wouldn’t affect me.”

And there was it in a nutshell, Harry thought. He’d killed Ginny and all those others because he really didn’t care about them: because killing them was just his price for getting what he wanted. With a little payback on the side.

The afternoon was drawing in.

“Mrs Atkins, would you like to start your defence, or would you prefer to defer until tomorrow?” Anglehurst asked, looking up at the greying sky.

“I would like the opportunity to start, Your Honour,” she said, standing up. “I would just like to give the members of the Wizengamot something to think over.”

“Very well.”

“During the course of this week,” she said, looking around at the members of the court, “I have been accused of the most heinous charges. I find myself almost speechless in wondering how to conduct my defence, so unexpected, and frankly, absurd, are these allegations. I have spent my whole life in the service of the law and the wizarding community, and I have an outstanding record as a Prosecutor in ensuring that wicked men and women who have felt that they can live outside of our laws are brought to justice. I could quote you all the cases, but I wouldn’t wish to bore you,” she gave a slight smile, and one or two people laughed.

“I would just like to ask you to consider the witnesses against me. By his own admission, here today, Theodore Hinch is a murderer who has been solely focused on achieving his own desires. I will tackle each of his allegations tomorrow, but I just wanted you to think about that. It was quite clear to me, and I’m sure it was to you, that he is a clever, ruthless man who will do anything to get what he wants. It is perfectly obvious that he has made a bargain with the Prosecution, promising to indict me in order to lessen his own sentence. This is a man who has admitted to murdering a young man because he found him stupid and the boy’s mother had annoyed him!” She looked around. “I am a bigger target, and I’m sure he’s made an extremely good deal. Then we have Lucius Malfoy.” She paused, looking across to where Malfoy was sitting between two guards

She certainly hadn’t forgotten how to work a court-room, Harry thought.

“Mr Malfoy served a lengthy sentence in Azkaban for his Death Eater activities. He was not the Dark Lord’s right hand man for nothing, ladies and gentlemen,” Atkins continued, shaking her head. “He – and Harry Potter, and others here – have tried to make you believe that he’s reformed. Well, let me disabuse you of that fact.”

“What is she up to?” Lily whispered.

“Mr Malfoy showed you a piece of a memory – the occasion when he discovered my identity. You might have wondered why he didn’t show you the actual moment when I was ‘discovered’.”

“Oh no,” George said, looking across at Harry.
Harry looked towards Lucius, but apart from the tiniest hint of a straightening in his shoulders, the man didn’t move.

“Mr Malfoy said that he hadn’t used the recording of the meeting as it was in French, etc, etc. Well, I have arranged for a translator to be here, just so that there can be no question that a translation spell is not giving an accurate reflection of what was said. If I may call Madame Vourdain, Your Honour?”

“Yes, yes. And you’d like the pensieve, I take it?”

Moments later the recording started

“You’ll see two people look the same,” Atkins pointed out. “Malfoy took some of the potion I was using to prove that I was polyjuiced, and then held me in a *Petrificus* spell for an hour until the potion wore off. This memory starts just before it did so.”

“Well, wands at the ready, my friends,” Madame Vourdain translated. “Mr Malfoy speaking, I believe?”

“Yes,” Atkins nodded. “I will name the people as necessary.” She took a breath. “Transforming back under Petrificus was immensely painful, as you can see,” she commented. “Mr Malfoy is entirely unperturbed by my suffering, of course.”

The scene played out; Madame Vourdain stuck to translating the speech.

“My God!”

“A witch! You were right, Malfoy!”

“Well, well, well. Mrs Atkins. What an…unexpected…pleasure,” Malfoy said.

“You know this woman?”

“That is Henri Laval,” Atkins pointed out. “He’s irrelevant.”

“Oh yes,” Malfoy said. “May I present Mrs Dorothy Atkins, Head of the British Department of Magical Law Enforcement.”

He made a slight bow.

“A spy?”

“That last man is Monsieur Benôit,” Atkins said. “Mr Malfoy is awaiting trial for his murder, as you know. Here you can see Mr Malfoy mocking me.”

In the memory, Malfoy was wiping the sweat off her face.
“Well,” Lucius said, “that is the question, isn’t it? I think not.”

“Malfoy was so sure of himself he made a serious misjudgement,” Atkins said, “as I was indeed spying on them.”

Several people laughed, and she turned a smug smile on them.

“Bitch,” Ron bit out.

“Should we not release the spell and…interrogate her?” Laval asked.

“I was rather frightened at this suggestion, as you can imagine,” Atkins said.

“I think we need to establish some boundaries, first. A little rapport, perhaps,” Malfoy said. “It’s quite possible she’s capable of wandless magic, and will either kill us, obliviate us, or apparate out. I wonder which you would do?” He paused. “The last, of course. You would only have a moment, and you wouldn’t be able to deal with all of us in the split second you might hope was open to you.”

“Why do you think she is not a spy?” Benôit asked.

“She’s far too senior: if she’d wanted a spy in here, she’d have sent someone from down the ranks, wouldn’t you?”

“You can understand that Malfoy might have felt threatened by Benôit. He doesn’t give him a chance to be right, does he?”

“Benôit! Laval! Watch her!” Malfoy said, as the Polyjuice he’d taken wore off.

Moments later, he was in his own body.

“So, Madam,” he said. “You’re not a spy, you’re the driving force behind this little group of friends. The question now, now that we know who you are, is whether you’re going to cash in your chips, or lead as you obviously wish to do.”

“You want to trust her?”

“She already knew who all of you were. Did ‘Duncan’ ask you to organise this meeting?”

Laval nodded.

“Have you kept her informed of everything that has gone on? Recently?”

“What? You mean at my dinner party?”
“As you say.”

“Yes.”

“So she knew of my involvement too. And that I have killed a man. And I haven’t been thrown back in Azkaban.” Malfoy said.

There were gasps of shock in the auditorium.

Madame Vourdain swallowed several times, her hands gripped tightly together, looking only at the memory playing out and not at anyone else.

Everyone hushed as the recording continued:

“She came to check me out, I think. And no doubt to keep you all in line.” Malfoy said. He continued to look directly at Atkins. “I can cast Avada before you can blink,” he warned, “and you know I can. And I will.”

The recording ended.

There was utter silence.

“I’d like to leave things there for tonight, Your Honour,” Atkins said. “I trust in the intelligence of the Wizengamot to draw their own conclusions about who is being persecuted here.”
Harry crawled into bed at two in the morning.

Snape’s arms slid round him, his sleep-warmed body enfolding him in comfort. Harry wriggled into position, his back to Snape’s front, and just let out a huge sigh of tiredness and pleasure.

“All done?” Snape’s husky voice said, warm breath on the nape of his neck.

“Yeah. God, I hope it works….”

A hand soothed down his side. Fingers tangled with his on his stomach.

Snape didn’t offer any platitudes, only his presence, and Harry found that more reassuring than a hundred words, because Snape couldn’t know any more than he did how the next day would go.

He lifted the hand to his mouth, kissed it, felt Snape’s lips ghost a kiss against his shoulder, and within moments was asleep.

It was a beautiful day under the dome at the court. Harry loved watching the waves dancing, the sunlight silvering the sea.

He liked watching Kingsley even more, as he came down the steps two at a time, and leant casually up on the bench in front of Anglehurst.

The only pity was that Kingsley was wearing wizarding robes, so that he hadn’t been able to watch the play of muscles in his thighs, or see the snug fit of his jeans over the swell of his behind.

“Mr Shacklebolt has asked to make a statement to the court.” Anglehurst said.

Kingsley stood there, looking magnificent.

“Thank you, Your Honour,” he said, with a slight bow. He turned to the court. “Last night, you were shown a memory of Lucius Malfoy admitting to killing someone.” He looked around. “I’m sure most of you were horrified. Some of you, no doubt, wondered whether Mrs Atkins fabricated it. I can tell you that it was a true memory.”

There were cries of shock.

Kingsley just waited until the noise simmered down. “As you know, Lucius Malfoy took on the task of spying on behalf of the European Wizarding Alliance. On almost every occasion, Mr Malfoy wore a device which allowed the meetings he was attending to be monitored. On the evening in question, we were able to hear what happened in our office.” He looked around the auditorium, his face serious. “Mr Malfoy reported back to us straight after the meeting; he informed us, even though we knew it already, that he had killed a man: he expected to be returned to Azkaban. It was my decision not to send him. It was my decision that he should continue with the important job he was doing. Mr Malfoy found out a great deal of important information that night, having held himself under control – ”

“Held himself under control?” Atkins stood up and objected. “He killed a man and you did not
inform the authorities?”

“I was the authority,” Kingsley said with utter calm. “If I could finish what I have to say without interruption, Your Honour? I will, of course, be happy to answer questions later.”

“Please sit down, Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst said.

Kingsley looked around the Wizengamot. “We sent Lucius Malfoy to this meeting. His purpose was to infiltrate the group. The fact that he had been a Death Eater was regarded as an introduction. I would like to play the court the recording of that meeting. The translator is here to tell you what is being said, and I will stop the recording to explain what the spells do. I am afraid that what you are about to hear is disturbing and upsetting. If you find it unbearable, please raise your hand. Last night, Mrs Atkins asked you to draw your own conclusions from the evidence she gave you: I would ask you the same. I would ask you what you would have done in Mr Malfoy’s place.”

He played the recording.

The sound of the meal started. The translator settled in at translating the small talk. Kingsley explained who the voices belonged to.

“I’ll move it on till after the main course, if you have no objections,” Kingsley said.

“Please do, or we’ll be here all day, feeling increasingly hungry,” Anglehurst said brusquely.

“I don’t think so,” George muttered harshly, hanging his head.

Andy, Scorpius and James turned to look at him.

“It’s bad,” George said.

Kingsley, at the front, said nothing and wound on.

They heard Artur say that he’d had enough to eat, and was looking forward to the entertainment.

Laval had laughed, and then called his house elves.

For the next ten minutes, they listened to the screams of the man being tortured. The sounds were punctuated by Kingsley stopping the tape, explaining what each of the spells were doing to the wizard. Within five minutes, over a quarter of people had their hands up. Within ten, two thirds of the Wizengamot had them up, and many were sitting there with their hands over their ears, or with tears running down their faces.

“Mister Shacklebolt, that’s enough,” Anglehurst said.

Kingsley stopped the recording, the high pitched wail of agony being cut off instantly.

A deathly silence fell, broken only by sobbing.

“Mr Malfoy had to endure listening to that – to watching it, to smelling it, for forty minutes,” he said. “Whilst being expected to eat.”

People shook their heads in horror.

Kingsley looked at the Judge. “If I could play thirty seconds more, Your Honour. I believe it’s essential.”
Anglehurst said nothing for a minute. “If you must,” he said. “My stomach is revolting, and I’m sure I’m not the only one.”

Kingsley fast-forwarded. He’d been pretty sure that they would be unable to listen to it all, and had tagged the place he wanted. “Are you alright?” he asked Madam Vourdain, the translator, who was as white as a sheet, her hand in a death-grip on the chair beside her.

“Thirty seconds?” she said faintly.

“That’s all,” Kingsley nodded.

“Very well,” she swallowed.

*The man could be heard sobbing, raw, guttural sounds.*

“Come, my dear Lucius, I am sure you have been waiting impatiently for your turn,” Laval said.

*There was a pause. The sobbing intensified.*

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Why did you do that?” Artur snapped. “He was nowhere near ready for that!”

Kingsley stopped the tape. He allowed the silence to settle. Several people were wiping their eyes with their handkerchiefs, beckoning the court elves for glasses of water.

“If you were there, would you have tortured him?” Kingsley asked. “Or would you have had the courage, the mercy, to kill him?”

“Avada Kedavra!”

“Why didn’t you rescue him?”

“A very good question,” Kingsley nodded. “We found ourselves with something of a dilemma on our hands: if we had charged in and rescued him, we would have thrown the whole operation, and Mr Malfoy’s life would have been at risk – either immediately, or as a consequence of it becoming known that he was spying. But to be frank, the torture was completely unexpected, and I didn’t have a team on standby to go in and tackle seven wizards in a warded house in a different country. That was my failing, in not being ready to provide sufficient support.”

Someone else raised their hand.

“Go ahead. Mr Shacklebolt will take questions,” Anglehurst said.

“Why didn’t you rescue him?”

“B –Brouchard?” the witch asked. She looked across to the public gallery. “Was that – was that that young woman’s husband?”
“Yes, the torturer was Artur Brouchard, the young man she was forced to marry,” Kingsley said, looking at Nanette. “Her father was present, and so was Paul Brouchard, Artur’s father. It was Paul Brouchard who approached the French Minister for Justice – a friend of his and a radical Pureblood – to accuse Mr Malfoy of the murder of Benôit, who we heard speaking. This was only done after Mr Malfoy helped Nanette Brouchard escape, and the death some weeks later of his son at the Benefit Gala.”

“Thank you,” the witch nodded.

Another hand went up. “Do – do you see a lot of behaviour like that?” a quavering voice asked. “Is that how foreigners behave?”

“Samantha Donnelly, part of the English group, tortured Daniel Poulter so that he has been a permanent patient in the Janus Thickey ward at St. Mungo’s and is likely to remain there for the rest of his life. I don’t think cruelty is reserved only for foreigners.”

After one or two more questions, Kingsley stood down, and Anglehurst called Dorothy Atkins.

Throughout the morning she brought forth witness after witness, attesting to her honesty, her success at her job, her integrity.

It had got to the stage where the people in the auditorium sighed as she brought forth yet another person to spout more of the same.

Atkins paused. “I can see that I have made my point,” she said. “You are perhaps wondering why I am not attacking all the arguments you have heard in the last few days.” She raised her head. “I don’t intend to. Theodore Hinch and Lucius Malfoy are the only props holding up this trumped up case against me. Both, from their own mouths, are murderers. Both have a history of manipulation, and as we have seen, are solely focussed on achieving their own aims in life, and neither mind who gets hurt or killed on the way. How am I to defend myself against such an attack? I can only ask you to use your wisdom and common sense. I can only show you what sort of person I am: the honest and hard-working person that the witnesses this morning have shown you. I don’t pretend that I don’t love this community: I believe we’re honoured to have magic.”

“Oh god,” Harry whispered to Hermione, “she’s winning them over. Shit! Shit!”

Around the auditorium, people were nodding in agreement as she spoke.

“To be honest with you all,” Atkins said, biting her lip, “I’m totally shocked to find myself in this position. It might have been more sensible of me to have taken the time to draw up a rigorous defence, but even if I had more time, what more can I say? I have never killed anyone, or tortured anyone. What you see is what you get.” She shrugged, and sat down.

There was a startled silence.

“I think we’ll break for lunch,” Anglehurst said. “Court will reconvene in an hour.”

Everyone stood up, almost uncertainly.

“Bugger,” Hermione said, looking at Harry. “We’re back to square one.”

People were shifting along the rows to get out.

Down below, Atkins was being led away, as were Lucius and Hinch, who were both in court under guard. Harcourt picked up his papers and headed for the steps. Harry glanced at Lucius, but he
wasn’t looking back.

Harry didn’t know what was going to happen about him. His shoulders slumped, weighed down with worry. Kingsley’s speech must have helped, surely? And then his head whipped round, as a commotion started.

Ron was pulling Hermione down, shouting. “Down! Down!” even as he did so.

Harry was grabbing at his kids. Screams and commotion broke out.

Guards ran everywhere.

Harry was peering cautiously up, shocked and delighted to see that while he’d thrown himself over Lily, James was half-covering Albus.

“It’s alright,” one of the guards was shouting. “He just slipped! Order! Order!”

Things calmed.

Slowly they stood up. Looking down, it was obvious that someone had had an accident on the stone steps.

“Get the court doctor!” someone was shouting.

“Make your way through the other exits!” a guard yelled.

“Someone’s hurt,” Lily said.

And then Harry saw the leather case.

The leather case in which Harcourt kept his court notes.

“Harcourt’s helping,” he said, scanning for the now familiar head.

“I don’t see him,” Ron said, and jumped down to the next level, making his way across.

George had a spyglass out of his pocket. “It’s Harcourt,” he said, just as Ron arrived at the scene and turned to mouth the same at them.

“Oh my god,” Hermione sat down with a bump.

Twenty minutes later they were in the food tent, picking at lunch and waiting to hear the news. A mediwizard had been called, and Harcourt had been levitated, blood pouring down his face, into his tent.

An elf popped up beside them.

“Mrs Weasley?” it asked. “Mr Harcourt is asking if you will come.”

Hermione looked at the others and stood up.

Half an hour later, everyone started moving back towards the auditorium, although the warning bell hadn’t yet sounded.
“I’m going to see what’s happening,” Ron said, standing up.

“With Hermione?” Harry asked, following suit.

“Yeah, what else?” Ron said.

“I’ll come with you.” Harry turned and looked at his family. “We’ll see you back in the auditorium, alright?”

Harry and Ron went to Harcourt’s tent, but were informed by the guard that Judge Anglehurst and Mr Shacklebolt were inside.

“My wife’s in there too, right?” Ron said, frowning.

“Yes sir,” the guard nodded.

Ron looked at Harry. “Shit. Harcourt’s fall must’ve been serious.” He turned back to the guard. “Ask them if we can come in.”

There was something in his tone, an inflection of authority, that made the man straighten, and then, with a nod to the second guard, he slipped into the tent.

A moment later he was back. “You can go in,” he said to Ron.

Harry went to follow him.

“Just Mr Weasley, Mr Potter,” the guard stepped into his way.

Ron glanced inside, then looked back at Harry. “All well,” he said.

Harry nodded, and moved away, his anxiety dropping a little.

He headed off to join his family.

Half an hour later, as they were all seated in the court, Ron plonked down next to him as Anglehurst made his way to the front. Two seconds earlier, the auditorium had been full of noise and chatter, frustration and speculation. Now, everyone quietened down in expectation.

Anglehurst took his seat, settled himself, and then looked up at the assembled gathering. “I apologise for keeping you all waiting. Unfortunately Prosecutor Harcourt slipped as he left the court before lunch, and I am informed has sustained a concussion after hitting his head on a step.”

The auditorium rustled with surprise and excitement at this unexpected turn of events.

“Rather than put you to the inconvenience of delaying the trial, Mrs Hermione Weasley has agreed to take over the Prosecution,” he said, and with that, Hermione walked carefully down the steps.

Everyone turned to stare.
Something was slightly different about her, Harry thought. Or was it that he just hadn’t noticed how rounded her bump had become?

He glanced at Ron.

“She shrunk her robe a bit,” Ron whispered.

“Thank you for jumping into the breach, Mrs Weasley,” Anglehurst said.

Hermione inclined her head. “I’m happy to do so, Your Honour.” She looked down at the papers on her desk, and then looked up at the people in the auditorium. “This morning, Mrs Atkins asked you to discount every bit of evidence against her that you have heard from Mr Hinch and Mr Malfoy. I’m sure that many of you are tempted to do so. Mrs Atkins has made a strong case to show you what a paragon of virtue, a stalwart of our society, she is. However much I argue, I can understand that it would be difficult for you not to feel reasonable doubt when it comes to convicting Mrs Atkins of such serious crimes. Because we are talking of serious crimes here. Mrs Atkins has said that she has never killed anyone. That she has never tortured anyone. That she has always wanted the best for our society.” She looked up and around, letting anticipation build. “I am going to show you how Mrs Atkins can have the bare-faced cheek to stand in front of you and tell you she has never killed anyone. I am going to show you how she ‘has never tortured anyone’. And most importantly, I am going to show you the sort of society Mrs Atkins wants us to live in. And we will not be calling on Mr Hinch or Mr Malfoy, but the children in our schools, the family members we should cherish, the friends and colleagues and ordinary members of our community.” She paused. “I would like to call Mrs Hannah Longbottom.”

There was a lot of murmuring.

Everyone turned to watch as Hannah made her way to the witness box.

“I’m sure Mrs Longbottom is known to all of you as the landlady of The Leaky Cauldron,” Hermione said.

“Hannah,” she addressed her, “You’ve given up running the pub. I’m sure most of the people here know why, but if you could tell the court?”

Hannah nodded. “I ran the Leaky for over twenty years, but when Neville – my husband – was killed – I couldn’t present the sort of friendly face that a landlady should have,” she said.

“And you sold the pub,” Hermione prompted.

“Yes.”

“Your whole life was changed the moment Neville was shot, in fact.”

“Yes, of course it was!” Hannah burst out.

Hermione turned to the court. “You will forgive us both, I hope, if this is rather – emotional. Neville was murdered in court where he had been forced to perjure himself in an attempt to save the life of my son. I would ask Hannah to sit out for a moment, Your Honour. I would like to call Hugo Weasley.”

“Is this strictly relevant, Mrs Weasley?” Anglehurst asked, but his tone was not as brusque as it often was.

“Yes, Your Honour, it leads into the character of the defendant.”
“Very well,” Anglehurst nodded, and Hugo took the stand.

“Hugo, could you show us a brief part of the memory of when you were captured?”

Hugo nodded, and pulled out the memory to go into the pensieve projector.

Everyone watched as the memory played, of Neville and Hugo being attacked, of Neville’s attempt to fight with wandless magic, of Hugo being petrified, of the Light-Blooming Devil’s Snare being doused in *Speed-Gro* and then the blinds of the greenhouse being spelled open. There were gasps of horror as the plant grew and writhed, finding its way all over Hugo’s body, winding around his neck…of Hugo watching as Neville was forced to accept the attacker’s terms.

“As you can see,” Hermione said, “Neville Longbottom was a hero. He was forced into an appalling situation by a ruthless individual determined to ensure that Harry Potter was found guilty, without care to the harm to the reputation of Neville Longbottom, a decorated war hero and beloved Professor, or to a child. Hugo, would you please take the *Veritavision* from Master Davis.”

The memory was retrieved, Hugo took the dose, and then the memory was extracted and shown again.

A number of people gasped as Professor Samantha Donnelly was shown to be the perpetrator.

“In what way is this evidence relevant to this trial?” Dorothy Atkins said, standing up. “Samantha Donnelly is dead.”

“If you’d allow me to continue, Your Honour, you will see that this evidence is relevant to this case.”

“I’ll allow you to go a little further,” Anglehurst said, tone flat.

“I’d like to call Cally Donovan, Paul Greerson and Neil Smith.”

“Three people, Mrs Weasley?”

“They’re all in their last year at Hogwarts, Your Honour, and their testimony overlaps and corroborates each other.”

“Very well, very well.”

The three took the stand, looking nervous.

“Mr Smith, you contacted Prosecutor Harcourt last night, I believe?”

“Yes, Madam,” Smith said, swallowing. “I saw the newspaper report about Mr Malfoy.”

“Do you know Mr Malfoy?”

“Oh, no! But in the picture, Mr Malfoy and Mrs Atkins were polyjuiced to look the same, and I saw the paper because people were laughing about it at school, and I had a look, and realised that I’d seen the man that – that they were looking like – before.”

“That is interesting. Where did you see – the persona was called Mr Duncan, so we’ll use that name – Mr Duncan before?”

“At The Three Broomsticks in Hogsmeade. Having a drink with Professor Donnelly.”
“Can you remember when this was?”

“We had a Hogsmeade weekend at the end of February. It was then.”

“And it was definitely the same man that you saw with Mrs Donnelly that you saw in the paper?”

“Yes. I – well, I looked quite hard, at the time, because the man she was with – Mr Duncan, you said – wasn’t – well, wasn’t very attractive, and I wondered why Mrs Donnelly was meeting up with another man, you know, when she was married, and then I wondered if he was the chap she’d always been talking about from the Ministry – ”

He swallowed again, going red.

“Professor Donnelly had talked to you about a chap from the Ministry? In what sense?”

“This – this is embarrassing. Shameful. I – we – we’re ashamed of ourselves,” he said, a hand moving between himself and his friends.

“We all do things sometimes, that are wrong,” she nodded, “but I ask you to tell the truth here, because people’s lives depend upon it.”

“We wanted to get out,” he said quickly, “but she wouldn’t let us.”

“Perhaps you could explain?”

Cally Donovan stepped forward a fraction. “I’ll explain,” she said, “if that’s alright?”

“Of course,” Hermione nodded.

“When Professor Donnelly came to the school, we were all rather – well, we sort of hero-worshiped her a bit,” she admitted. “You know, she was famous, and lots of people had followed her career, and – well, it was exciting. Lots of extra people joined the school teams, of course, but there are people like us – I mean, we’re not very sporty, but that didn’t mean we didn’t think she was great, and she said she was starting up a quidditch club for people who weren’t very good at it, but wanted to do it, and – I mean, she invited us to join. We were flattered.”

The boys were nodding agreement.

“And she was cool, and had us round for hot chocolate in her rooms afterwards, some of us, and then, after a few weeks, she started talking politics.”

Suddenly, the auditorium seemed to still.

“We were all Purebloods, everyone there,” Greerson said, his voice deep and solid. “Even then, we didn’t really think. She had us do exciting things, like try Polyjuice, and so on, and it was fun. We had to pretend to be each other sometimes. Or her. Then one day, she caught me just after lunch. Gave me a huge bottle of Polyjuice and told me it was my task to take all her lessons that afternoon, without anyone knowing.” He shrugged. “It’s stupid. I was in a panic until she said that she was only teaching History of Magic that afternoon. I felt so relieved, and she laughed, and said she’d never trust me to pull it off if I had to be on a broomstick.”

“After that,” Smith said, “things seemed to get more intense in the group. Nastier. There was a lot of talk of Pureblood politics, stuff we didn’t – we weren’t into that. We told her we’d got other things to do, homework, and so on. She wouldn’t let us leave. Told us Paul had been an accessory to a crime. We thought she was joking. Then she said he was an accessory to the torture of a
wizard,” he gulped, and looked down. “We didn’t believe it. She told us his name, and said we could check with the Janus Thickey ward.” He looked up. “It was Daniel Poulter. We didn’t realise till much later – after Professor Longbottom was killed – that he was involved in the death of Mrs Potter, I swear! We didn’t know what to do –”

“Surely you thought of going to the Aurors?” Anglehurst peered over his glasses. “You are not so young that you wouldn’t have known to do that, surely?”

“No, Sir, Your – Your Honour, Sir,” Greerson said, “but Professor Donnelly said that someone high up in the MLE – and other people in the MLE – were on our side. What she meant was her side – we didn’t want to have anything to do with it, with the group. So we didn’t know what to do. And then she threatened us – we thought that was – was just a warning, or something, until I was attacked one day in Hogsmeade, and later, she made clear that she’d done it. Using Polyjuice, so no-one would ever be able to trace her.”

“Were you involved in covering her classes on the day Professor Longbottom died?” Hermione asked.

Cally shook her head. “No, but I heard the sound of someone changing back in the girls’ loo, that day, and Alice Browne came out of the cubicle. She was stuffing one of Professor Donnelly’s robes into her bag.”

“You can be sure it was one of Professor Donnelly’s?”

“Professor Donnelly wore quidditch robes in the class if she had both classes on the same day. She’s the only one who wears a robe like that, and her quidditch gloves have her old team and initials on the back. They were sticking out of the bag.”

“Did you say anything to Alice?”

“No. She shrugged at me. Neither of us knew what was happening that day, and,” she looked at her friends, “we didn’t trust anyone else from that group. It was only later – well, after Professor Donnelly tore Alice’s Achilles tendon – that Alice wanted out too.”

“The Professor tore a pupil’s Achilles’ tendon?”

Greerson explained the session that Harry and Snape had witnessed, much to the horrified gasps of many of the people in the auditorium.

“I’m astonished,” Hermione said, “that you didn’t find someone to tell. Surely the Headmaster, or your Head of House?”

“We talked about it. But we thought the Headmaster was very chummy with Professor Donnelly’s husband, and we didn’t – well, we didn’t know who to trust. And also, she – Donnelly, threatened – well, for example, she threatened to make Cally fall off her broomstick and make it look like an accident.”

There were more gasps.

“Thank you for coming forward to tell us this,” Hermione said.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t help before,” Greerson said. “That I was a coward. We – it was a real relief when our group was discovered, after Professor Longbottom’s death.”

“The minute I saw that picture,” Smith said, “I knew I needed to get in touch.”
“Thank you, Mr Smith,” Hermione said. “Would you please give your memory of the wizard you saw meeting Professor Donnelly at The Three Broomsticks to Mr Davis, the Potions’ Master? When we have viewed it, we’ll return it and then ask you to take Veritavision, which will reveal whether the man is as you saw, or not.”

In minutes, it was shown that Mrs Atkins had indeed been the one meeting Professor Donnelly.

There was a lot of muttering.

“Thank you for having the courage to come forward,” Hermione said. She looked up at the members of the Wizengamot. “Here we have discovered a particularly unpleasant development – a group of young Purebloods being forced into appalling behaviour towards each other, and coerced into actions that enable criminal activities of the highest order. Professor Donnelly had made clear to them that she had support from within the Ministry, from within the ranks and leadership of the MLE. We see Mrs Atkins meeting with Professor Donnelly days before the murder of Mrs Potter, a murder in which Professor Donnelly took part, aided by using unwitting pupils to cover for her.”

She put her quill down, and put a hand out to hold the back of the chair. “I would like to assure worried parents amongst you that shortly after Neville Longbottom’s murder, the group was discovered and changes have now been made within Hogwarts to prevent such a dangerous situation arising in future. Nevertheless, I think it important to show Mrs Atkins’ connection with Professor Donnelly was a regular and covert one. She visited her in disguise, ladies and gentlemen, not openly as any friend might. Mrs Atkins must have known that her life-long friend was running this club: this is the sort of world that Mrs Atkins loves, when she speaks of her fervour for the wizarding world: one where children are used as tools to further the aims of adults, where they are used to torture and hurt each other. I’ll leave you to think on that as I call my next witness.”

“If I may?” Atkins stood up imperiously.

Anglehurst nodded to her.

“I have no wish to put children through the stress of the witness box,” Atkins said, smoothly, “I would just like to point out that for all the lengthiness of her proceedings, most of which seem to stem rather inappropriately from her personal interest because of the suffering of her son, Mrs Weasley has proved nothing except that I visited a friend. It is not illegal to use Polyjuice in this country for recreational purposes, and frankly, I am amazed that Mrs Weasley would intimate that I would know anything at all about Professor Donnelly’s activities at Hogwarts, when, it appears, even the Headmaster did not know.”

There was some nodding of agreement.

“You did not know that your friend ran a special club, Mrs Atkins?” Hermione asked.

“I knew she ran several clubs for quidditch,” Atkins said. “That was hardly a surprise.”

Several people laughed at her comment and tone.

“Do most quidditch clubs use Polyjuice, then?”

“Excuse me?” Atkins frowned.

“The Polyjuice used by Professor Donnelly and the students – to enable them not only to hurt each other but to enable Mrs Donnelly to almost suffocate a child – and yes, I admit, my child – to death, slowly and painfully – and most possibly to kill Mrs Potter – was Ministry issue.”

There was a huge outcry.
“How can you possibly know that?”

“All Ministry Polyjuice has an additive added for identification,” Hermione said. “Did you not know, Mrs Atkins?” she added sweetly. “Ministry Polyjuice is provided solely for the use of the Auror teams, and the additive is to prevent it being sold on.”

It was clear Dorothy Atkins hadn’t known. Nevertheless – “Mrs Donnelly’s son worked in the Potions Department – ”

“Yes, he did,” Hermione acknowledged. “Who helped him get that job, a job for which he was vastly underqualified, Mrs Atkins?”

There was a heavy pause.

“Please answer, Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst said.

“I did. It was a simple favour – ”

“Thank you,” Hermione cut across her. “As you do not wish to cross examine the witnesses, may I go on?”

“Please do, Mrs Weasley,” Anglehurst said.

Mrs Atkins sat down, her face furious.

It fell further as Hermione said, “I would like to call Albert Thruxton.”

It did not take long for Albert Thruxton’s memories to be shown; first the one of him being Imperiused by a stranger, the second version, under Veritavision, showing quite clearly that the man instructing him to kill Neville Longbottom was Dorothy Atkins.

People stood up and yelled.

Anglehurst seemed to let the chaos go on a little longer than usual. “Mrs Atkins,” he said, “you should understand from this point that you must consider yourself also charged with conspiracy to murder Professor Neville Longbottom. I will ask you again, do you wish to have a lawyer?”

Atkins stood up. She looked pale, but shook her head back. “I will continue to conduct my own defence.”

“Very well. Continue please, Mrs Weasley.”

Hermione got heavily to her feet again.

Harry looked at Ron, who was looking concerned too. He didn’t know what to say. “Mione won’t be stupid,” he said awkwardly, and Ron nodded, biting his lip. “She’s got her, Ron. You can’t get clearer cut evidence than that. If there’s nothing else, she’ll be put away for that.”

Ron looked at his wife, and a slow smile crept up his face. “She’s great, isn’t she?”

“She bloody is,” Harry agreed.

“Mr Thruxton, I have one or two further questions. I can see from your expression that you’re rather shocked,” Hermione was saying.

“Yes, yes! He was a Pureblood,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t understand! She – why would
"You sound as if you know Mrs Atkins well," Hermione prompted, swallowing down her distaste.

"Yes, of course. I – I made her dress-robes, you know. I worked in Twilfit and Tatings. We had – that is – she called us her Gentlemen Plotters.” He went red, and white, as if realising what he was saying. “I thought – I mean, it was just talk! Reminiscing, that’s all!” he said, horrified.

“Do I take it the Gentleman Plotters were a group of Pureblood Supremacists?” Hermione asked.

“Su – what? No! That is – it was just talk!”

“Well, it seems as if Mrs Atkins decided it was time for you to act,” Hermione suggested.

“But – I mean, I was shocked enough when I knew I’d killed Professor Longbottom – I knew his grandmother, years ago! Splendid family – not ones for the Dark Lord, obviously, but then, I didn’t get involved then. He was a half-blood himself, after all!” He shook his head, his face troubled. "The Longbottom’s family history goes back centuries! And she made me kill the last one.”

“Not quite,” a voice said, and Hannah Longbottom stood up, pale and trembling, a hand at her belly.

“Oh, my dear,” Thruxton was mopping his brow. “I – I would never have – I’m so – You must accept my apologies.”

“Apologies cannot bring my husband back,” Hannah said, “but you can make sure the person – the people – who wished to kill him – are brought to justice,” and sat down again.

There was a hush.

“Hear, hear!” someone said, and a roar of agreement rushed around the auditorium, some people clapping, and stopping, and starting, not sure whether clapping was entirely inappropriate.

Hermione let it settle, and then asked, “Perhaps you’d care to tell us of the other Gentleman Plotters, Mr Thruxton.”

His face went red, and he started to bluster, “Well, I’m sure none of them mean any harm at all! It was just idle talk — ”

“Not so idle if Mrs Atkins thought that you would be perfectly happy to kill in order to further her agenda,” Hermione suggested. “Who knows what she’s made the other men do?”

“Oh, but - I mean, do you think she really –?”

“Your loyalty is to be commended, Mr Thruxton. Or perhaps you were more involved than you’re letting on?”

“Eh? What? Pardon, that is? I’m sure I don’t know –”

“The court had some difficulty finding you, Mr Thruxton. You’re no longer living in England.”

“Well, no. Oh! Oh my goodness,” he said.

Hermione looked at him.

“It was – she suggested I leave the country!”
“She? Do you mean Mrs Atkins?” Hermione asked.

“Yes, yes,” Thruxton said impatiently. “She came into the shop for a robe. After the - that business,” he said. “I’d been cleared, but – well, it had affected custom. Several of my gentlemen asked to be seen by Geoffrey – he’s the other fitter in the shop - or had taken their trade elsewhere. She suggested that I might find it easier to start afresh somewhere else. Of course, I didn’t want to, but the more I thought about it, and the family were more settled – ”

“In what way?”

“Hmm? Oh, well, one of my grandsons had got a job at last, in the – ”

“In the?” Hermione prompted.

“In the Ministry,” he said quietly.

Hermione looked from him to Mrs Atkins. “You’re referring to your grandson Hugo Farnleigh, I take it? I am right in thinking that your grandson didn’t manage to pass any OWLs, Mr Thruxton, aren’t I? Despite retaking them for four years?”

“He – he’s a clever boy really – ”

“Very clever to get a job in the Ministry, Mr Thruxton, where there is a minimum requirement of five OWLs. It does look like his employment was – a payment to you, don’t you think?”

“No! No, I never – I had no idea – ” He spluttered to a halt. “I could do with a sip of water,” he said faintly.

Anglehurst sent the court clerk over.

Thruxton supped slowly, his eyes darting to Atkins and away again.

“I – do you really think the other – I mean, they could be – she might be making them - ?”

“Oh, quite,” Hermione said.

“Fred Whitmore, he’s one, honest, I assure you,” he said. “I hope he understands I’m doing this for his own safety,” he said pleadingly, but Hermione just looked up, her quill hand paused.

“Thomas Wilkes, of course, he’s a great fellow!” he said.

And it went on, till he had named another half dozen people.

“Thank you,” Hermione said, and looked at last to Anglehurst, giving a small nod.

“Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst said. “Do you wish to ask Mr Thruxton any questions?”

“As this accusation has come out of the blue, Your Honour, I would like extra time in order to draw up my defence – ”

“Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst said, “I don’t quite know, given the position you’re in, and the charges you’re facing, how you can imagine any additional charge is ‘out of the blue’. You have repeatedly declined the opportunity to have a lawyer, and consequently already have the benefit of not having to take Veritaserum: I am not inclined to show any further consideration.”

“He’s lost patience with her,” George grinned, leaning across.
Ron nodded. “Yeah. Go for it, Mione.”

At the front, Hermione put her hand on the chair and stretched her back.

“Do you need to sit, Mrs Weasley?” Anglehurst asked, trying not to sound embarrassed.

Hermione put her hand under the swell of her belly. “Thank you, Your Honour, yes please.”

“You should have asked,” Anglehurst said gruffly. “Would you like to continue the case tomorrow? I understand that you’d handed in your notice: I’d wondered why.”

She gave him a smile. “I’m very pleased to be having another child,” she said, “and obviously put its wellbeing first. I’m very grateful for your concern,” she added, “but if I can sit, that will be sufficient.” She looked around, and gave a shy smile. “I’m sure there are many witches here who’ve worked much harder than me, but the backache is a killer,” she said conspiratorially.

Several witches nodded and smiled, and Hermione made herself comfortable on her chair, took a sip of water, and turned to address the Wizengamot. “I hope none of you are in any doubt about what Mrs Atkins is capable of. We have seen that she arranged for Neville Longbottom, Professor at Hogwarts, barman at The Leaky, and the most unassuming hero imaginable, to be murdered, right in front of the Wizengamot, in the heart of our Ministry where, if anywhere, one surely ought to be safe.”

She looked round, and people were nodding. She took another sip.

“Some of you, though, might still wonder whether this is an isolated act. A moment of madness. Could Mrs Atkins really have wanted to destroy our world even as she professes to be working for it? Well, I’m going to be honest with you. She’s perfectly happy with many of you – it’s people like me she can’t stand. She does want a Wizarding World – but one where people like me - people like my child,” she touched her belly, “are not allowed to have a place. Could this woman, you’re probably wondering, really have plotted to destroy a Ministry full of people like me? I would like you to hear from two more people: I believe what they have to say will convince you that yes, she could. And yes, she did.” Hermione paused. “Your Honour, I would like to call Mrs Martha Atkins.”

“Oh yes!” Ron said to Harry, pulling his fist down in a gesture of victory, “look at the old trout’s face! She never expected that!”

Mrs Atkins Senior was shown across the floor by the clerk, moving slowly and cautiously over the uneven slabs as she leant on a walking stick.

She sat herself down and took a minute looking around.

“Mrs Atkins,” Hermione said, when she was ready, “thank you for travelling so far for this hearing. Could you please state your relationship to Mrs Dorothy Atkins, who is sitting in the dock just there?”

Mrs Atkins Senior looked at her, and then turned back, her face hard. “I’m her mother-in-law,” she said. “She was married to my son, before he died.”

“And when was that, Mrs Atkins?” Hermione asked gently.

“Fifteen years gone now,” she said.

“But having a daughter-in-law must have been a comfort to you?”
Martha Atkins cracked a harsh laugh. “Now you’re laughin’ at me, dear, ain’t you? There ain’t no comfort in that woman, there sure ain’t.”

There were one or two titters.

“I’m blessed with a wonderful mother-in-law myself,” Hermione said, making Ron beam and nudge Harry. “You look like you’d be a great one too, but I take it you didn’t get on?”

“Only met her the once, what with me living in the States,” Martha Atkins said. “She took one look at my house, realised I was a Muggle, and demanded they leave at once.”

“Really? That sounds awful! But your son still married her, after that insult?”

“Oh, they was already married. I was poorly sick, and couldn’t attend the wedding, so I didn’t git to see them till they came to tell me I was going to be a Grannie.”

“Oh dear: I don’t know what to say. That must have been such exciting news, and yet terribly awkward…”

“Awkward!” Martha Atkins snorted. “That don’t begin to describe it!”

“What happened next, Mrs Atkins?”

“What happened was that they went back to England, and I heard nothing. I kept writing, of course, and when I still heard nothing, I went over to England. That’s when I found out my son was dead.”

The silence was absolute.

“Nobody had told you? Your daughter-in-law didn’t write to you? You weren’t able to attend his funeral rites?”

Martha Atkins sat there, biting her lip, and shook her head to all of it.

Anglehurst gave an apologetic cough. “I’m afraid I must ask you to answer for the record, Mrs Atkins,” he said gently.

“No-one told me my boy was gone, she never wrote to me, and I never got to say goodbye to him,” she said, voice husky. She brushed the back of her hand angrily across her eyes.

The court was silent, people looking down in embarrassment.

“I’m very sorry for your loss, Mrs Atkins, and for the appalling treatment from our community. Thank you for coming to talk to us.” Hermione sat down.

Dorothy Atkins stood up. “Mrs Atkins,” she said. “I am sorry that in my grief at the loss of my husband, I didn’t contact you. I sincerely believed that the Auror services who were investigating would have done so, and to be honest, I was very surprised that you were not at his funeral, but assumed that you were having a Muggle service in your home town. I have no idea where you got the idea that I was pregnant, however. I’m sorry that you felt I was rude when I visited your house: I was tired, having been working on a very difficult case, and the journey was the furthest I had ever travelled. I’m afraid I was a little cross with your son, because he hadn’t told me you were a Muggle, so I hadn’t prepared myself and was a little uncertain about how the gadgets and so on in your house worked. I hadn’t meant to be rude, and I’m sorry if you felt I was.” She sat down again.

“She’ll fucking do anything, won’t she?” Ron said. “Unbelievable.”
Martha Atkins was led to a seat in the front row, reserved for witnesses.

“I’d like to call David Wallace,” Hermione said.

Everyone watched in interest as the wizard made his way across to the stand.

“Mr Wallace,” Hermione asked, “you were Charles Atkins’ business partner, weren’t you?”

“I was,” Wallace agreed. “We’d known each other at school in Boston, and then met up again some years later. We were both thinking of coming to England, and after discussing it over a beer or two, decided to join forces. We opened an apothecary shop together.”

“It was a successful business?”

“Yes, the business was moderately profitable. Enough for our needs. We – it was a good life. Charles was a nice guy.”

“Mr Wallace, Charles’ mother said that Charles and Dorothy came out to tell her that a grandchild was on the way. Dorothy Atkins has just denied being pregnant. Were you aware of the pregnancy?”

“Yes, Charles spoke about it openly. He made her anti-nausea potions.”

“So you are absolutely and positively clear that Dorothy was pregnant?”

“From everything her husband told me, and from his actions, yes.”

Dorothy stood up. “Mr Wallace, did you ever speak to me about it at the time? Did you ever ask me if I was pregnant?”

Wallace paused. “I didn’t need to –”

“Did you ever ask me about it?” Atkins demanded, cutting across him.

“Damn,” Ron whispered.

But Wallace was not going to let her intimidate him. “I didn’t need to ask you,” he said. “I helped your husband make tailor-made potions to stop you throwing up.”

“That is not evidence,” Atkins said.

Wallace stood there, and just looked at her.

“If I may continue?” Hermione asked.

Atkins sat down.

“Mr Wallace, were you present on the day Charles died?”

“I was,” he agreed.

“Was there anything unusual about that day?”

“Charles had come back very upset after the trip to tell his mother about the pregnancy,” he said. “He’d taken a week off, but come back early. After a couple of days I found out that Dorothy had left him. He was beside himself. He said that he hadn’t realised the fact that he was a half-blood
would be such an issue – he knew his wife was a Pureblood, obviously, but you know, in the States – America – we don’t worry about that. It’s a young country, and the wizarding community is small. Most of us, I suppose, are mixed blood, or Muggleborn. We don’t think of it. I really don’t think he meant to deceive her. But she was upset about it, obviously. He was hoping that – that she’d get over it, so he was really excited on the day he died, because she sent him a letter saying she wanted to talk, and she’d come and see him. The day wore on and on and every time the door bell went – well, you can imagine. Late in the afternoon, he – well, he had a heart attack.”

“I’d like you to show us the memory of that, if you would,” Hermione asked.

“Objection!” Dorothy Atkins said.

Anglehurst looked at her, and then at Hermione.

“Mrs Weasley, this is bound to be distressing, for both Mrs Atkinses.”

Hermione turned to Mrs Atkins Senior. “Would you prefer to leave, Mrs Atkins?”

“No I wouldn’t!” Martha Atkins said. “I – I don’t know how this works, but I need to know how my son died, Sir,” she said to the judge.

Anglehurst nodded, and the court watched the scene.

“Well, Mrs Weasley?” Anglehurst said, “where are you going with this?”

“I’d like Mr Wallace to take Veritavision now, Your Honour.”

He looked at her sharply, and nodded. “Mrs Atkins,” he said, addressing the older woman, “Veritavision allows us to see whether any of the people were using a disguise.”

“Thank you, Sir,” she nodded.

The memory was played again. People rose to their feet in horror as they saw that the third man – the man who had come into the shop, was in fact, Dorothy Atkins.

It was quite clear that her husband saw her.

It was quite clear that she looked up at him, nodded, and then left, even as he keeled over.

“She – she just left him? To die?” Martha Atkins asked in confusion.

Hermione stood up, her hand in the small of her back again, and signed at the woman that she would answer as soon as she could.

“Quiet, please!” Anglehurst banged his gavel hard, twice, but the court was slow to simmer down.

In the dock, Atkins looked up, face expressionless.

Hermione sat down again, and brushed her hand over her face.

As if realising how tired she must be, the court quietened.

“This is very difficult for me to say,” Hermione said. “I know that any witches here will know at once why I am horrified by what we’ve just seen, but I’ll put this into words. Mrs Atkins has denied being pregnant, and we can see why she would deny it. But her husband’s mother has come here from America to tell us that the only time she met Dorothy Atkins was when her son brought
her over to share the joyous news that Dorothy was expecting – that Martha was to be a grandmother. It’s hardly something she is likely to have been mistaken about. Given how rude Dorothy was to her – something Dorothy Atkins herself acknowledges – it hardly seems something she would make up. David Wallace, Charles Atkins’ business partner, says she was pregnant. We know that Mrs Atkins has been a regular user of Polyjuice. I think we can be certain that Charles Atkins recognised his wife when she came into the shop. She was, no doubt, using a form she had used in his presence. When he saw her, the shock was so great that, following on from the tension of waiting all day for her to appear, he had a heart attack. We can’t say for sure whether she intended to kill her husband: she certainly didn’t stay to try to revive him, or comfort him. What we do know is that she is an intelligent woman. Her husband was an apothecary. She has used potions regularly throughout her life. Why would she have turned up at her husband’s shop as a man that afternoon? I can only think of one reason.” She stood up, picking up her glass or water with a visibly shaking hand, and taking a sip.

“She wanted to show her husband what she thought of his heritage. She wanted to show him that she would not have a half-blood child. She deliberately took Polyjuice, she deliberately turned into a man, to negate any hint of chance.” She swallowed, and looked around the auditorium.

One or two people were wiping their eyes with their handkerchiefs.

“You cannot use Polyjuice when pregnant,” she said. “Polyjuicing into a man makes this utterly clear. There is no womb for a child to inhabit. There is no hope of its survival. It’s death is brutal and – ” she stopped, turning away briefly with a hand over her mouth.

“Mrs Weasley?” Anglehurst said. He half stood up. “Get the court mediwizard,” he snapped at the clerk.

Ron was on his feet, jumping down between people.

Hermione put up her hand to stop them. She swallowed, and then said, into the silence, “Dorothy Atkins killed her own half-blood child, and wanted to show her husband that she had done so.” She took a breath. “Do you have any doubts that she could be utterly ruthless in her determination to make the Wizarding World belong only to Purebloods?” She turned to the Judge, a hand on her stomach. “Your Honour, would it be possible to break for tea now?”

“I think we all need a break after that, Mrs Weasley,” he said. “I will ask the mediwizard to see you in the Prosecutor’s tent. No, don’t argue. I will await his verdict on whether we can continue this today. Mrs Atkins,” he said, looking at Charles’ mother, “the clerk will bring a hover chair to take you to a private tent. Please ask the elf in attendance if you need anything. Guards, take Mrs Dorothy Atkins to the cells. I prefer not to see an attempt at lynching in my court.”

Harry made his way through the throng to the Prosecutor’s tent. He could feel the silencing spell even as he approached, and the guard on the door gave him a bit of a grin before letting him past.

Inside, Ron was laying into Harcourt, who was sitting in an armchair in front of the marble fireplace taking tea from a delicate china cup.

Magic was so ridiculous, Harry thought.

“Harry!” Ron said, “this prick was fucking faking it!”
“Where’s Mione?” Harry asked.

“Loo,” Ron said. “He did it on purpose!”

“No, no,” the mediwizard said, wringing his hands. “That cut is – I was just mistaken, I think, about the concussion.”

Ron rolled his eyes.

“Is there tea for Mione?” Harry asked Harcourt.

“Yeah, and some sandwiches?” Ron asked. “I’m starving. And yes, Hermione first,” he said, seeing Harry’s look. “What sort of man do you think I am?”

“One who loves me, I hope,” Hermione said, coming into the room and sinking down into the armchair on the other side of the fireplace. She held out her hands to the blaze, and Ron poured her a cup and came and put it on the little table beside her.

She gave him a beaming smile.

“You are alright, aren’t you?” Harcourt said, looking serious, and the mediwizard came over, hovering, until Hermione nodded and he cast a diagnostic spell over her.

They all waited for his verdict.

“Your blood pressure’s up a bit,” he said, “and you could do with – ” he conjured a stool, and put it under Hermione’s feet. “Keep them up till you have to go back in,” he said.

“Everything’s alright?” Ron said fiercely.

“Yes, perfectly,” the man nodded, and Harry watched as both Ron and Hermione seemed to relax.

“Mrs Atkins senior might need you,” Hermione said. “Judge Anglehurst asked the clerk to put her in a private tent.”

“Then if you’ll excuse me…”

“Yeah. Thanks, mate,” Ron said, and Hermione added her thanks.

“It was always going to be better coming from a pregnant woman,” Harcourt said, slightly apologetically.

“Fuck you,” Ron said.

“Ron,” Hermione put her hand on his arm. “I was playing it up a bit.”

“Oh. Well.” He looked relieved. “I thought the whole point of Harcourt doing this was because he was ruthless.”

“I was ruthless,” Harcourt said. “Do you think I really enjoyed knocking my own head and allowing Mrs Weasley the best bits? But that was what needed to be done.”

Ron was quiet a moment, as he poured himself and Harry some tea, after converting a couple of the little cups into mugs. He went over with the pot, topping up Hermione and Harcourt. “You’ve been listening in?” he asked, indicating the device on the coffee table in front of the fire.
“Yes. You were outstanding,” he said to Hermione.

“What do you think?” she asked. “Push some more or leave it as it stands?”

“There’s more we can throw at it, but it might muddy the waters,” he said.

“That’s my thought,” Hermione agreed.

Harry gulped down his tea. “I’ll leave you to it,” he said. “I want to talk to the kids.”

“See ya in a mo’, mate,” Ron nodded.


Both nodded, and Harry left the tent.

He felt on edge, aware that at last, it had all come to a head. They’d done their best to find who’d killed Ginny – and why. They’d done their best to protect the society they belonged to.

All of them, over the months, finding out information, trying to put it all together, facing the ugliness of other people’s aspirations and ambitions.

It felt like a huge weight would be lifted, whatever the verdict.

Everything would be out in the open.

Either they would be disbelieved, and they would have to start again; they would know that the Pureblood supremacists were gaining power, and that they would have to fight once more for a free and just society, or………

It would be over.
The court had reconvened, and Dorothy Atkins was led into the auditorium.

Someone booed.

Someone else joined in.

And then, unstoppable, the court continued in a mayhem of noise, shouts and jeers, for several minutes.

Atkins sat in her chair, her head raised, ignoring it.

The flush in her cheeks spoke otherwise.

Anglehurst had given up banging his gavel.

Eventually, Hermione stood up.

Bit by bit, the court quietened.

“Thank you,” Anglehurst said, with some sarcasm, to the assembled gathering. “Mrs Weasley, if you’re ready?”

Hermione looked around at the Wizengamot, and with a small smile, sat down again. “I rest my case, Your Honour.”

“Very well,” he said. “Mrs Atkins, is there anything else you wish to say in your defence?”

Dorothy Atkins stood up.

Someone shouted out. Others started to join in.

Anglehurst rose to his feet, leaning forward on the bench. “That is quite enough!” he roared.

“Bloody hell!” Ron jerked back, as if blasted. “Overdoing the Sonorous, mate!”

Harry grinned, but people quietened down.

“This court cannot complete its task if the defendant is not allowed to speak,” Anglehurst said. “Mrs Atkins: please go ahead.”

Atkins straightened her shoulders. “You have heard so many lies about me –” she began, and then faltered.

Everyone looked to see what had stopped her.

In the front row, an elderly witch had stood up, and then, moving slowly on her walking stick, had turned around, bracing herself on her stick, showing only her back.

Murmurs rushed round the court, and then someone in the middle row did the same.

Then another, and another…

“What’s happening?” Lily whispered to Harry.
“No idea,” Harry said, amazed.

Down below, Atkins was continuing, “…no-one can doubt that I love the Wizarding community –”

Someone snorted, and got to their feet, also turning their back.

Within three minutes, more than three quarters of the Wizengamot were standing with their backs to her.

Atkins was still talking.

Harry looked to Minerva, who was there, sitting on a thick cushion. “Minerva?” he whispered. “What’s this?”

Minerva opened her mouth, leaning across to answer, when Anglehurst spoke.

“Mrs Atkins, please stop speaking,” he ordered.

Dorothy Atkins looked for a moment as if she might argue.

“Although I have not seen this gesture in many years, I recognise this for what it is, and having read the Law, I’m sure you must too,” Anglehurst said to her.

Atkins looked at all the backs turned towards her, and at last her jaw snapped shut, her mouth screwing into a tight furl.

Anglehurst’s gaze too tracked around the auditorium, as if counting. “Members of the Wizengamot, I would like to confirm that you are deliberately and knowingly indicating that you have heard enough from Mrs Atkins, and no longer wish her to speak?”

A chap at the back got up.

Anglehurst looked at him.

“I didn’t know what it meant, Your Honour,” the man said. “I’ll be joining them,” and he turned his back too.

Several of the remaining sitters followed suit.

“It’s a sign of complete and utter disgust, and disapproval,” Minerva whispered.

“I think we gathered that,” Ron nodded at her.

“Well? You will not allow Mrs Atkins to continue her defence? You’re satisfied that you have heard enough?” Anglehurst demanded.

The first witch turned, looking over her shoulder. “I’ve heard enough,” she said, and spat on the ground.

It was fortunate that she was in the front row, Harry thought, otherwise she might have hit someone.

A wizard higher up said over his shoulder, “I’ll listen only if she’ll take Veritaserum,” he said. “She can have a court-appointed lawyer. Every word out of her mouth seems to be a lie, and I’ve had enough of it.”
“Hear, hear!” several people said.

“Mrs Atkins, will you take Veritaserum and allow a lawyer to continue and conclude your defence?” Anglehurst asked.

“I will not,” she said.

“Bet she’s hiding other murders, and she’s scared she’ll spill the beans!” someone shouted.

“That is enough!” Anglehurst said. “Mrs Atkins, this is your last chance. The Wizengamot have made their feelings clear. Will you rest your defence, or will you take Veritaserum?”

“They’ve obviously made up their minds already,” she shrugged, and sat down. “I’ll rest.”

Anglehurst turned to the Wizengamot. “Please be seated.”

There was some shuffling and shifting, and then everyone was seated again.

“Your gesture of negation is duly recorded,” he said. “Normally, I would ask you to go away to consider your verdict, but in light of this, I ask instead whether you are ready to reach your verdict now. Could you please raise your hand if you’re ready.”

Everyone in the court did so.

“Very well, then. The clerk will read out the charges: I will ask each of you to give your judgement by show of hand for each charge.”

Ten minutes later, it was all over.

Atkins had been found guilty on every charge.

“Thank you,” Anglehurst said. “I would like to note, for the record, my thanks to the members of the Wizengamot. It is hard for us to accept that those amongst us, and especially those in charge of our security, should betray our trust so ruthlessly and cold-heartedly. I would also like to thank the European Wizarding Alliance for their assistance in helping to keep our country safe. I must give this court’s apologies to those who were falsely accused by those plotting this dreadful treason, namely, Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter, and I order that the Ministry ensure compensation for their suffering. My thanks must go too, to Potions’ Master Severus Snape, whose inventions help protect the innocent and ensure the security of our state. There are others too, whose names I cannot mention, but to whom we also owe a great debt.”

Harry looked across at George, and nodded.

Behind the front as a maker of toys and tricks and childhood fun, George was an able inventor. Just as he had thirty years ago, he’d come up trumps, but never wanted nor sought recognition.

Ron turned a grin on his brother, and gave him a discreet thumbs up.

“It is not my role to make speeches,” Anglehurst continued, “but I can only hope that the trials of Theodore Hinch and Dorothy Atkins make us aware of the threats that our society faces, and make us work towards a thriving and united community, as enshrined in our laws.” He paused, and took a breath. “I’m sure many of you wish to get home and have done with this, but I am deferring sentencing until tomorrow afternoon, so that I may consider the matter to ensure that the punishment reflects the severity and nature of the crimes. Your presence at sentencing is not a part of your duties, but if you wish to be here to see this through, you are most welcome to attend.”
banged his gavel, calling the session to a close, and rose.

The court applauded him as he left.

Hermione waited in the middle, and rather than queuing to leave, they ran down the steps and joined her. Ron was the first to arrive, picking his wife up and swinging her round.

“You did it! You did it!” he cheered.

“Harcourt –”

“Oh, fuck Harcourt!” he grinned.

James laughed.

“Put me down, I’m too heavy,” Hermione batted at Ron’s arm.

“When did you get all those muscles?” Bill asked, looking at Ron.

Ron put Hermione down and flexed his arms.

Harry realised, surprised, that his little belly had disappeared too.

“You can shift beer barrels with magic or muscle,” he said. “I decided to go with muscle.”

“And very nice it is too,” Hermione said, squeezing a bicep.

Ron laughed, blushing a bit, and tucked her under his arm.

“Seriously, thank you, Mione,” James said. He looked at Albus and Lily, standing nearby. “From all of us.”

“Well, I had nothing to do with Hinch –”

“She set it all up, though, didn’t she? She was the brains. She knew. And she wanted to kill Dad too,” he glanced across at his father. “Thank you.”

Harry felt a hand at his back, and turned to see Snape. His face broke into a smile.

“I’ll see you later,” Snape said, about to slip away.

“Thank you too, Severus,” Albus said. “We would never have got them without you.”

James nodded. “Yeah. I second that.”

Harry looked at his son in amazement, but Lily had already come over and kissed Snape, and everyone was clapping him.

“Yes,” a quiet voice said, “I can’t thank you enough either, Professor,” and they all turned to see Hannah.

“I wish it hadn’t been necessary,” Snape said, “but I’m glad I could be of some small service.”

Harry wondered if he was the only one reading subtext into the exchange.
Minerva headed over to Hannah, and then people were just talking, joyous and happy.

Harry couldn’t help watching Hannah, knowing that she was being asked about her pregnancy.

Given how big Hermione was looking, it was important that people realised that Hannah was quite far along too, he knew.

He felt the brush of Snape’s hand again in the small of his back, and looked up into knowing eyes. Without thinking, he dropped his head onto Snape’s shoulder. He felt the infinitesimal pause in Snape’s touch, and realised what he’d done. He looked up to see James staring at him.

“Severus, thank you so much for that philtre for my joints,” Minerva said, and Harry could have kissed her.

Harry had straightened. He felt the hesitation in Snape’s touch, giving him the chance to move away.

His heart seemed to skip a beat.

He stayed where he was, and as life resumed around him as if nothing had happened, he let out a shaky breath, only the firm and renewed touch of Snape’s hand to indicate that Snape understood him so well.

The next moment Kingsley came over, solicitously walking beside Harcourt, who had a bandage around his head.

Several people who were still queuing on the stairs cheered, and Hermione clapped.

Harcourt gave a pleased bow, and then joined them.

Kingsley spoke to his mother for a moment, and then Lily and Mione, and then was standing next to Minerva, talking with them.

Harry’s eyes ate him up. His heart started to thump.

“Will you be able to sleep in your own bed tonight, Kingsley?” Minerva asked, casting Harry a knowing look.

It was the question occupying most of Harry’s brain function. It seemed to be far too long since all three of them had slept together, all tangled up in the sheets… He swallowed.

Kingsley’s gaze was scorching as it licked over his two lovers. “One more night,” he said to Minerva, his easy tone belying the look. “Then Atkins and Hinch will have been sentenced and off to jail, and not my responsibility any longer. I can’t wait,” he added, and his voice dropped so deep it seemed to burrow into Harry’s bones, and Harry couldn’t control the shiver that rippled through him.

He felt Snape’s smirk, rather than saw it, and then Nanette was making her way around the group towards him.

He tensed.

Snape’s hand made one last press and dropped away as Snape turned towards Minerva and Kingsley, giving Harry some privacy.

“How, what happens about Lucius?” Nanette got straight to the point.
Harry opened his mouth and shut it again. “I – I’m not sure –” he began.

Kingsley turned round. “There’ll have to be a trial,” he said.

“What? Non! Mais –”

“He killed a man,” Kingsley said gently.

“But – he did it for you!” her glance swivelled from Harry to Kingsley.

“He did it to save a man agony,” Kingsley contradicted, “which I’m sure will be taken into account. But it’s out in the open: it can’t be ignored.”

“But you’ve got to save him!” she said, getting agitated. “I thought – I thought he’d be free now – you need to go and see the Judge –”

“I will go and see him tomorrow,” Harry nodded, putting a hand on her arm.

She shrugged it off. “Tomorrow! You’ll leave him another night, locked up and….rotting in a cell?” She looked from Harry to Kingsley. “You – you put yourself first? You just want to –”

“I wouldn’t say another word,” Kingsley said, with the sort of authority that had had recruits quailing.

Harry felt suddenly tired, as if all the euphoria of winning had been wiped out. And he was cross.

“It’s none of your business what I’m going to do next, actually, Nanette,” he said tightly. “It isn’t actually your business what I do with regard to Lucius, but I have told you I’ll see him tomorrow, and I would have hoped you’d know me better than to imagine I would leave him in the lurch. Kingsley has ensured that his arrangements are not uncomfortable. As it happens, I promised Ginny’s parents that as soon as her murderers had been found, and sorted, I would go and see them. So if you’ll excuse me –” he turned away before he lost his temper, a quick hand to Kingsley’s arm and a nod to Severus, and then he was rounding up James and Albus and Lily.

“I –” Nanette began.

“Lucius would not expect him to put his comfort before what Harry is doing,” Snape said, cutting her off. “Lucius was instrumental in harming Ginny when she was a child: she would have died if Harry hadn’t saved her. The Death Eaters killed one of their sons –”

“What? I did not know –”

“No, you didn’t. Whatever history books you read, they don’t tell you the personal cost. George’s twin brother was killed. Bill was mauled by a werewolf. Ron and Mr Weasley were both almost killed. The Weasleys are a good family; they have a remarkable capacity for warmth and forgiveness. But do not expect Harry to put one night of Lucius’ discomfort ahead of the people who are the closest thing he’s known to parents.”

Nanette was silent, swallowing. “I did not know,” she repeated, in a whisper.

“No.” He looked down at her. “I have known Lucius a long time; he is not all bad, and I think both you and Harry have brought out the best in him. If you wish to remain his friend, I hope that you will continue to exert such an influence on him. If you are ever – concerned – however: you will come and talk to me, yes?”
Her eyes flashed up at him, surprised, and disconcerted.

“You need have no concern that I have any interest in you,” he said. “I have been a Death Eater and a spy myself, and I can attest to the fact that good friends and love can change you. Also, I am no fool. I’ll give you an honest opinion, and honest help. Now, I need to go and assist Minerva,” he said, and swept away.

All the Weasleys as well as Harry had returned to the Burrow. Molly had apparently been expecting them, and had cakes ready to be whipped out of tins and scones warm and mouth-meltingly good straight from the oven.

The whole family took turns at explaining what had happened that day – Harry had been glad to find that they had been keeping up with proceedings via their sons every evening.

Mrs Weasley plonked down next to Hermione on the sofa and kissed her on the cheek, much to Hermione’s surprise.

“Thank you, dear,” Mrs Weasley said. “I don’t know what Ron did to deserve you, but we’re all very glad that you’re part of our family.”

There were rousing cheers, and Hermione caught Harry’s eye, because more than once she’d talked to him, when Ron wasn’t there, about the strain of failing to be the sort of wife that Molly Weasley had expected her to be.

It was sad, Harry thought, that she’d finally found acceptance over this, and he knew Hermione was thinking it too.

Ron though, plumped down on Hermione’s other side, having filched a stool from across the room and slid it under his wife’s feet, and kissed her too, and Hermione had turned her face to him, and the love that burned between them was still such a bright glow that Harry knew Hermione would have put up with anything to be there beside Ron.

Arthur had grabbed his hand as he made his way to the back door, and just squeezed it tight, holding it in both of his own. “Don’t want to lose you,” he said. “Still our s-son, Harry.”

Harry squatted down so that he was closer to eye level. “Thanks, Arthur. I could never have asked for better parents-in-law,” he said, and meant it, because however much Molly and Hermione had occasionally rubbed each other up the wrong way, Mr and Mrs Weasley had always given him something that he’d never had: love, and warmth, and acceptance, and family. “I’m just going to sit in the garden for a bit. Want to come?”

It was cold out, but Harry had spelled warm blankets around them both, they had a mug of hot chocolate each, and a lantern beside them, night having fallen swift and sudden.

Harry felt more aware of Ginny here than in Grimmauld Place, where she’d lived and laughed with them, where the room was where they’d performed her funeral rites. In Grimmauld Place, he couldn’t help feeling aware of her betrayal, of her lying naked and dressed up for her lover, of the days she must have kissed him on the cheek and then gone out to have sex with some player elsewhere. She’d been the mother of his children at Grimmauld, but here – here at the Burrow,
she’d been happy. He could remember her as a young girl, of his first stirrings of attraction to her, the embarrassment of her interest long before he was ready to consider such a thing.

“Best to j-just remember g-good things,” Arthur said, and Harry turned an amused face on him, not surprised at all that Arthur could read his mind.

“I might sell Grimmauld Place,” he said, voicing without intention an idea he’d only played with.

“Miserable house,” Arthur nodded, and Harry snorted, because although they’d made it into a family home, and it had resounded with laughter and children, it also held the ghosts of its past.

And it was, really, a rather awkward house, with its dark corridors and basement kitchen.

Harry thought briefly of the cool kitchen of Villa Olorosa, also quite dark, but it was different when the cool was a welcome refuge from the heat, and stepping outside the door led to the warmth and sharp sunlight and bright colours of Spain.

“When the kids are ready,” he said.

“Get a f-f-flat,” Arthur said. “N-nice for the toddlers to have a base.”

“Toddlers?” Harry grinned.


“Yes,” Harry said, thoughtful. He’d need somewhere to encourage Hannah to visit.

“G-garden?” Arthur said.

“Just what I was thinking,” Harry agreed.

“B-bring here? If you can?”

Harry’s head swivelled round, gobsmacked.

“Molly loves k-kids,” Arthur said.

“You’re too good to me,” Harry said, patting Arthur’s knee.


They sat and sipped the hot chocolate, the sting of the autumn night air on their cheeks.

No more words were needed between them, and the silence was full of companionship and acceptance.

And Harry thought of Ginny for the first time without the need for action, or guilt or anger or pain.

The next morning, he was woken by Mitty with the news that Nanette was waiting downstairs for him.

He sighed, moving out of Snape’s arms.
“Take her to the kitchen and see if she needs some breakfast, Mitty, if you would. I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

“Yes, Master Harry,” Mitty bowed. “Shall I be making some tea and coffee for the Masters? Is you wanting bacon this morning?”

“Just coffee for me,” Snape said. “Thank you.”

“Tea and a bacon sarnie sounds great,” Harry said, and the elf disappeared, smiling happily.

Snape rolled over. “She’ll have some plan for saving Lucius.”

“Yeah,” Harry said, sitting up, and shifting to the side of the bed. He glanced back at Snape, and away again.

“What?”

“Just – oh, wondering,” Harry said. “I need to think about stuff.”

“Fair enough,” Snape said, after a moment.

Harry turned back, a big smile on his face. “Not to do with us,” he said, and kissed Snape, a quick peck, that moved into a second peck, and then a very thorough kiss.

“That’s alright then,” Snape said, several minutes later, against his mouth.

“I just wonder – she’s good for him, he’s a better person because of her – ”

“I told her as much yesterday,” Snape nodded, reluctantly letting Harry go.

Harry stood up and opened the chest of drawers, conscious of Snape watching him as he stood there naked, selecting a pair of pants. It was an incredible feeling, to be – admired. Wanted. He pulled the pants on, and grinned at Snape’s sigh.

“The thing is – the thing is,” Harry said, “the thing is – ”

“Spit it out, please,” Snape rolled his eyes.

Harry snorted. “The thing is – ” he gurgled as Snape thumped his head back against the pillow. “I keep feeling it’s good for her. Even though, on paper, it shouldn’t be.”

“You have power over his decisions,” Snape said.

“What?” Harry frowned.

“He cannot marry without your permission.”

“Wha – oh, shit, I did read that! I just never thought that it would be relevant – ”

“You can make them take their time, if you think that is for the best.”

“What do you think?” Harry asked.

Snape paused. “At the risk of sounding horribly girly, I’d say that love is a very powerful force.”

Harry nodded.
“Anglehurst seems a sensible man,” Snape said. “Talk it over with him. She might have come up with something else entirely, anyway.”

The previous night, Kingsley had come over to kiss them both goodnight, staying a little longer than usual.

Harry’s finger reached up and touched the joint of his jaw, just in front of his ear, opening his mouth a little to ease the dull ache still there, unable to hold back the smile at the cause of it. But they had spent five minutes discussing what needed to be done about Malfoy, and Harry thought that was a pretty strong commitment to the man, given all the other things they’d rather have been doing.

“Alright,” he said. “Kingsley’ll make sure I don’t do anything stupid.”

“I think it highly unlikely that you’d do anything stupid,” Snape said. “You take your responsibilities very seriously.”

Harry felt a warm glow at the unexpected praise.

Once again, the auditorium was packed. Harry was not surprised that almost everyone had returned to see Judge Anglehurst sentence Hinch and Atkins.

Anglehurst took his seat, and Hinch and Atkins were brought in, again to loud boos.

Anglehurst pounded his gavel twice, short and sharp, and order fell.

“I am not surprised to see so many of you here,” Anglehurst began, “as I was besieged, last night and this morning, by a storm of owls from both members of the Wizengamot and members of the public. I have not had a chance to read every letter, but I can tell you that every one so far has been in the same vein: people are horrified by the appalling crimes committed by the pair in front of us, and concerned for the future security of our people. A Judge does not take into account any facts other than those he has heard during the trial.”

Several people called out in disappointment, or stood, hands raised to ask questions, but Anglehurst put up his hand, and they sank down again.

“It is not the practice for a Judge in our courts to take into account anything other than the facts he has heard during the trial,” he repeated, looking around the auditorium, “but I cannot discount those concerns in this case, when we are all affected by what has occurred, and when, in fact, those views tally so strongly with my own.”

There was a general sigh of relief.

“Mr Theodore Hinch made a plea bargain with this court, and I cannot go against the agreement then made,” he said. “As a result of it, a number of other people have been arrested, and should thorough investigation show it to be appropriate, will be brought to trial. Please stand, Mr Hinch, while I pronounce sentence.”

There were boos when people heard that Hinch had been given only a year for each murder, but Harry could see people counting, tallying up the total.
“The total time to be served is twenty nine years. No application for remission will be accepted. It may serve you to know, Mr Hinch, that were it not for the support of your son, you would not have been offered the opportunity to rejoin society in so short a time. Having said that, many of my correspondents have called for the death penalty. I will not change the sentence I have made, but I have had to consider, in the light of what I have heard since your plea bargain was agreed, how best to protect society from you in the future. You have a considerable intellect, and were it better informed, perhaps you would turn it to better use, and make recompense for the terrible crimes you have committed. In light of this, I have negotiated with the Muggle authorities, and you will serve your sentence, without magic, or contact with magic, in a Muggle prison.”

Hinch leapt to his feet, chains jangling, his face furious. “Muggle –”

“You will be quiet,” Anglehurst said, as the guards dragged him back down.

“You will serve your sentence in a Muggle prison, without magic. On release, if your record is clean, your magic will be restored, but I cannot let you remain unsupervised on your return. Therefore, as the Death Eaters were in the past, you will be on permanent parole for the whole span of your life –”

“You made a deal!” Hinch shouted. “You bastard –”

“And I have kept my side of the bargain,” Anglehurst continued, as a guard silenced Hinch with a spell. “You will serve twenty nine years, and if you behave properly, you will be free. I have arranged for you to receive education in Muggle history and innovation in prison, a benefit you will receive after five years if you show good behaviour. If, on release, you continue to conduct yourself in the manner one would hope a wizard would aspire to, you may have a long and trouble-free life in our world. If, however, you breach these terms, your magic will be taken from you permanently. These are the terms of your sentence,” and he banged the gavel with finality.

Hinch threw the Judge a filthy look, and was led, fighting against his chains, from the court.

Silence fell.

“Mrs Atkins,” Anglehurst said, “you have betrayed the trust that was given to you when you became the Head of Law Enforcement in this country. I do not have enough words to express the disgust that your actions inspire in me, and in the writers of the letters I have received. Many of them have asked for the death sentence.”

Atkins raised her chin.

“It’s too good for her!” someone shouted out.

“Burn her to death, like she wanted to do to me!” someone else shouted.

Anglehurst looked up at the crowd, and silence resumed.

“The sentence of death is still available to me, but I am not inclined to use it,” he said, “sorely tempted as I am to rid the foul horror of your behaviour from this world. You are hereby stripped of all your possessions – all your chattels will be sold and the money used will fund a future project – yet to be decided – to help better integration within our society. You will be stripped of your magic,” he said, and looked to the side.

Two wizards with black face-masks stepped forward, and a ripple of horror ran around the court.

“ – And you will spend the rest of your life, without possibility of parole, in Azkaban.” Anglehurst slammed the gavel down.
Atkins was pulled forward. She was as white as a sheet.

Harry wanted to protect his children, to cover their eyes. He didn’t know what would happen, but he knew it was going to be bad. And yet, this was what they had worked towards, wasn’t it? She was guilty, and therefore, she had to be punished. It was the decision of them all, wasn’t it?

Everyone fell silent, and then as the two wizards moved towards her, someone began to stamp their foot. It thumped through the stone, and someone else joined in.

The low rumble thrilled through Harry’s bones, frightening and calling him in. It was as if they were raising magic, and he realised that they were. They might not know what they were doing, just as he hadn’t known in the water, but they were calling on the earth, he could feel it, and the wizards were pointing their wands at her, and she was screaming, and it was dreadful, and then a blast of something ripped from her, and then forked down like lightning from the wizards’ wands, diving down into the earth, leaving only a scorch mark on the grass and Dorothy Atkins in a crumpled, sobbing heap beside it.

She was dragged away, gasping and shaking.

“Thank you for your assistance with that,” Anglehurst said. “Now, I am sure you all want to leave, but we have one more matter to deal with. Bring forth Lucius Malfoy. Mr Potter, please join him in the dock.”

The bile that had been receding down Harry’s throat rose again as his stomach started to clench, but he stood.

Lily stood up and hugged him, then Albus and James, and Ron and Hermione.

All the friends around him reached out, touching him as he passed, and he made his way to the dock, and stood beside Lucius.

“During this trial,” Anglehurst began, “you had the unpleasant duty of hearing a young man being tortured repeatedly. You all heard Mr Malfoy kill him. You heard from Mr Shacklebolt, Head of the European Wizarding Alliance, that Mr Malfoy had been working as a spy and had confessed at once. We have a situation where a young man is dead, and Mr Malfoy has admitted, with no hesitation, to manslaughter. One would expect, in the usual run of things, that the French courts would deal with this matter, but I have received a request from the French Ministry, who are in some disarray following the arrest of the French Minister for Justice and several other key members, for it to be dealt with here. The family of the young man are aware that the man who killed him did so out of mercy, and have expressed their gratitude that he stopped the torture. Nevertheless, this is not a matter that can be ignored in our society. We are not at war, and taking the life of another cannot go unsanctioned. On the other hand, Mr Malfoy’s actions as a spy may have prevented civil war.”

Everyone sat quietly, waiting.

“I do not, as you know, have to have your approval for sentencing, and as Mr Malfoy has pleaded guilty to manslaughter, no further action is required from you. However, I am sure many of you will be wondering what actions were taken on this matter, and I believe it is essential for our community to be open and honest. I have held talks this morning with the Minister, with Mr Shacklebolt, representing the European Wizarding Alliance, with Mr Potter and with Draco and Scorpius Malfoy.”

Lucius glanced up at that, surprise registering on his face.
“Having ceded his life to Mr Potter, Mr Malfoy is not in a position to make any offer of reparation, which is, sometimes, the route by which such difficult matters are settled. Mr Potter, however, in support of Mr Malfoy, has authorised Gringotts to transfer sufficient funds to the wife and children of Pierre Balcon to amply provide for them throughout their lives, and to cover all school and educational costs. Furthermore, Malfoy Manor is offered to our community as a token of reparation.”

There were murmurs of surprise.

“Mr Draco Malfoy and Mr Scorpius Malfoy have told me they fully support Mr Potter, and expressed the hope that the seat of their ancestors will be of benefit to the wizarding community,” Anglehurst continued.

Lucius Malfoy stared straight ahead, only the slightest twitch of his shoulders showing any reaction.

“Mr Potter, in recognition of his responsibility for Mr Malfoy, has made several offers of personal reparation – ”

A number of people made surprised exclamations.

He looked around, quelling the protests. “I have accepted his offer to provide his considerable services in making whatever alterations Malfoy Manor might require to make it fit for purpose. It is important for wizards to understand that magical commitments are not to be undertaken lightly.”

He paused, looking at Harry and then around at the members of the Wizengamot. “As for Mr Malfoy himself, Mr Hinch received one year per life that he had taken. I do not believe,” Anglehurst said, “that it would serve justice to impose a custodial sentence on Mr Malfoy, but I cannot let him walk free either. Therefore, I sentence Mr Malfoy, on behalf of the Governments of Britain and France, to a term of exile, during which he must not return to our shores, for three years. That is the sentence of this court. I will add, that in recognition of your service to this country, Mr Malfoy, upon the end of your term of exile, and assuming satisfactory behaviour, your permanent parole will be over-riden. You will be a free citizen.”

For the first time, Lucius Malfoy looked startled. He swallowed. “Thank you, Your Honour.”

“Members of the Wizengamot, I would like to thank you all for your service, and for returning today. It’s good to see that our citizens are interested in justice, and I hope that the events we have witnessed will be a head’s up, to make us aware of the threats we face, and our need to take action to create a more cohesive society, a society that values all members of our community. This session is closed,” and for the last time, he banged his gavel.

The guard lifted the flap and Harry walked into the tent.

Lucius was sitting at the desk, his fingers steepled. He rose at the sight of his visitor.

Harry paused.

“I owe you thanks, Mr Potter.”

Harry shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry that I couldn’t discuss the terms with you beforehand.”
“You talked to my family.”

“Yes.” Harry came across the room. “May I sit down?”

“Please.”

They both sat.

“Are you upset about Malfoy Manor?” Harry asked.

“I had already ceded it to you.”

“I’d intended to return it to your family,” Harry shrugged. “We needed to offer something important. I’m sorry about it, but I checked with Draco: he never intends to live there. Neither does Scorpius.” He paused, then added, a seeming non-sequitur, “Nanette’s father – and Artur – died there.”

Lucius looked at him sharply.

“It might become the main building for the Ministry,” Harry added.

Malfoy laughed, sharp and sudden. “Only you, Mr Potter,” he said.

Harry shrugged. “They could do with somewhere above ground. It’s better for the workers, and frankly, I think building some monstrosity in London is going to cost a fortune and take a hell of a lot of magic to disguise it from the Muggles, both while building and just to maintain it. It seemed a better use for the Manor. And your family hasn’t always been based in Wiltshire. I looked up your family records.”

“Well. That will give it a new lease of life,” Lucius said.

“Yeah. Anyway,” Harry said, rubbing his knees, “I need to talk to you about Nanette.”

“She is well?” Lucius asked, frowning.

“She’s worried about you,” Harry said. “She took me to task yesterday and visited me at the crack of dawn this morning, in theory to apologise, in practice because she had spent all night with French lawyers, working on your behalf. I think we both know she’s in love with you.”

Lucius looked down. “It is a little bit of hero worship,” he said. “It will pass.”

“It might,” Harry agreed. “She asked me for your hand in marriage,” he said, making Lucius choke.

“Despite knowing what she does of you, which is not enough, but still it’s a taste of who you are and what you’ve done, despite knowing you own nothing and are rightly treated with suspicion in many quarters, she still wants you. She suggested it as a way to enable you to have your freedom: that she would undertake to vouch for you. She offered her own money in reparations.”

“She is young and foolish,” Lucius said, his lips tight.

“I’m only telling you this because you have the power to hurt her. I’m placing my trust in you that you won’t.”

Lucius looked at him. “What are you asking of me? Not to see her again or contact her? Is this why I must go into exile?”
“I thought exile was better than a year in Azkaban,” Harry said. “But a period of exile will permit Nanette to have some time. I’m sorry to interfere so in your life, and I wouldn’t do so if hers wasn’t at stake. I’ve told her that I will not consider her offer until she has completed her studies.”

“Three years…” Lucius said wonderingly.

“Yes. You can both write, and she can visit you when she has holidays. But she needs the chance to find her own way, to study, to achieve success.”

“To meet younger people, more suitable….suitors,” Lucius said.

Yes.” Harry wriggled his shoulders, releasing the tension in his neck. "I know it will be hard. My son is undertaking a long distance relationship, so I know it can be done."

“I don’t understand why you’re not refusing to let me see her.”

Harry laughed. “I think Nanette would ignore any such stricture entirely.”

Lucius’ lips twitched. “She is very determined.”

“She is. But she’s had a very difficult time, and I won’t remove her hope. She’s placed all her trust in you: I hope you won’t let her down.”

“She should find a younger man,” Lucius said. “I can’t offer her – much,” he added, his eyes darting away from Harry.

“Maybe she will find a younger man,” Harry agreed. “But I know she feels that young men will expect children.”

“If someone loved her –”

“Of course, but she isn’t likely to let anyone get close under false pretences.”

“Mr Potter,” Lucius said awkwardly, “I know she was – attacked by her husband. But her –fear – of – of intimacy – that – a young man – I could not fulfil –”

“I may be the latest bloomer in the world on the sexual front, and I can’t believe we’re having this conversation, but even I know that a man doesn’t need to be – that there are many ways to please a woman.” He stood up. “I can’t discuss Nanette and sex,” he said. “Where will you go? You have houses in Barbados, Belize and Washington –”

“You’ll allow me to use one of the Malfoy houses?” Lucius’ eyebrows rose. “That is, that were –”

“Of course,” Harry sighed. “I’ll also give you a vault with a regular allowance. But you might find your time less tedious if you find an occupation, and it will give you and Nanette a shared topic of discussion. Now, Draco is waiting to see you before you leave. You’ll owl me your destination? I’ve promised to visit you regularly to supervise your exile.”

Lucius stood up too. “Thank you, Mr Potter,” he said quietly.


They didn’t shake hands. There was nothing final about the meeting, now that Harry had to visit, but Harry felt a huge sense of relief that he’d laid the cards on the table with regard to Nanette. He didn’t know whether it was wrong of him to interfere, but he was responsible for Lucius, and he
cared about what happened to Nanette.

Draco stopped him just outside the tent. “I owe you thanks, Harry.”

“Your father did what he promised,” Harry said, with a shrug.

They’d already talked that morning – Harry had needed to find out if either he or Scorpius really wanted the Manor, although he wasn’t surprised neither of them were bothered. As Scorpius had pointed out, if it hadn’t been for Harry, he’d never have wanted it because it was his grandfather’s home; he’d never envisaged having any sort of relationship with his grandfather. To get to know his grandfather - that his grandfather had got to know him a little - had been unexpected and appreciated.

“Do you know where he’ll be going – I’d like to keep in touch, arrange an allowance – ”

“I’ve seen to an allowance,” Harry interrupted. “Draco, you can’t think I want your father’s money?”

“He gave it all to you – ”

“I just thought he could help. I don’t know if there’s a mechanism for stopping all this, but at the moment, it’s probably better for him to have some…protection through the arrangement. But in the long run – “

“I don’t know if you can rescind it.”

“I’ll get Mione to look into it. If not, I’ll leave the rest to you – or Scorpius,” he said, seeing the look on Draco’s face.

“We can make our own life. We don’t need your charity.”

Harry sighed. “I know you both can. But a lot of it is stuff, not just money. Your heritage – ”

“I feel a hell of a lot freer without it,” Draco said. “Bugger the heritage.”

Harry snorted a laugh. “We’ll talk about it another time. I’ll let you know where he goes. He can write himself, anyway. He hasn’t got any restrictions apart from keeping out of trouble and not returning to Britain or France. He did it to make sure your name was thoroughly and entirely clear, you know.”

Draco’s face became expressionless.

“What?” Harry said. “He did – ”

“I still feel to blame. I didn’t – I should have been able to protect her,” Draco said. “I’ll always blame myself for that.”

Harry knew sometimes there was nothing you could say. His own feelings were mixed, because even thinking about what had happened – there were so many ‘ifs’. If Ginny hadn’t been handcuffed….if the cuffs had had some release mechanism…if they’d cast wards…

None of it mattered.

Ginny was dead.

“I need to get home,” Harry said, and Draco nodded, and stepped away.
Harry apparated into his parlour and listened for the sound of his children. He heard the hum of the television, and headed to the lounge. He stood at the door, watching Lily arguing with James about something in the programme they were watching, while Albus had his head in an enormous textbook. The normality of it was wonderful, and he loved them and didn’t want any damn arguments at the same time.

What he really wanted…an image of Severus and Kingsley in the kitchen in Spain flashed into his mind, and he pushed it down guiltily.

James spotted him first. “All right?”

Harry nodded. “You lot? Have you eaten yet?”

“Actually,” Albus said, giving him a knowing grin, “I’ve got to be back at the crack of dawn, so if you don’t mind, Dad, I’m going to head up and spend a few hours with Laura.”

“And I’ve got an Arithmancy test in the morning,” Lily said, standing up and coming to give him a hug. “It’s important –”

“Of course it is,” Harry hugged her back. “You going to be alright?” he asked quietly.

She nodded. “I’m glad it’s over.”

Harry stroked a hand over her hair.

Both boys were standing too.

“Dad,” Lily said, pulling away to look at him, “can we not – I don’t want us to do any – any remembrance thing on the day Mum died. If – I mean, I’d like us all to get together on her birthday, if we’re going to do something. I don’t want to have to think how she died every year. I’ll remember that anyway, but I don’t want to be made to remember it, if you see what I mean.”

“Absolutely,” James nodded. “Good idea, Lils.”

“Birthday it is,” Harry agreed, looking to Albus, who was nodding too. “So, do either of you need anything before you go?”

“Yes,” Lily said, and Harry waited to be told what he could do.

“I need to know you’re happy – happier,” Lily said. “Mum’s life was short, so – don’t waste any, right? Straight off to Severus and Kingsley for you.”

“Lily!” Harry exclaimed, a surprised laugh bursting from him.

“They make you – you’re different, with them. It’s great to see you – at ease,” Albus said. “And don’t take any notice of James –”

“I want Dad to be happy,” James protested.

“And I want you lot to stop worrying about me,” Harry said. “I am happy. I was happy before. I know it might be hard to understand, but I loved your mother, and I had you three, and I was grateful for that, and for being alive –”
“Dad!” Lily said.

“I’d died before your age,” he said quietly. “Technically, or sort of, or something. I never knew I’d live to have anything. Anyway, this is all sounding morose. Well done, all of you, for being so great the last months. I’m proud of you all,” he said, making sure to include James as he looked at them. “Now, are you packed?” he turned to Lily.

The next few minutes were full of organisation and farewells. Albus slipped away to say goodbye to Allie, while Lily was fetching a book she’d left upstairs, and then Lily was gone, and then Albus, and James said, “You won’t mind if I bugger off, then? I think some of my mates are planning on getting me down the pub: they’re finally getting used to me still wanting to go despite the fact that I can’t get plastered.”

“Sure?” Harry asked. He didn’t want James to be making plans just to make it easier for him to go to Spain.

“I’ve taken my stuff back to my flat already,” James said. “We’ll go for a pint next week, yeah?”

“Sounds good,” Harry nodded, and then James was gone.

Harry looked at the empty room.

He made his way to the kitchen, and called for Mitty and Dinky.

“The kids have told you about the trial?” he asked.

Mitty nodded, ears flapping.

“You played a really big part in helping convict Hinch,” Harry said, squatting down on the floor. “Thank you, Mitty. And I was wondering if you’d like me to see if Toaster could come and live with us? Because I think Thomas Wilkes might end up in Azkaban. No?”

Mitty’s face was contorting and she was wringing her hands. “Whatever Master is thinking best – ”

“Mitty, I was only suggesting it to please you,” Harry said gently.

“Toaster would like a master who will let us visit,” she said, “but I is not wanting him here all the time!” she burst out, and then bit her hand, looking at Harry with horrified eyes. Allie clutched on to her neck, obviously anxious at the sudden outburst.

Harry looked across at Dinky. “Is Toaster not a good elf?” he asked.

“Toaster is a good elf,” Dinky said, “but he is – ” he too looked anxiously at Harry, and then finished, “he is being used to being in charge.”

“Ah,” Harry said. “Is he your older brother, Mitty? A bit bossy?”

Her head nodded up and down, her eyes huge.

“I wonder if James might consider him. What would you think of that?”

A beaming smile was his answer.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Harry said, grinning. “Now, I’m going to Spain, to Kingsley’s and Severus’. Will you keep everything nice while I’m gone? And if there are any owls for me, or calls, would you let me know?” They both nodded, happy to be given tasks in Harry’s absence.
“I might be back for some wood tomorrow,” Harry said, realising suddenly that it was all over.
He had his life back.
Or rather, a new life to contemplate.

He landed in the kitchen in Villa Olorosa with a smile lightening his face.
Kingsley looked as if he’d just stepped out of the shower. He was wearing just a pair of loose cotton trousers, and was standing behind Snape, arms around him, peering over Snape’s shoulder as Snape attempted to stir something on the stove.

Harry’s eyes couldn’t help tracking the breadth of his shoulders, eyes sliding down over shifting muscles to where Kingsley’s spine dipped behind the low-slung bottoms. His mouth watered.

Both men turned to look at him.
Kingsley held out an arm, the other still looping around Snape’s waist. “At last,” he said. “We’re starving.”

“For food?” Harry asked, his eyes moving from the hand on Snape’s abdomen to the pot.
Kingsley laughed, and Harry slid under his arm, peering into the pan.
“Smells wonderful.”

Snape turned his head. “Chicken in wine and cream, with tarragon,” he said. “Are you staying?”

“Yes please,” Harry said.

Snape’s look sharpened. “For good?”

Harry nodded, swallowing and grinning at the same time.

Snape kissed him.

Kingsley’s arms held them both.
“I might have known she’d make us suffer.”

“Severus!” Kingsley chided, digging him in the ribs, trying to suppress a smile.

“What? No one in their right mind could stand listening to that,” Snape said, watching the piper wrestling with his bagpipes as the wind whipped at his kilt.

“It might’ve helped if he could actually play,” Harry nodded. “He’s her great-great-grand-nephew or something, isn’t he?”

Molly blew her nose in a loud honk, competing with the wail of the instrument. “American,” she whispered, behind her handkerchief, as if that explained everything.

“She’ll be turning in her grave,” Poppy said, “and she hasn’t even had a chance to get it warm yet.”

Headmaster Brown choked, and cast a glare at the woman, now long since retired.

“You needn’t worry about decency,” Hermione said to him quietly. “They were the best of friends for more years than we’ve been alive.”

“What’s decency, Mummy?” Ellie asked, reaching up to tug at Hermione’s arm.

Harry grinned, and even Snape turned to see how Hermione would respond.

“Decency’s making sure you don’t do things that you know will upset other people,” Hermione answered.

Harry smirked at Snape. “We must be indecent all the time, then,” he leant up to whisper.

Hermione flashed a look at him, and continued, “But sometimes people have very narrow minds,” she bent down and re-tied the stripy scarf around Ellie’s neck. “And then they get bothered about nonsense, so you have to use your judgement.”

“What’s a narrow mind?” Rachel asked, peering round her mother’s legs.

“Oh Merlin, here we go,” Hannah whispered. “When these three get together…”

“It’s like this,” Kate began forming some sort of tunnel with her hands.

Ron rolled his eyes, and all of them were trying to hold back smiles.

It was amazing the joy that children could bring, Harry thought, allowing his body to relax and his shoulder to bump Snape. He turned his head to look around.

Behind them, the whole school was turned out. Harry could see Scorpius and Andrei, the new quidditch teacher and Roxanne’s boyfriend, trying to keep them under control. Most of the younger kids wouldn’t have known Minerva, and Harry couldn’t help but be amused as he saw a couple of girls giggling behind their hands at the kilt and the potential exposure, and two boys surreptitiously swapping cards.
He wondered if Minerva was on them, or if they were checking over ones from people that were there. There’d been cards of himself and Ron and Hermione for years, of course, but it was interesting to see how they got updated. Severus’ now gave much more prominence to his potions inventions than to his period as a spy, and Professor Brown’s now listed him as the Headmaster under whom Hogwarts had changed its name for the first time in a thousand years: it was now Hogwarts School for Magical Studies.

One of the unexpected outcomes of the Beings Equality Law was the application by Ragnok’s great-great grandson to attend Hogwarts. Harry would’ve loved to have been a fly on the wall at the Board of Governors’ meeting when it was first discussed. Rigbod, the goblin who had been on the Board for years as their financial advisor, had told Harry that he’d been dreading it, but that Hermione, and her calm and implacable personality, had been incredible.

He looked across at his friend. He didn’t know how she did it. Instead of finding late motherhood exhausting, she seemed to have been revitalized. In the four years since the twins had been born, she’d completely rewritten _Hogwarts: A History_, updating the style to make it more interesting and easy to read, so that it had sold out its first print-run within a month. Then she’d thrown herself into her role as a governor of the school. Harry’s lips twitched. He’d no doubt she’d probably driven Peter Brown bonkers to start with, but it was obvious that he’d slowly come to realise that it was better to listen to Hermione than fight against her, and it was clear too that he’d come to rely on her, rely on her down-to-earth _it can be done_ approach, because Hermione _had_ done things, she’d been essential to defeating Voldemort, and she’d been incredible in destroying Atkins, and she’d brought about the Beings Equality Law, quietly and steadily working for the rights of others, and she’d done it, she always managed to cut through the nonsense and make things happen, and gradually Peter Brown, like everyone else, had realised it. What’s more, Hermione knew all the history that Peter Brown didn’t, she knew context and people and, Harry thought, how funny was it that she (and he, and all of them) had _connections_.

How did people grow up from being ordinary kids to being people who knew all the major players in their world? But then, they might have been ordinary kids, but they really hadn’t had an ordinary childhood, had they? And Hermione’s latest venture…he cast a glance across at George, who now had Kate on his hip, and smiled.

“You’re grinning like an idiot,” Snape whispered down at him. “Shocking the youngsters, Potter?”

Harry pushed his shoulder into Snape slightly in response, straightening his face.

“Distracting yourself from the racket is understandable,” Snape continued. “But I can’t believe you caught a glance of his tartan boxers from that angle.”

Harry’s head whipped up, grinning again. “No! Really?”

“Ridiculous!” Poppy leaned back to say, obviously listening in. “How he has the courage to play so badly in front of everyone and yet not dress properly…”

“Tartan knickers are not correct?” Nanette asked, from her position next to Poppy. She’d been assisting the current mediwitch at Hogwarts half a day a week, and had been introduced to the older woman at the start of the funeral.

“Kilts and wizarding dress bear something in common,” Lucius said from beside her.

Harry watched her brow furrow.

“But you do not wear – ”
“Precisely,” Poppy nodded approvingly.

Harry really didn’t want to think about Lucius’ underwear, or lack of it.

“But – that kilt is so short – ” Nanette stuttered.

“You’re a Healer, dear,” Poppy said, “you should know better than anyone that the human body is a magnificent thing.”

“Not if he’s not got enough to flap in the breeze,” Snape said, and several people around them snorted.

“Show off,” Harry whispered.

Snape glanced down at him. “That accusation would only hold if I was the one wearing the kilt.”

“I’d like to see that,” Kingsley said. “Your long feet in those funny shoes, and the white socks…”

Harry choked.

He hadn’t expected to laugh at Minerva’s funeral.

Severus had spent a lot of time in the last months, visiting Minerva, collaborating with Poppy, making potions to ease the ache in her joints and to help her breathe more easily, but she had faded despite all their ministrations, and told them all to stop worrying about her, to boot. She was old and ready to go.

She’d probably asked the great-great-whatever nephew to do the honours just to make them laugh and snipe, as she herself would have done, Harry thought. It was very different, this celebration of a life well-lived, rather than the numb grieving over a life cut short. He shivered slightly, as if Ginny’s ghost had touched her cool fingers to the nape of his neck, but they had given her the Traditional Rites to wish her well on her way, and he knew that she was there only in his thoughts.

Minerva, on the other hand, had wanted to be interred in the grounds, as Albus Dumbledore had been so many years before, and as every Headteacher was entitled to be. He wondered if Minerva’s ghost would come and haunt the school; he could see her rather enjoying it, experiencing in a new way the school to which she had devoted the majority of her life.

It had been interesting, though, listening to the eulogy: finding out unexpected things about a person you thought you knew well. It was funny to think that Minerva had had two sisters; it made him think of Macbeth and the three witches over their cauldron, and “Hubble, Bubble, Toil and Trouble,” as the kids had always said in his Muggle school playground, although Hermione had told him that was a misquote, when Lily was little and he’d been playing with her. Maybe that was why Minerva had gone for Transfigurations rather than a career in Potions; apparently she’d been outstanding at everything as a schoolgirl.

The piper came to a rather whining end, the wail of the drone seeping to a halt, but as the desire to laugh rose again, the young man turned and bowed to the vault where Minerva had been interred, and Harry felt touched. His fingers brushed against Severus’, and he felt the momentary response from his lover. Kingsley was on the other side of Severus, an unspoken recognition that he was the one who might need their support.

“Oh dear god, there’s scones and tea to get through yet,” Severus said.

“Scones!” Rachel said, rubbing her tummy. “Yum, yum!”
“Whisky,” Arthur said, from the row in front, jerking his head backwards. “Minerva liked a pint.”

“Arthur!” Molly remonstrated, “I think you mean a drop!”

Arthur said nothing, just turned to waggle his eyebrows at the men behind him.

“It’ll be a good one, I don’t doubt,” Snape said, with an answering smirk. “I’ll certainly raise a glass to her.”

“Me too,” Gloria said. She blew her nose loudly. “You’re heathens, all of you. That was lovely.”

“You need to come back to civilization,” Kingsley said to her, dropping a hand to her shoulder as she sat in front of him. “Anything sounds good after panpipes.”

“Tell me about it,” Ron said, “she gave the twins some this morning - one set each, even worse - and they’re driving me mental already,” but he gave Gloria a grin as he spoke, and she laughed, winking at Kate.

Gloria and Draco had parted six months after the trials; for the last year, Gloria had been living with a Bolivian farmer on one of the secret magical islands in Lake Titicaca. Consequently she was keeping the cold wind at bay with a purple alpaca stole and a knitted turban in cerise and turquoise with llamas gambolling on it.

Her eyes crinkled at the corners. “I could do with a nice bit of soul,” she confessed. “Even some jazz would do. I could even put up with Celestina Warbeck, and I’ve always hated her.”

“Really?” Molly said. “A Cauldron Full of Hot, Strong Love is one of my all-time favourites. Why, Arthur and I –”

Ron coughed loudly.

Molly glared at him. “I was only going to say –”

“We all know what you and Dad got up to to that song,” Ron huffed, face reddening.

“Well I never!” Molly said, but she’d gripped Arthur’s hand and they were smiling fondly at each other.

Peter Brown had stepped out to the front once again, and was now saying, “Do come in for tea, everyone, please. There’ll be scones and scotch, as ordered by Professor McGonagall,” he cast a quick smile over towards them. “Tea and hot chocolate for the students, of course. And if any of our guests would like the opportunity to revisit their common rooms, or to see our recent alterations, we have a band of trusty pupils who’ll be delighted to show you around. Professor McGonagall was always keen for our old boys and girls to feel welcome to return, to see Hogwarts as their home, and that is a tradition I am very happy to follow.”

And with that, he turned to the pupils and started leading off the first years towards the castle.

A little later, Harry was settled on a bench, his elbows on one of the groaning tables in the Great Hall. He was just about to comment about feeling far too big for it now when the thought made him look at Kingsley, far larger than him, to see how he fitted. Kingsley was sitting next to him,
but several people had already got up to go on tours, and so they all had a bit of space. Kingsley was leaning forward, talking to Arthur who had his chair pulled up on the other side of the table: Harry had only needed to do a small spell to part the benches and create space for him. There was nothing worse than always being made to sit on the end, or outside of a group. Kingsley’s deep teal robe was of a modern cut, fastened at the chest then cut away. “Much easier if I need to run,” he’d said simply, and had purchased several. It was always a source of amusement between Harry and Severus that Kingsley was rather more into fashion than one would have at first thought, given his love of well-worn jeans, and they teased him mercilessly about how much he took after his mother. Neither of them objected though, because Kingsley always looked magnificent, and today, Harry’s eyes took in the enormous power of Kingsley’s biceps, then followed the flow of the fabric as the cut-away design had allowed Kingsley to throw the sides of the robe back over the bench. Harry glanced down, to see Kingsley’s thighs spread apart, muscles straining against the black fabric of his trousers, and he swallowed. He wondered how anyone had been able to sit next to Kingsley without being overcome with lust when he’d been at school.

As if feeling his eyes on him, Kingsley’s glance swung his way, enquiring, and then sparkling with laughter as they caught the direction of Harry’s gaze. Kingsley chuckled, low in his throat, and just flexed his pelvis forward a little, as if settling himself more comfortably.

Harry dragged in a breath, and his eyes darted up and across the table, where a little further down Severus was sitting, talking to a young witch who Harry didn’t know. Snape too seemed to know when he was being looked at, and turned his gaze away from the girl and straight across at Harry, his eyes instantly taking in the flush, and then moving to Kingsley as he saw Kingsley deliberately drop a hand below the table and on to Harry’s thigh.

Harry shuddered.

The previous night, they’d made love for hours, a weird sort of celebration of life when they knew the next day would be about death. Harry’s body still felt aware of it, not just his mind: his thigh muscles still felt that hint of stretch and strain, and on his inner thigh there was a bite mark that lay just under the inseam of his trousers. Every movement made him conscious of it. Severus had put it there, and Harry’s eyes darted to him as Kingsley’s fingers just brushed over it for a fraction of a second, reminding him of being together and living together and loving together.

Kingsley’s hand moved away, Severus’ eyes dark and warm and hot and amused all at once, and as Harry turned towards him, Kingsley bent his head and brushed a quick kiss across Harry’s lips before resuming his conversation with Arthur.

Harry, though, was aware that there had been a minute pause, a shared intake of breath throughout the room.

So people had been watching them.

And then the sound of chatter, young people talking fast and hushed and excited.

He remembered the thought he’d had, the day Scorpius had returned from France, back in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place, and he and Andy had hovered, inches from each other, behaving.

Well, Minerva had approved of their relationship.

So he edged a little closer, and slipped his hand around Kingsley’s back.

He felt Kingsley’s muscles tense, and then Kingsley turned to him, eyes warm, as he finished his sentence, and Harry leant up and returned the kiss, not lingering, but just – a kiss. Then he turned
and joined in the conversation with Arthur, leaving his hand on Kingsley’s back, and a moment later glanced across the table to Severus, who gave a slight nod of approval.

“Can I have a kiss too, Harry?” Ellie said, rushing up.

The youngsters had finished eating in about ten minutes flat, and had been racing up and down between the tables ever since.

Harry popped a smacker on her cheek, and she giggled.

Kate and Rachel ran up too.

“Me next!”

“No, me!”

Harry swung his legs round so he was facing outwards from the bench, grabbed a girl in each arm, hauled them squirming onto his knees, and then planted a loud kiss on each one’s cheek before dropping them down again.

“Now Sev’rus!” Kate said, pointing across the table.

“Go on, then,” Harry said, “run round and give him one.”

“Not us, silly, you,” Kate said. “You’re his Daddy.”

Ron snorted tea out of his nose.

“Not quite,” Harry laughed, and Kingsley next to him was quaking too, Rachel leaning an arm nonchalantly along his thigh.

“I think he should,” Kingsley agreed, ruffling her curls.

“Well,” Ron said, “I suppose it’s not fair otherwise, is it?”

“’Xactly,” Kate nodded. “Daddy always gives me a kiss if Eleanor gets one.”

“Fair enough,” Harry laughed, and apparated till he was standing behind Severus, putting a hand on his shoulder to steady himself as he bent down and brushed a kiss against Snape’s jaw-line, unable to stop himself from inhaling Snape’s unique scent.

“Showing off?” Severus said, amused, as the conversation along the whole length of table stopped.

“What?” Harry straightened, and then swung his leg over the bench as the girl Severus had been talking to shifted along a bit to make room for him, her face rather white. “The girls insisted I shouldn’t leave you out.” He glanced around, to see people craning their necks from the other side of the room.

Gloria leant forward from the other side of Snape. “I think the kissing was a shock – ”

“We’ve never hidden we’re together, and I’m not pretending now,” Harry said firmly.

“ – but the apparition within Hogwarts might have something to do with it,” she finished.

“Oh,” Harry said. “Can you still not - ?”
Ron squeezed up his face in a look of extreme concentration. “Definitely not,” he said, a moment later.

“Oh. I thought I was being more discreet,” Harry said, flushing. “You know, rather than walking around the whole length of table…”

“Is there no limit to your magic?” Percy hissed, almost scandalised.

There was a pregnant pause, people at the next table listening in. “I don’t know,” Harry answered. “Never tried being an animagus,” he offered.

“Not too hot at potions, either,” Snape murmured.

Harry covered his face in his hands. “So true,” he grimaced, “and potions are something you really don’t want to get wrong.”

“What happened?” A voice piped up from the next table.

Harry thought of his attempt to make a special lubricant as a birthday present for Severus. He shifted in his seat, remembering the disastrous consequences of trying to use ginger in it because it was one of Snape’s favourite flavours. Harry had tried to test it out in himself in advance, and despite the agony he’d suffered at least they hadn’t got as far as Snape trying to slick his cock with it. He’d never have heard the end of that. Although, of course, Snape would have known from the first sniff …

Harry had stuck to what he was good at – furniture, and wood, ever since.

“Let’s just say I was stupid enough to try and make Severus a potion for his birthday once,” he said, “without realising all the qualities of the ingredients. Are you good at potions?” he twisted the question back on the questioner.

“I like them,” the boy nodded. He kept his head straight ahead as he said, “Some people say that they aren’t proper magic,” he whispered.

Harry glanced at Severus, and wondered how often he’d dealt with similar comments.

“Magic isn’t something in isolation,” Harry said. “Potion-making requires incredible intellect, memory, and physical skills, and all of that before you apply the most subtle magic.”

The boy’s eyes widened, and he glanced to Severus.

Harry did too. “I’m sure Potions Master Snape can tell you in a lot more detail than me, though.”

Snape was just looking at him. “I think you’ve put it pretty succinctly, Harry.” He turned to the boy. “I wouldn’t let them laugh at you: if you turn into a competent potions maker, you’ll always find work. If you turn into an excellent one, your life will be constantly enriched by the challenge of creating new potions. Far better than a life filing parchments at the Ministry, I’d say.”

The boy nodded, almost breathless at being addressed by the Potions Master himself. He stayed standing.

A girl along the bench said, “You kissed him,” to Harry.

“Emma!” someone tried to shush her.

“I did,” Harry said easily.
“But you just kissed that other guy.”

“That’s ex-Minister Shacklebolt! Other guy! Merlin!” whispered her long-suffering friend, shaking her head.

“Yes,” Harry agreed.

“I read that you’re all together,” said another girl, looking as if she were steeling herself.

“That’s right,” Harry nodded.

“All three of you?” An older boy said, who’d edged into range.

Snape looked up at him. “That is correct.”

“You can ask anything you like,” Harry said easily, seeing the boy swallow and dart glances at them.

Another boy, further along the table, sniggered, and the boy in front of them blushed, and started to turn away.

The first girl said, “You – you live in the same house?”

“Yup,” Harry said.

The boy glanced up the table again, but lingered.

There was a bit of silence, students eyeing each other and not saying anything.

“Like mates?” the boy said, not looking at them.

More sniggering from along the table.

“Mates and more,” Harry said easily.

“Ew!” one of the sniggerers mimed sticking his fingers down his throat, retching.

“I see that frightens you,” Snape addressed him directly.

“What? No!”

“Come, come,” Snape said gently, “the thought of three very powerful wizards together is obviously worrying you.”

The boy was about to protest, and then registered what Snape was saying. He swallowed.

“Quite so,” Snape said, and Harry grinned.

“My mother says it’s selfish for men to live together,” one of the witches said. “You know, because you don’t have children.”

“Is she here?” Harry asked, because he recalled an older couple sitting amongst the children there earlier.

The girl nodded. “She’s gone to see the Ravenclaw common room with my sister.”

“Then she must have liked Professor McGonagall, to have come today,” Harry said.
“Yes,” the girl agreed, puzzled. “She was her Head of House.”

“Professor McGonagall never had children,” Hermione pointed out, joining in. “I don’t think her life was a selfish one, do you?”

“I – no, of course not,” the girl said.

“In fact, I don’t think any of the Professors when we were at school had children, or even had partners,” Hermione looked to Ron for confirmation.

“Yeah, you’re right,” he nodded. “Not that we knew of.”

And there were people like Atkins, Harry thought, who killed their own children, but he said nothing. These students were too young to have followed the trial, even though it seemed so recent to him. It was good and bad how quickly things were forgotten. Atkins was never mentioned in the press, but Kingsley, Harry knew, had regular reports on both Atkins and Theo Hinch. Hopefully it would be a while before they had to start worrying again.

Kate had come and stood in front of Ron, listening, and he handed her a carrot stick from the table, which she started gnawing, leaning back against his leg.

“And of course, not all people can have children, even if they want them,” Hermione ploughed on. “Are they being selfish too?”

“No,” the girl said quietly.

“It takes all sorts,” Hermione said. “There are other ways to contribute to society, other than just making more of it.”

“Oh good,” said the bossy girl. “I don’t ever want to get married.”

Several people laughed, and the conversation moved on.

Later, Scorpius came to sit with them.

“We had an interesting conversation with some students,” Hermione said.

“Sounds like not all good,” Scorpius prompted, raising an eyebrow.

“There’re some boys who could do with a bit of – attention,” she went on.

He looked at them. “What year?”

Probably fourth years,” Snape said.

“I think I know who that is,” Scorpius sighed. “Blond guy with sharp haircut, and a beefy chap?”

“That’s the ones.”

“Homophobia, race issues – they’ve got the lot,” he sighed.

“How’s the job going?” Harry asked.

“Challenging,” Scorpius said, helping himself to a scone. “No, it’s good, really. Sometimes I think we’re getting there, and then….”
“It will always be like that,” Snape said.

“Did I see Franklin being an idiot?” Peter Brown said, coming and sliding onto the bench next to Scorpius.

“And Dodd, from the sound of it,” Scorpius agreed.

“I’ll deal with it,” Brown nodded, and Harry looked at him in surprise.

“I wanted to speak to you, actually, Mr Potter,” the Headmaster said. “Might you have a minute or two, later on?”

“Sure,” Harry said, brow wrinkling.

“Perhaps you’d come too, Hermione?” Peter Brown asked.

She looked at her watch. “In half an hour, say? Any later and I think these two will have worn out their welcome,” she glanced along the aisle at the girls, who were very much enjoying the attention they were causing.

“Don’t worry about them,” George said. “Ron and I can get them home, if need be, and sort them out.”

“You’re a darling,” Hermione smiled at George. “Whenever you’re free, then, Peter,” she said, to the Headmaster. “Send a house-elf to get us.”

“I will,” he nodded. “Come too, please, Mr Malfoy,” he said to Scorpius, and got up and moved on to the next group.

“What’s this all about?” Harry turned to Hermione, glancing too at Scorpius.

“I’m sorry, Harry, I haven’t had a moment to mention it to you,” Hermione said. “We’d only talked about it in principle last week, then everything got railroaded with Minerva dying – not that I mean –”

“Oh dear,” Kingsley said, raising his eyebrows at Harry.

Hermione went bright red. “We need you,” she said, swinging Ellie onto her lap.

“Using a child as defence?” Snape said, and then looked down, moving his arm out of the way as Rachel squirmed up his side and sat on his lap.

Rachel reached across the table to pick up a scone, carefully picked out a sultana and then offered it, rather squashed between her fingers, to Snape.

George snorted.

Hermione was giggling.

“You’re ruining my gravity,” Snape said, looking down at the child, but Harry could see his hand at her waist, holding her firm so that she didn’t fall off.
“They’re going to be terrors, those three, when they come to Hogwarts,” Scorpius grinned.

“Like me, Fred and Lee,” George said.

It was only since Hermione and Ron had had the twins and George had moved into The Leaky that George had started mentioning Fred in everyday conversation. It was as if seeing Ellie and Kate had released the memories of all the happy times they’d had together, all the closeness and good things, rather than just the constant knowledge that Fred wasn’t there.

“Heaven help us,” Snape said, after only a fractional pause. “You three in the Potions’ classroom was like watching a ticking bomb.”

“We were good though, weren’t we?” George grinned. “Fred was best.”

“He was,” Snape agreed.

George just smiled.

Down the table, Molly dabbed her handkerchief to her eye, but Arthur too was smiling.

George, Harry thought, was amazing.

When Hermione and Ron had found that she was expecting twins, everyone had initially tip-toed round George, even though George had just shrugged and said, “These things run in families. I’m surprised it hasn’t happened before now.” But Ron had confided to Harry that they’d seen less of him, that he came into the bar less and seemed to spend more time at his other shops rather than in England.

Then the twins had arrived and George had come round to The Leaky one night to babysit, and never left. It had turned out that his withdrawal had had more to do with the fact that his marriage had fallen apart. No-one had been hugely surprised. George had just up and left, left Angelina the house and no money worries, and asked Ron if he could rent a room at The Leaky for a bit. Somehow, renting a room had turned into George being absorbed into the family, with the twins clambering onto his lap as easily as onto Ron’s. George was as rich as Croesus, and so the whole of the top floor of The Leaky had been converted to family accommodation, with rooms for Fred and Roxanne if they wanted to stay with their father rather than their mother.

Harry found it incredible and fantastic that it all worked so well. Six years ago, Ron and Hermione had been living in their rather sterile, Muggle-style house, with both children away at school all the time and both of them involved in the law, one way or another. Now they lived in a building that had to be five hundred years old, if not more, with tilting floors and nooks and crannies everywhere, in an extended family, with Ron being a landlord and Hermione with her finger in every pie, and they just seemed incredibly, wonderfully happy.

He grinned, just thinking about it. He still had the shop in London, though he leased that out, and just kept the flat upstairs for a London base for himself and the children, but in truth, if he needed to stay in London, he usually stayed up on the top floor of The Leaky too.

Especially as Rachel got on so well with the twins.

He looked at his daughter, sitting on Snape’s lap, and wondered for the hundredth time whether Snape had sneaked a bit of his own essence into that potion.

Although Rachel had been born with light hair, surprising them all, she was now as dark as Harry and Snape were. To begin with, Harry had come to England on his own to visit his daughter, and
by common consent the easiest thing had been for Hannah to visit London and stay with Ron and Hermione at The Leaky. Hannah had found life so tiring that she’d been happy for Harry and Ron and Hermione to look after the baby for the night.

Severus had come with him, one day a year or so on, as he needed to go to Slug and Jiggers. He’d returned from his shopping expedition to find Harry and Hermione in the kitchen, and the three children, and tea was made, and before anyone knew it, Rachel had pulled herself up to standing on a chair and taken two awkward steps over and landed, delighted, with her chubby arms on Severus’ knees and that had been that. She’d obviously decided that he was alright, and somehow Severus had decided that the child was bearable, and now Rachel always made a beeline for him the minute he walked through the door.

To begin with, Hannah had stayed in Durham after having Rachel, once she’d realised what hard work children were. Her step-mother had loved having a baby in the house, but as Rachel had started toddling around, tempers had begun to fray, and Hannah had started looking for a home in London in earnest.

She had surprised them all when a meeting with the estate agent had led to a whirlwind romance, and now Hannah and David had been married for a year, and were as happy as Harry could wish. More to the point, Harry couldn’t fault David as a father, not with Rachel or with Rachel’s baby brother, Jack, who was only a month old.

It was funny how things turned out, Harry thought, watching Severus’ patience with Rachel.

Nanette came and sat next to Harry, smiling at the milling children. “Lily couldn’t come?” she asked.

The girls had remained friends, catching up once again when Lily had returned to England after Beauxbatons, and, much to Harry’s surprise and Hermione’s interest, had asked to study Chemistry, Maths and Physics at a Muggle sixth-form college. She was now studying Computer Science at UCL, and was hoping very much to get a job with George and Hermione and Arthur on their new venture when she graduated.

She wasn’t the only student mixing Muggle and Wizarding studies. Josh Hinch was combining Chemistry with an apprenticeship to David Wallace, who had moved back to England and opened a new apothecary shop.

They all kept a kindly eye on him. He and Roxanne had kept up their friendship, and Harry supposed they should be glad of that.

Who knew what the future would bring?

“Both she and Albus had exams today,” Harry answered Nanette. “Minerva wouldn’t have approved of them missing those for her funeral,” he added, with a slight smile.

“How is Albus’ wife liking India?” she asked.

“Loving it,” Harry grinned. “She’s training in Indian Magics and Defence. Says I should go.”

“Do you want to?” Nanette asked.

“I really don’t want to have to do any more fighting,” Harry said. “I’m sure it’s fascinating, but…”

“You’re happy where you are,” Nanette finished, smiling.
“Yes,” Harry said, looking across at Severus and along the aisle, to where Kingsley was now standing, chatting to Bill Weasley.

“And you?” Harry asked. “All well?” He was pretty certain it was. Nanette glowed with a quiet happiness.

“Very. I’ll always be grateful to you, you know – ” she said, her voice quiet and intense.

“Nonsense,” Harry said. “You really do seem to have worked a miracle there,” his eyes followed hers to where Lucius was now standing near the front of the hall, talking to Scorpius.

“No, I think you did,” she said. “You showed him the man he could be.”

“And you’re holding him to it?” Harry smiled at her.

“I think he enjoys being admired,” her eyes crinkled with amusement.

Harry laughed. “I think we all like that,” he said, and his eyes slid to Kingsley again, looking so strong and male.

“Scorpius needs your help,” she said quietly, her voice serious again. “Please don’t dismiss the Headmaster out of hand.”

Harry looked at her in surprise.

“Being a Healer – I see things,” she shrugged.

Harry sighed. Nanette really had developed into an extraordinary woman. It made him wonder...Hermione was extraordinary, of course, and Severus, and...and he wondered how much having experienced shattering and bizarre life events had led to them being so marvellous. Or, looking at it the other way round, if they’d all had ordinary, boring lives with nothing exceptional happening, no dangers...what sort of people would they all be?

But then, that was wishing for trouble, for the lack of peace that he’d worked so hard to achieve, that he’d wanted for his own children... A tiny part of him wondered if James might be a different man if he’d been fighting...he remembered back to hearing how James had helped Hugo, when Hugo had been trapped, here at Hogwarts by that bloody plant, and it was a glimpse of the sort of man his son was capable of being.

He felt awful for thinking it. It wasn’t as if James was doing anything dire.

He just didn’t seem to have found what he wanted in life.

Harry heaved a breath. James was still young. And safe. And working. He had friends. That was enough for a father to be satisfied with, surely?

It wasn’t as if they weren’t in touch.

It was just, he thought guiltily, easier with Albus.

Even though he didn’t see Albus that often, he knew his middle child was happy and prospering. He and Laura had struggled on with their long distance relationship for over two years, before deciding it was silly: within a couple of months, Laura had handed in her notice, her parents had hosted a lovely wedding for them in their garden just outside Milton Keynes, and then the young couple had had a fortnight touring India before Albus settled back to his studies and Laura started...
some new ones. She’d got a grant from the Ministry too, to fund it, so Harry knew that they’d be returning to England eventually, as part of the conditions of the grant were that she would return and disseminate that knowledge.

Mitty, Dinky and Allie had gone out to look after them, an arrangement that had pleased everyone tremendously. For Albus and Laura, it meant that there were meals on the table when Albus got home after a long shift at the hospital, or Laura after a stressful training session, and the elves were glad to have family to look after once again. Harry had finally sold Grimmauld Place, knowing that the elves as well as his family were settled, because Villa Olorosa was now his home.

The Ministry itself seemed both refreshed and stabilized. With Benningdean in charge, and Filius Stubbington as Head Auror, it felt as if they were in safe hands. The workers at Malfoy Manor – now renamed Phoenix Hall, which Harry rather liked – seemed to approve their workplace, and although there were direct floo connections to London, the local wizarding village had grown substantially.

Ron had opened a second pub there called The Holey Kettle, which did a roaring trade and had rooms as well for visiting dignitaries. To the astonishment of everyone, Molly was now the landlady, and Arthur was a well-loved figure in the bar, when he wasn’t with George and Hermione. Molly had said that the top floor of The Leaky had become the heart of the family, and rightly so, and they had sold The Burrow to a large but impecunious wizarding family, both feeling happy that the house should once again be full of children charging about.

“It had got too quiet for me,” Molly had said. “I know Arthur needs me, but he needs other people to talk to, and so do I, and I like to cook for more than two or three, you know. It feels wrong, putting a couple of chops into a pan and that’s it.”

Hetty had asked Harry if she could look after his little place over the shop, once she was satisfied that the Ministry elves had adequate knowledge of all the idiosyncrasies of Malfoy Manor. She was feeling her age, and it suited them both very well. Harry had made her new quarters there, and it meant that if the children wanted to use the place, it was always ready.

It was surprising how so much had changed, and yet, still…

An elf appeared. “The Headmaster is asking you to come to his study, now, please, Mr Potter, Sir,” she said, bowing low.

“Thanks,” Harry nodded. He looked at Nanette. “So everything is alright with you?” he asked quietly.

“Wonderful,” she nodded. “You need not be concerned for me, you know.”

Harry paused, wondering if he would ever not have a little worry, but just said, “I know. Good,” and with a smile, he got up and headed towards the doors, collecting Hermione on his way.

“So, you going to tell me what this is about?” he asked, as they made their way up a staircase. It had seemed inclined to shift as they’d got on it, but Harry had thrown a thought at the castle, and it had shuddered apologetically and stayed in place.

“I think I’d better let Peter do that,” she said. “But – Harry, education is everything. We wouldn’t be who we are without this place,” she went on earnestly.

“You want me to teach,” he said, bluntly.

“Just listen to what he has to say,” she repeated.
They stepped onto the landing and headed along the corridor towards the entrance to the spiral staircase leading to the Headmaster’s study.

“How’s your work going?” Harry asked, voice neutral.

Hermione’s step faltered. “You don’t approve?” she asked, picking up on his tone at once. “But – Harry –”

He shrugged. “It’s a bit – I worry about it,” he said.

“Harry, you can’t – knowledge is essential.”

“I know, but it can be misused.”

She nodded. “That’s why Arthur is so important.”

Harry looked at her.

“We don’t follow any research programmes that Arthur has expressed concern about. He – he always just knows what’s alright. Moral. So even if George or I or one of the students gets carried away, Arthur sets us back on track.”

“He loves it too,” Harry said, thinking of how much Arthur enjoyed his involvement.

“He’s utterly essential,” Hermione agreed. “Sometimes it takes new researchers a bit of time to realise, but…Arthur doesn’t let that bother him, luckily.”

Harry nodded again. Not long after George had moved into The Leaky, a late night conversation around the kitchen table about Muggle technology and science had led, within months, to George sinking part of his enormous fortune into a research academy; Hermione was his partner and Arthur had been employed from the start. Currently, they had a couple of dozen students, as far as Harry knew, and his own daughter was aiming to be one of them. Ron had told him proudly that they were inundated with applications from students across the world, vying to get in.

Harry had talked about the dangers with Severus and Kingsley only a few nights ago, lying in bed with his head on Kingsley’s chest and Snape’s hand resting on his thigh. And now he did feel – less worried, because Arthur – Hermione was right: Arthur was a moral compass, a man who knew in his heart what was right, and wouldn’t let temptation stop him from saying so.

“Okay,” he said, and smiled. His face fell. “Funny, isn’t it? If Arthur hadn’t had that stroke, he’d probably still be working away at the Ministry, and Molly would be tearing her hair out, bored out of her mind, or taking your kids over.”

“I think I have a lot more respect for her now,” Hermione whispered, bumping his arm as they walked. “I mean, not that I didn’t respect her, but – you know.”

Harry nodded. “Yeah. She was always a bit – powerful.”

Hermione grinned. “I can see why now. I can’t imagine how she managed Fred and George – I mean, she already had Bill and Charlie and Percy. And no house-elf!”

Harry laughed, because there had certainly been a day when Hermione would never have dreamt of saying such a thing.

“...I mean, George is a handful now! And the girls are – well, they’re such hard work, but they’re
“You like working with him though, right?”

“Oh yes! He’s so enthusiastic, and clever, Harry. He sees how to do things straight away, or even if he doesn’t know how to get there, he knows where he wants to go, and makes it happen. It’s amazing working with him.”

Harry watched her. “He’s good with the girls too, isn’t he?”

“Yes. He understands them, better than we can. He’s so patient.”

“You – you don’t think you see too much of him?” Harry said, tentatively, because another thing he’d discussed with his lovers was the interesting household that the top floor of The Leaky had become.

It was amazing, given that he was in a triad himself, how hard it was to ask his friends whether they were in the same, and it wasn’t just because of the incest factor either.

Hermione hit him on the arm. “Not you too!”

“What?” Harry said guiltily.

“I am not sleeping with George! Or having wild threesomes with two Weasleys or orgies when Charlie comes to stay.”

“Er – good?” Harry said sheepishly.

“You wondered! Harry!”

“Well,” he said. “You could have been!”

“That’s incest!”

“Yeah, that was the point that made it a bit tricky to ask,” Harry nodded.

“Honestly!”

“Well, how was I to know! You never stop talking about him!”

“The work is exciting,” Hermione said, with heavy emphasis, “but as for - he’s exhausting.”

Harry snorted a laugh.

“Just because you’re having non-stop rampant sex - ” she said, and stopped short.

A girl and a boy fell out of an alcove, obviously thinking they’d been caught out, shirts being hastily tucked in.

“We – I had a – that is, a spider fell down my – ” the girl began babbling.

Harry looked at the guy, and coughed, his gaze flicking downwards rather obviously.

“Wha - ? Oh!” the boy turned round fast, and the sound of a zip being done up seemed to echo off the castle walls.
“I think you’d better get back to your common rooms, don’t you?” Hermione said firmly.

“Yes, Miss,” the girl said quickly.

They scuttled off. “Was that Harry Potter? And Hermione Weasley?” she was whispering rather too loudly as they went. “They were talking about sex! I always wondered – they camped together for a year, or something, three of them, you know - ”

Harry choked. “Your reputation has been shot for thirty years, from the sound of it,” he giggled.

“You!” Hermione said, hands on her hips, and then they were at the staircase.

Thankfully, the Headmaster seemed to have done away with the password nonsense, and they rode up and knocked on the door.

Inside, Scorpius stood and smiled in welcome, and Peter Brown came forward, first shaking Hermione’s hand, and then Harry’s.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Peter Brown said. “I suppose you’re wondering what this is about?”

“You want me to teach woodwork?” Harry suggested, sitting down in one of the chairs opposite the desk, and hiding a smirk as the nod of agreement on the Headmaster’s face slipped right off it like an avalanche.

“Harry!” Hermione chided.


Scorpius’ eyes were twinkling.

“I realise,” Peter Brown said, and then swallowed, his eyes darting for a moment towards Scorpius, and quickly away, “that you have no need to work for a living, but I hope to prevail upon your… your good nature – ”

Harry looked sharply at Scorpius, who gave his head a quick shake out of the Headmaster’s eyeline.

So, Scorpius was keeping it quiet, then.

Not that it was any business of the Headmaster’s, of course.

The fact that Harry had turned the Malfoy fortune over to Scorpius, and his grandfather’s life, was not of importance to anyone else. It meant that Scorpius hadn’t been flaunting his wealth, either.

Just over a year ago, Nanette had come to see him. She’d sat, neat and pretty, in the kitchen in Spain. Snape was conspicuously in his workshop, and Kingsley at work.

“I think you must know why I am here: I have come to ask you again for Lucius’ hand in marriage.”

“You still want to marry him.”

“Yes, of course. You know he cannot ask me, and I must ask you.”

“You’ve continued to see each other?” Harry said, sipping his coffee, although of course he had known, from his visits to ‘supervise’ Lucius.
“And write, yes, of course.”

“Nanette, forgive me,” Harry said carefully, “have you ever been out with another man?”

She’d sat up a little bit straighter. “It isn’t any of your business, of course, but in fact, oui. Lucius insisted on it.”

“He did?”

“He thinks he is too old for me.”

Harry’d said nothing.

“I know he is much older,” she said quietly and firmly, “and nothing will change that, but he is what I want.”

Harry tapped his fingers on the table. “May I be very personal?”

She rolled her eyes. “You want to ask if we are able to make love?” she asked. “If I am scared of it? I am not scared, and yes, we do.”

Harry had gulped, at the bluntness of her answer, at the thought that maybe Lucius had taken note of what he’d said –

“You’re thinking of his – his difficulty. I have healed him of that.”

Harry’s jaw fell open.

“What? I have been training for three years, Harry,” she said, sounding a little miffed.

“You’ve cured his impotence? That spell –”

“It wasn’t easy,” she agreed. “I made it my final project.”

Harry went from gobsmacked to laughing.

Nanette had joined in. “So,” she said, after they’d both got themselves under control. “What can I do to convince you? Will you now accept my offer to buy him off you?”

“I think you’ve convinced me,” Harry said, thrilled that he wouldn’t have to ask Severus to make the potion to supply Lucius after all.

He’d taken time to think about it, making several visits to Draco and Scorpius, and to Ragnok, and to Hermione for legal advice, before apparating out to the Caribbean to see the couple.

Lucius had been increasing the contents of his vaults almost from the start. He’d used his knowledge of antiques and artwork to become a dealer in both, and was more than successful at it. Harry had made sure that all the deposits made into the vaults since Lucius had been working were recorded separately.

Harry had handed over a vault containing all Malfoy’s earnings.

He had passed ownership of Malfoy himself and all his other holdings to Scorpius.

“I know that you would have preferred it if I had handed him to you, Nanette,” Harry’d said, “but I think this is for the best.”
Nanette had opened her mouth in fury, but Lucius had put his hand on her arm. “I am more than satisfied,” he said. “Harry has been most generous.”

“I told you I didn’t need your money,” Harry said, “and I don’t think you do, either. You’re doing very well for yourself.”

“Yes.”

“I have enough for both of us –” Nanette said.

“It isn’t about money,” Lucius said, looking at Nanette. “Harry’s been making me responsible for myself. No, no, don’t say I always was. There is something particularly enjoyable about money one has earned oneself. I had never known that before.”

She nodded. “I don’t understand why you have given Lucius over to Scorpius, though,” she said. “I did not think I had done anything to earn your distrust,” she looked at Harry reproachfully.

“Again,” Lucius answered first, his eyes going from Harry to Nanette, “I think Harry is being rather romantic. You will always know that what I do is because I care for you, rather than because I want to manipulate you.”

“Oh. Oh! Yes, I see,” she said. She smoothed her hand over her skirt. “I still think you underestimate me then, Harry,” she said, but she was smiling.

Harry had laughed. “It was a huge responsibility.” He looked at Lucius. “I trust Scorpius with it: I hope you do too?”

Lucius looked back at him, and nodded. “Yes. He is a man of honour.”

Harry felt a huge weight lift from his shoulders. “He’s not mad about having the family wealth, to be honest, but he is a man of honour. He’s assuming you will not give him any cause for concern.”

“I will make sure of that,” Nanette said, taking Lucius’ hand.

Harry looked across at Scorpius. So, the Headmaster thought Harry was still stinking rich with the Malfoy fortune, did he, and that Scorpius was scraping by on his teacher’s salary?

He could understand Scorpius wanting people to think that.

“What is it you want?” he asked.

“‘I don’t know how well you know Mr Malfoy,’” Brown said, looking at Scorpius, “‘but I asked him to come and work here. I’d been impressed with how he’d handled the situation when he was fighting to be allowed to visit Andrew, or vice versa, in their rooms, while they were students here: he was always polite but steadfast. I think such qualities are admirable. Consequently, although I am grateful for his excellent services as an Arithmancy teacher, my main purpose in employing him was as a students’ champion, if you like, someone they could turn to for help who would take up their cause. Not just for students of – of differing sexuality,’” the Headmaster said, going a bit red, “‘but as you probably know, since the Beings Equality Law came into force, we’ve expanded the scope of our admissions. In the last two years, two house elves, four goblins and a centaur colt have joined the school.’”

“Wow,” Harry said, “I knew Ragnok’s great-great grandson had come, but – wow. How’s it
going?” he looked from Peter Brown to Scorpius.

“It was inevitable that there would be teething problems,” Brown said.

There was a moment’s silence.

“How can I help?” Harry asked quietly.

“I think part of the problem is that we don’t understand their magic enough.” Brown said, “and to be honest, we need to change our vision. We started off thinking what we could teach them, but I don’t think they are truly going to be accepted until we start showing that they too have much to teach us.”

“That’s interesting,” Harry said, glancing across at Hermione. “I don’t know if the centaurs or the goblins are very keen on sharing.”

“I’m hoping you might be able to convince them, Mr Potter.”

“What? Me?” Harry was gobsmacked.

“To be honest, when you came into the room, what I’d been meaning to ask was for you to teach a wider magic course, for the older pupils, but you know, I don’t think that’s going to be enough. If they want to come to this school, they need to be a part of it properly, sharing their magic too. You and Hermione seem to have more influence that anyone else I know. What do you think?”

“We need to do something soon,” Scorpius added. “I’m trying my best, but part of the problem is that all of our new pupils are having difficulties with one part of the curriculum or another, so the initial wariness, even the positive feelings of those who were willing to give them a chance, is waning, because on the whole, they’re not doing as well as the average student.” He looked at the Headmaster, who nodded in agreement. “What I’d been hoping was that you’d come in and maybe assess what was happening. Because you seem to have a fundamental grasp of magic in the way that most of us don’t.”

“I think that’s a great idea,” Hermione said, speaking at last, “but I also think it would be really good if we had a complete rethink about the curriculum. For example, house elves are amazing at apparition, they do it from childhood, whereas we don’t allow it till much later. If we started teaching it earlier – pupils would be excited by that, but the house elves would be able to excel….”

“It sounds like you need to think about what you want a bit more,” Harry suggested, “but I’d be happy to talk to Ragnok, if that would be any help.”

Harry and Ragnok had developed a firm friendship, and film nights had become a regular feature of their social calendar. It had been one of the easiest and simplest ways to break down barriers that Harry had ever known.

“You should be able to talk to your own Head house-elf? Or if not, I know a pretty amazing older one – Hetty,” he said, looking at Scorpius, “who might be willing to help out. She’s certainly helped me. And as for the centaurs – well, we used to have Firenze teaching here – I don’t know if he’s still about?” he asked delicately. He didn’t know the life-span of a centaur.

“He is, I believe,” Peter Brown said.

“He’s your man to ask, then. Centaur, that is.”

Peter Brown stood up and held out his hand.
Over his shoulder, someone winked at Harry.

“You’ve had the portraits put back,” he said, nodding a hello at Dumbledore. His eyes tracked across. Minerva’s portrait was there, but she was still sleeping.

“Yes. I was a fool to do away with that tradition: they can be helpful,” Peter Brown said.

“Hmm,” Harry said, making the Headmaster open his eyes in surprise.

“You don’t agree?”

“Oh, I’m sure they can be helpful on history,” Harry said, under Dumbledore’s watchful gaze, “but you need to make your own decisions.”

“Oh, quite,” Brown said, obviously confused.

Hermione and Scorpius got up too, and they found themselves heading off together.

“How’s Andy finding living here?” Harry asked, making conversation as they walked along.

“What? Oh, he’s not allowed to – “

“What?” Harry stopped dead.

“We’re not married,” Scorpius said simply.

“But – you would be if you could,” Harry said.

“Yes.”

“I can’t believe you took the job,” Harry said.

Scorpius shrugged. “We both thought it was important, but – you’re right, it is more of a strain than I’d thought. But he’s living in Hogsmeade, so we see each other –”

“No,” Harry said. “It isn’t acceptable.”

“It was amazing that he employed me,” Scorpius said.

“It’s amazing that he’s got you,” Harry pointed out. He looked at Hermione. “How could you let this injustice pass, Mione? It’s outrageous!”

“Non-married couples aren’t allowed to live together in the castle. There’s a straight couple in the same situation -”

“No,” Harry said, “because they have the right to marry, and Scorpius doesn’t. And if he plans on having others here, on staff – well, I know for a fact that the centaurs aren’t monogamous, and I don’t know if they even marry at all. It needs sorting.” He bit his lip, and went over to the wall, putting a hand on it, and feeling.

After a minute or two, he dropped it. “Would you like me to arrange for your door here at Hogwarts to link straight to your house at Hogsmeade?”

Scorpius and Hermione blinked.

“Can you do that?” Scorpius asked.
“The castle’s just agreed to it. I’d need to know where your home is.”

“I can show you – ”

“Yup,” Harry nodded, and took hold of Scorpius’ arm.

Scorpius looked down on it and grinned. “You’re going to apparate us there? Out of Hogwarts?”

“The castle’s waiting to set it up,” Harry said. “You guide, I’ll provide the steam power.”

Hermione stood with her mouth open as they blinked out.

A group of four students came round the corner, laughing and giggling.

“Stop right there!” she commanded, and they ground to a halt.

“We weren’t doing anything!” one said, sounding a bit frightened.

“I know,” Hermione said. “But – ”

Harry and Scorpius reappeared.

“- I was just saving you from being flattened,” she finished.

“You’d better show me your room,” Harry said, “so I can join the door.”

“Did you just apparate?” one of the girls said, awestruck.

“Of course he is apparating,” a squeaky voice said from the back of the group, and Harry realised that one of the pupils was a house-elf.

Harry grinned at her. “Bet you can too, can’t you?”

“It is being forbidden,” the little elf said, blushing.

“Yeah, that’s fair enough,” Harry nodded.

“Run along, everyone,” Scorpius said.

The group rushed on.

Harry grinned as they all heard a couple of them asking the elf-child – “Can you really apparate? How far?” and then groaned when another whispered, “Was Mr Potter cuddling Mr Malfoy? He’s already kissed two men today – ”

“There goes my reputation,” Scorpius held the back of his hand to his forehead, as if he was a delicate maiden, and Harry and Hermione laughed.

“I’ll go check on my horrors,” Hermione nodded at the two of them. “I’m very proud of what you’ve been doing, Scorpius,” she said. “I know you probably don’t feel like you’re winning, but you’re really making a difference, and I’ll speak to the Head about what Harry just mentioned.”

Scorpius nodded, and then he and Harry set off to Scorpius’ chambers.
“Should I be worried?” Kingsley asked, fifteen minutes later, as Harry walked out of the staff quarters and almost bumped into him.

“He’s fixed a door so I can get home!” Scorpius said, full of excitement, then looked at Harry. “We haven’t even got the Head’s permission.”

“Well, I think if the castle allowed it, he’s hardly likely to argue,” Harry said. “But if he doesn’t like it, he needs to let Andy live here with you.”

“I prefer it like this,” Scorpius said. “If anyone comes knocking, I’ll hear them in the house, but I can take them into the study here if they need a chat. Perfect!”

Harry laughed, and Kingsley, standing beside him, was smiling too. Then he looked at Harry. “I wasn’t sure if you had Severus with you.”

“No,” Harry said, frowning, “he was in the Great Hall when I last saw him.”

“He’s been gone an hour, I should think,” Kingsley said. “Any ideas?”

“You checked the Potions classrooms?”

Kingsley nodded.

Harry paled.

“What?”

“I think I know. Come on!” and he started running.

“Are – is everything alright?” Scorpius shouted after them.

“Yes, it’s nothing,” Harry shouted back. “Astronomy Tower,” he whispered to Kingsley.

Severus was indeed there, and had obviously put a charm across the door to deter anyone else from thinking of going up the narrow staircase.

His magic was utterly familiar to Harry, though, and obviously Kingsley felt the same way. They charged up the stairs.

They found him, sitting in the freezing wind, the landscape now just one of lights and stars, night falling early at this time of year.

Harry cast a warming spell around him with the blink of a thought, and startled, Snape looked up.

They sat either side of him.

“He was a bastard,” Harry said, and as both of them jerked in surprise, he explained, “to make you do that.”

Snape’s mouth tightened.

“You know I was there,” Harry said. “He petrified me so I couldn’t help. Under the cloak. I watched it all, and thought you were a murderer.”
“I am a murderer.”

“We all are,” Kingsley said, voice even. “We’ve all taken life.”

“He made me promise to force-feed him this dreadful potion – right before we got back and he made you do that,” Harry said. “He made me torture him, despite his screams. He was an appalling old man.”

Snape barked a whuff of surprise.

“He would have died from that, and he knew it, I’m sure. So much for saving Draco Malfoy’s innocent soul – he was happy to give mine up,” Harry said. “My life. Your life. I just saw his portrait in the Headmaster’s study and I wanted to shout at him. Don’t feel sorrow over it, Severus. He was dying, and he used you.”

“He was my friend,” Severus shrugged. “My saviour.”

“Well,” Kingsley said, “it was typical Albus: he had a nasty situation, but he got everything out of it he could. Quick death or slow death, I know which I’d choose. It was a sign of his trust in you that he asked it of you. I’d trust you to put me out of my misery, if the time came. I know you’d love me enough. He knew you could see all his weaknesses –”

“Weaknesses!” Snape exclaimed.

“Yeah. We only show those to people we truly trust. He showed you his. He respected you tremendously, and knew you had the courage to do what needed doing, even though it would destroy your reputation and your sense of honour. And my arse is freezing up here. Can we go home?”

Snape was still for a moment, and then rose gracefully to his feet.

Harry stepped in front of him. “It’s customary to snog up here,” he said.

“Harry, I don’t th – ” Snape put out a hand to push him away.

Harry slipped a hand onto his chest. “One tiny kiss, a grain of sand in the scale of awful that this place is,” and he leant forward, and just brushed his lips across Snape’s, and stepped away.

Snape’s shoulders relaxed a little.

Kingsley slid a hand into the small of Snape’s back, and turned him towards the stairs.

As they reached the bottom, they found a witch with her wand out, sweeping at Snape’s spell. “Ah. I thought it was too subtle for students,” she said, eyeing them up and down.

“Mrs Banton?” Harry asked.

“Harry Potter,” she nodded. “Professor Snape. Mr Shacklebolt. I wouldn’t mind knowing this spell,” she nodded at the door-way.

Snape gave a slight smirk. “I always rather enjoyed catching the students canoodling at the top.”
“Aye, well that’s all very well for your lanky legs,” she said, glancing at the length of him. “A spell like that would save mine a lot of work.”

“But you’d spoil all their fun,” Kingsley grinned.

“Fun! Have you seen the state of my ankles?” she said, hitching up her robe to display the puffy flesh. “They can find their fun somewhere else,” she grumbled. “And they will. They always do.” Her eyes twinkled for a second, belying her words.

Snape gave her a bow, and with a flourish, he showed her the spell.

“She’s a million times better than Filch ever was, I bet,” Harry said, a couple of minutes later. “Have you been in the loos? They’re sparkling.”

Kingsley laughed, and gave him a sideways bear-hug.

Back in the Great Hall, things were coming to an end.

Hannah’s husband had a very sleepy Rachel nestled on his shoulder.

Harry felt only a twinge of jealousy. Mostly relief, and pleasure, he thought. Rachel was comfortable with David, and he cared for her.

He went up and waved back as she languidly waved her hand at him, and pecked Hannah on the cheek, before they headed off.

Ron had one twin in his arms and George the other, and Hermione was gathering up the bags and clutter that seemed part of the travelling paraphernalia of young children.

“Mione says you’ve been showing off again,” Ron said cheerfully, as they headed en masse towards the floo.

“Just sorting something out for Scorpius,” Harry said. “The castle allowed it, it wasn’t exactly tough.”

“Course it wasn’t,” George shook his head at Harry.

“You know,” Ron said, pressing a kiss to the top of Ellie’s head to calm her as he bent to step into the flames, “I think you were wrong and I was right all those years ago.”

“What about this time?” Harry grinned, leaning down to ask, as Ron ducked under the mantel.

Ron’s voice seemed to boom as it bounced off the chimney. “Sex.”

“What?” Harry squawked, nearly hitting his head, as everyone turned to look.

“And magical strength. Ever since you’ve been at it, and with two lovers to boot,” Ron’s voice echoed, “you can do bloomin’ anything! Don’t think I haven’t pointed it out to Mione!”
Well, dear readers, over half a million words later, we’ve reached the end.

If you've stuck it out this far, thank you! And if you have a moment to spare to write a word or two of your own, I'd love to hear what you think. I welcome all views: constructive criticism will help me write better - and at the moment, anything that will get me writing at all would be a good thing - so don’t hold back!

Philo

Works inspired by this one

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!