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Name: Folie a Deux
Author: Persepolis130
Chapter 1 to 18

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Chapter: 1

Title: Folie à Deux

Author: persepolis130

Rating: R

Pairing(s): AS/S, H/D, others

Disclaimer: If I were JKR, wouldn't I be making money off this?

Warnings: underage sex, het, language

Summary: Scorpius Malfoy wears a permanent invisibility cloak and dreams of growing wings. Al wishes he were half that cool (and has the nail polish to prove it).

Notes: *Folie à deux* is a French term for "shared madness," a rare psychological condition in which one person's delusions are transmitted to another person. (Just to clarify, no one in this story is actually insane- they just act like it!)

CHAPTER 1

They're fighting again, but they think I don't hear. I'm invisible.

You find out a lot of things being invisible. Like why Mummy is always out and where they keep all the Dark Objects they're not supposed to have. Or how Father hates his job and Grandfather says he has to keep doing it anyway.

For the good of the family, he says.

Right now they're fighting about Harry Potter. It's always the same argument, round and round, back and forth. Grandfather doesn't like him. Father likes him too much. I wonder why they don't get bored with it. I am. *So* bored with it.

I go to my room and write, *They're at it again. With any luck, I'll be there before you get this.*

I open my window and whistle for the owl. I'm not supposed to have it in the house. Grandmother says they're filthy creatures. I slide my fingers down the stark white of its feathers and decide I would look beautiful with wings.

I add to the letter, *I never want to grow up*, and watch the owl fly out over the gardens until it becomes a speck in the distance.

I used to like summers. Warm steps by the fountain to read on, and no one to stop me doing it. Sprinkles on the pages when a breeze comes up. It feels lonely now though. Too quiet. I wish I were back at Hogwarts with him, or he were here. If I were an owl, I'd leave right now.

I'm thinking of flying when Father comes in. "Do you think I would look strange with three eyelids?" I ask him.

He stares at me.

"Birds have three eyelids," I tell him. "They cover their eyes with one when they fly. It's transparent. Do you think I would look odd with bird eyes?"

"If you had bird wings, I don't think anyone would notice an extra eyelid or two. If I catch you trying to brew a bird-man potion, though, you're grounded," Father says.

"I'd have to be pretty dim to get caught at it," I say.

He smiles. "How would you like to visit your friend tonight?"

"All night?" I ask. "Or just a quickie?"

I'm not supposed to know these things. His face goes red and he tells me never to use that word in front of my Grandfather.

"I try not to use any words in front of him," I say. "He doesn't like them."

"Behave yourself," he warns.

"Well, or badly?" I ask.

He gets this line between his eyebrows when he frowns. When I talk too much, he presses his finger against it, his left middle one, like he can iron it out. It never works.

"I'll never understand how you can say things like that with such innocence, Scorpius. Sometimes I could swear you don't have a drop of malice in you. Are you sure you're my son?" he asks.

"Not entirely," I tell him. "But they do have tests for these things."

He shakes his head and tells me to be ready in five minutes.

You see? Even when he looks at me, I'm invisible.

Grimmauld Place has house-elf heads on the wall. I stare at them every time I come. Mummy says it's in bad taste, but if I had dead house-elves, I'd definitely put their heads up on the wall. And on St Valentines, hang candy hearts from their noses.

The elf heads disappear when clammy hands cover my eyes. "Guess who?" he says.

"Francois le premier," I tell him, and he laughs. "Cardinal Richelieu. Jacques Cousteau?"

"Why am I French? And Muggle? Those are all Muggles, aren't they?" he asks, pulling his hands away. They leave a wet feeling on my skin.

"You could be Bavarian instead," I offer. "They have those lovely crème deserts. I threw one up when I was seven, and it came out my nose. Am I smeared?"

"Sorry," he says, and tries to fix it by wiping my face with a spitty finger.

"I'll just wash it off," I tell him.

He sits on the edge of the toilet seat as I splash water on my face. "I wish I looked like you. You're the coolest looking person I know," he says.

"I wish your hair understood the concept of a comb," I say, and scrub at my eyes with a flannel. It's a shiny rainbow of colour, like petrol in puddles on the wrong side of the Leaky Cauldron.

He sighs and pulls his fingers through his mess of hair. "Do you think they're really going out for a drink? My dad goes out with Uncle Ron to pubs all the time, but he doesn't brush his teeth first."

"Maybe he has halitosis," I suggest.

"Hali-toe-sis? What's that? Is it like athlete's foot?" he asks.

I dry my face and tell him, "Like athlete's foot of the mouth."

"Gross. Have you ever had athlete's foot?" he asks me. "James did once, it's gross."

"No," I say, "but once I had a lizard."

He blinks. "A lizard?"

I nod. "I found it in the garden. I didn't know what to feed it, so I gave it to the owl. I looked through owl pellets for weeks to get its bones, but I never found them. I did find a baby snake skeleton, but the drawer I put it in ate it."

"Why are you the coolest person I've *ever* met?" he asks.

The way he looks when he smiles makes me want to smile back. I tell him, "Probably because you're the coolest person *I've* ever met."

We're lying on his bed examining wings in an old copy of *Which Owl* when his father comes in. They say he saved the world once, but when I try to imagine it, I get a headache. I can't imagine Al saving the world, and Harry Potter looks just like him but with glasses and grey hair, and a bit fat in the belly.

"I don't know why Father likes to see you naked," I tell him.

"Er," he says.

Al hides his head under a pillow and makes odd noises, but I think he's laughing.

Father comes in and puts his hand on Harry Potter's shoulder. His fingers curl into the fabric of his robes. "We're going out for a while. Behave yourself, Scorpius. *Well*," he adds.

"If you need anything while I'm out, you know how to contact me," Al's father tells him. "Your grandparents are home too, and you know Teddy is always-"

"I'm *fourteen*, Dad, I think I can handle myself in my own house," Al peeks his head out from under his pillow and rolls his eyes. "And anyway, Teddy'd just bring that girlfriend of his, and she's got an arse the size of-"

"Albus Severus!"

He hides his head back under the pillow. "But I hate her," he mumbles.

"Maybe you two should have a night of father/son bonding instead," I suggest. "But don't eat crisps because then Al will end up fat, too. Though I fear he's already doomed."

Harry Potter's mouth hangs open, but no sound comes out.

"You may not arrest my son," Father says. "Let's go. I need a drink. *Merlin*, do I need a drink!"

Al is lying back talking about Quidditch whilst I pencil the lines back in around my eyes. When he talks about Quidditch, he gesticulates. The only people who move their hands around enough when they talk are the French.

"Do you think I'd make an awful Chaser?" he asks.

"I think you'd make an awful Bludger," I tell him.

"Huh," he says, and goes back to the Appleby Arrows. His fingers pull back bow strings.

I have really dreary colouring. Dreadfully pale. Grandfather says it's because I'm always burying my nose in a book, and I should get out more. I don't answer but carry my Muggle Studies text around with me as much as I can. I've learned not to open it at the dinner table unless we're having liver.

"Will you do me now?" Al asks. He props himself up on his elbows and bats his eyelashes.

He's quick because I don't use shadow, just the liner. Thick, masculine lines. I remind him his father won't like if he uses the lipstick. His favourite is carmine, and the colour stains.

"He doesn't like your dad smoking, but *he* still does it," he points out.

"My Father puts out," I say.

He pulls a face and grabs the mirror. He stares into it and squints. "Do you ever, you know… think about it?"

"About putting out? I'm a bit young," I tell him.

"About our *dads*," he clarifies. "Being, you know. Poufs."

"Don't you sit on poufs? Like an ottoman?" I ask. "The boy begging for my lipstick has a problem with poufs?"

"Look, it's not a problem, alright? Why does *everyone* think I have a problem with it? They haven't even told people yet, jeez…" He scowls into the mirror. It's not a good look for him. "Auntie Hermione wants me to talk to a psycho-anatomist. Like I'm traumatised or something. Why would I be traumatised? Like nobody's dad's ever boinked another bloke before."

I hand him the carmine. "Maybe *she's* traumatised and projecting her trauma onto you. You should make *her* see a psycho-anatomist."

"Uncle Ron says you can never make that woman do anything," he answers. "I guess he'd know."

"Oh, stop. You're getting it on your teeth. You're not supposed to *eat* it." I sigh and have him wipe it off.

He closes his eyes, raven streaks across pale skin, and parts his lips. Light from the candles shines off his cheekbones. He looks like an angel waiting to be kissed.

Wishing.

I slide the colour across his lips, like blood welling up from a pinprick. "There," I tell him, and hold up the mirror.

He grins and puckers.

"Looking good, sweetheart!" the mirror proclaims.

"Cool," he says.

My owl is tapping on his window. Al laughs when he reads the letter.

"I don't think growing up will be so bad, really. You get married and have a couple kids, and your wife buys prams and changes the diapers and stuff," he shrugs. "And then she divorces you, and you get to go and sleep with a bunch of different people. Fun, right?"

"Or you can stay married and just have an affair," I offer. "You get tax breaks."

"You get *what?*"

"If you're married, you pay less in taxes. Father told me," I say.

"He hasn't divorced your mum because he gets tax breaks?" he says. His mouth forms a deep red O. "Tell me you're not serious!"

I shake my head. "No, he hasn't divorced her because she's in Spain. She and Grandmother are on holiday."

He says, "They're always on holiday."

I shrug. "They say nothing is certain in life but Quidditch and taxes."

"Not true," he tells me. "The Minister can cancel taxes. He could never cancel Quidditch."

"They'd string him up by his intestines on the goal posts," I agree. "Total evisceration."

Past ten, they still haven't come home yet, so we have the house-elf bring custard. She drinks too

much but does fix lovely desserts.

"Maybe they went to a brothel," Al suggests. He runs his fingertip around the edge of the dish.

"No, an inn. Brothels are where you go when you can't get it for free," I tell him. "And on your seventeenth birthday."

"Do not!" he says.

"Everyone does it," I say, "they just don't talk about it. I only know because I'm invisible."

"Maybe you crazy pureblood lot do it," he says, "but *my* dad sure didn't."

"Because your grandparents were all dead," I say. "It's a tradition, you know. The fathers get pissed and take you down to Knockturn Alley-"

"Lies!" he interjects.

"-and let you pick one out. She gives you hints and things. That way on your wedding night, you know how to do it," I finish.

"I totally don't believe you," he insists. "My dad only goes into Knockturn Alley to confiscate illegal Dark Objects. James went down there once when he was supposed to be buying textbooks, and Dad nearly skinned him."

"Maybe he caught a glimpse of the Ladies of the Night," I offer.

"Ladies of the NIGHT!" he exclaims. He has a mouthful of custard and snorts so hard he starts to choke. His face goes red as his lips.

His straw is red too. The tip of it where he puts his lips. When he's wearing the carmine, he won't use spoons. He coughs, wraps his lips around it, and sucks. The custard is thick, and his cheeks dimple.

"They're probably just getting pissed," I say.

"Probably," he agrees.

He falls asleep on the sofa, drooling on his copy of *Flying with the Canons*. His eyes are a messy smear of liner, but his lips are still perfect. I wait up for Father to get back.

He doesn't.

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Chapter: 2

CHAPTER 2

"I think I'd like to have three eyelids so long as it didn't look odd. Do you think it would look odd?" I ask.

"I think it would only look odd if you had actual bird eyes, considering their lack of binocular vision. No one would be able to tell that you had extra lids unless you closed them," he tells me. "It would probably be advantageous, all things considered. Think of everything you could do if you could close your eyes but still see."

"Like what?" Al asks.

"Like flying," I say. "You close them to keep the wind out of your eyes."

"Or swimming. Of if you were caught in a dust storm, like the ones they have in Egypt. Treacherous, their Ministry should ban them. I think having an extra eyelid is a clever idea." Percy Weasley is the most fantastic adult ever. I knew the first time I met him.

"Or you could just buy some goggles," Al offers. "Wouldn't that be less work?"

"Or, instead of visiting Antarctica, you could just buy one of those snow globes," I retort.

Al frowns and shakes his head. "Don't be a show-off, Score," he mumbles. It's his mother's turn to take him, but she's late. He fidgets and bites his nails.

I like waiting in the Auror Office. Percy is always very busy, and I watch him work. He has long fingers and smart looking glasses and thirteen IN and OUT boxes. And he says I'm clever.

"Wonder what Mum's doing. She's *always* late. She saw a psycho-anatomist once, you know, during the divorce, but he said there's nothing wrong with her. Must be a quack because she's bats," Al says. He uses a low voice because his mother is Percy's baby sister.

"I wish I had a sister," I tell him.

"Really? You can have mine," he offers. "Give her something shiny and pink, and she'll follow you home like a lost puppy."

"I'd better not, then," I say. "Father says I can't have a dog."

He laughs.

"Percy," I say. He lets me call him by his given name.

"Yes?" His brows rise when he looks up from a stack of parchment. His eyes are chocolate brown.

"Do you like dogs?"

Al makes a noise, but I don't look at him.

"I've never had one, but they seem alright," Percy says. "They're supposed to relieve stress, and young people can learn responsibility through training and caring for them."

"Do you think you'll ever get one?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "I'm not home often enough. It wouldn't be fair to the animal."

"You could get two," I tell him, "and they could keep each other company."

"And you could walk them in the park and find a girlfriend," Al offers. "Girls love dogs, you know. Bananas for them. You'd have a super smoking hot one in like, three seconds."

Percy was engaged once, but he called it off. She had two daughters and long brown hair. I wouldn't want a woman like that, either. Pre-owned.

"Thank you very much for the advice, Albus," Percy says, "but I'm sure if I had two dogs, they would only get themselves into trouble. Chew up all of my books and relieve themselves on the floor and such."

I suppose this is why I don't have a sister.

Al's mother has long, ginger hair. I've never seen so much in one place before. I run my fingers through it as she scolds him for the lip colour.

She grabs my hand. Her fingernails hurt my wrist.

"It's not as soft as I thought it would be," I tell her. "Do you dye it?"

She stares at me, and her face turns red. Her lips press into a thin, straight line.

Al wraps his arms around me, and I secret a charcoal pencil into his pocket. I whisper, "If you had three eyelids, you could put it on without poking yourself in the eye. Try doing *that* in goggles."

He laughs like water in our fountains on a summer day.

Grandfather is unhappy. He expected me home last night. Father is irresponsible. He has no one to bawl out, as Harry Potter's door is closed and Percy says, "Terribly sorry, Lucius."

"Maybe you should get a dog, Grandfather," I suggest. "They relieve stress."

He tells me, "Not now, Scorpius," nods to Percy, and takes me home.

Sitting at the head of the table, he looks miles away. Maybe Bavaria. I want to ask if he's ever been, but I don't think he'd appreciate it. He never does.

"I've just received a letter from the Headmaster of Hogwarts, Scorpius." He holds up a piece of parchment. "Have you any idea what he's told me?"

"That would be hard, as I haven't read it," I say.

He clears his throat. "He says he is rather… confused by your aims. You were second in your class once again last year, yet you possess an apparent lack of interest in the classroom bordering upon disrespect. He notes that Professor McGonagall, in particular-"

"That was a valid question. Normal cats *do* lick their arses," I cut across him.

"Do not," he orders, "interrupt me."

"Do not," I reply, "pretend you want me to respect Professor McGonagall."

His face goes blank for a moment. Then he smiles. "Headmaster Ogden says that you have no ambition." It is not a pleasant smile. It never is.

"Ravenclaws don't need ambition," I tell him. "We have books."

This is what he wants to hear, and he nods. "Scorpius, do you know why I came to retrieve you from the Auror's Office today?"

"Yes," I say, as I suspect he wants to hear this as well. Adults always want to think you understand.

"You are a credit to this family, Scorpius. People smile upon those with intellect. Do not allow yourself to be denigrated by such… indiscretions… as those which have befallen your father," he advises.

"Which indiscretions?" I ask. There are a lot to choose from.

He pretends not to notice. "You have heard the stories and know what our family once was, and what it shall be once more. Public opinion is everything to us now. It alone shall determine our

future. You did well in befriending the Potter boy, spitting image of his father that he is, but you must work harder to not upset important people. You never know when such things will come back to haunt you, but I *guarantee* they shall."

"Sometimes important people are really stupid," I tell him.

"Their intelligence is neither here nor there. Use yours to make them think well of you. If you lack respect, or interest, or willingness, feign it," he instructs. "And be sure to never let them think you harbour ill will toward the Mudbloods."

"I only harbour ill will toward those who deserve it," I say.

"Perfect," he says, not understanding what I mean. "Remember this, and consider our situation before you act, Scorpius. Our future is *you*."

Such an easy thing to say in when you're in Bavaria.

I nod and eat lunch in silence.

We're sharing a piece of cake. I don't eat frosting, and he eats nothing but. She's sitting at the bench across from us pulling the tinsel off a noisemaker. Even her freckles look angry.

"It's *my* party, Albus," she says. "You can't bring your weird friends along to other people's parties. You're ruining my birthday!"

"We're just eating cake," he says. "We're not hurting anything."

"You're *embarrassing* me!" she hisses.

"Wow, you're embarrassed by people eating cake? How awkward," he tells her, and forks a bite into his mouth.

"Would it be less embarrassing if we ate something else?" I ask.

Al snorts around his frosting. "Spotted dick?"

"Mint humbugs," I suggest. "Mints could never be awkward."

"Right, they freshen breath," he agrees.

Her freckles look positively incensed. "You two are both mad, do you know that? You have no social barometer, either of you. You're completely abnormal!"

"Funny how you like me fine until you invite friends over, and suddenly I'm anathema," he tells her.

"Funny how you think you can bring *your* friends to *other people's parties*!" She looks over her shoulder, but the friends are with the ginger swarm by the house. "It's not *my* fault Mum didn't think it was a good idea to invite your dad. If he'd just make up with Auntie Ginnie, everything could go back to normal. Why is he friends with *his* dad now, anyway? I thought they hated each other."

"I like that word," I say. "Anathema. Wouldn't that make a pretty name? Anathema Malfoy."

"You really are socially incapable, aren't you?" she demands. "And why in god's name are you wearing *eyeshadow*?"

"You have the most furious freckles I've ever seen," I tell her.

She throws the noisemaker down and storms off. I pick it up and twist a finger into the remaining tassels. Purple makes me look veiny. When I put it to my mouth, it emits a harassed sounding squawk.

I toss it back down onto the table.

"Having a good time, boys?"

I met Al's grandfather earlier today. He's very friendly despite having hardly any hair left on his head. It gives me hope for Father's future.

"Yeah, really good. Score's never been to a birthday party before," Al says.

"Albus? Albus! Oh, there you are! Would you come here, I need some help with the… yes, that's a dear, right this way, bring it toward the..." His grandmother is also friendly, despite being nearly twice as large as his grandfather and three times as loud.

"Is that so? Never been to a birthday party?" his grandfather asks.

I nod. "Grandfather says you love Muggles and thinks you're a disgrace to pureblood Wizards everywhere."

His chin lifts, and he clears his throat. "Does he?" he asks.

"Yes," I say. "My favourite class is Muggle Studies."

He stares for a moment. "Is it?"

"No, it's Divination. But Muggle Studies is my second favourite class," I tell him. "I saw a trolley once. Grandmother scolded me. Do you really collect plugs?"

He has dozens of them in a little shed that smells like rot. He sets them out in a row on a bench. Each is individually wrapped so as not to tangle with the one beside it. I think it's love.

I touch my fingers to the prongs of a slender one with a cream cord.

"And this," he announces, "is an eklectrical outlet!"

He shows me how to fit plugs into it. My cream one slides in and out like butter. I wish Percy didn't have to work all the time. All those IN and OUT boxes bring such responsibility.

Al laughs at us.

"I should've known you'd be here," he says. "Diddling around with other people's plugs. Come on."

He takes me behind the shed and pulls out a little plastic bottle. "Look," he says, and twists off the cap. I run my finger across the ball at the tip, and it comes back shiny pink.

"Where did you get it?" I ask.

"Nicked it off one of the presents," he says. "It's lip gloss, see?"

"Isn't stealing wrong?" I ask.

"Honestly, I think they sort of expect it," he tells me. "And Rose isn't allowed to wear makeup yet, anyway. Uncle Ron would have an aneurism. Put it on me."

I shake my head. "You'll get in trouble."

"But smell it, it smells like candy!" he tells me. "And it's got little bits of sparkles, look! Come on, Score, please? Pleeeeeease?"

"You've got to promise to wipe it off right away," I tell him.

He grins.

It goes on sticky like warm honey. His lips smell like candy. I should've made him put it back.

How readily we compromise our principles for a tube of cheap Muggle lip gloss.

"How does it look?" he wants to know.

"You should've stolen a mirror, too," I tell him.

"Haha," he says, and swipes my compact. He likes it, but the mirror isn't so sure it matches his

colouring. It suggests plum. I'll owl Mummy and have her send one with better taste.

"What are you two doing back here?"

Al swears and wipes his mouth on the sleeve of his robes. "Nothing, Mum! Just talking!"

"What've you got on your face?" she demands.

"Nothing," he says. "Frosting."

She purses her lips and crosses her arms in front of her chest. "I want you both back at the tables in ten seconds. Your cousin is going to open her presents. And we're going to have a little chat tonight about what you don't have on your face, young man."

"Urgh," Al says. He wipes at his mouth and swears again. He has glitter on his chin.

"At least she didn't have an aneurism," I tell him.

"It's so unfair. Not like I'm a *girl* or something. I mean, when my dad was in fourth year, he battled a *dragon*, and I'm not even allowed to wear a little lip colour," he scowls. "Makeup never killed anyone."

"Unless they swallowed it," I agree. "Though it's usually nontoxic."

"How is that fair?" he demands. "It's *not*."

"Maybe if you battled more dragons, they wouldn't notice," I suggest.

He smiles. "I could move in with Uncle Charlie. Except his room is like as big as a closet. And his boots smell like dung."

"Grandmother buys lavender perfume in the South of France," I say.

"Really?" he asks.

"ALBUS POTTER! OUT HERE RIGHT NOW, YOUNG MAN!"

He sighs. "Thank Merlin we're going back to Hogwarts next week. Won't even use my middle name anymore. She's a bloody *harpy*!"

"Do harpies dye their hair?" I ask.

He laughs and asks if I can get him some of that perfume.

I stare at the glitter on his chin all afternoon.

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Chapter: 3

CHAPTER 3

Evan Roberts summons a pillow from across the room. It hits Poppy Parkinson in the head. Professor Flitwick removes the wand that's been glued to Ewan Owens's backside. Rose Weasley is saying, "You'll never get anywhere memorising the theories if you haven't mastered the basic swish and flick. Let's try it now: swish and flick. Swish and…"

I touch up my eye shadow.

In second year, Justin Bradley set off dung bombs in my trunk and flushed my makeup bag down a toilet. Grandfather sent his parents a letter. Something about tickling sleeping dragons and reformed Death Eaters. Justin apologised in tears.

No one's much bothered me since.

Rose doesn't bother me, but she does tell me after class, "You'll never learn to do the spells properly if you don't practice."

"I already know them," I say.

"Then you'll never get any *better*," she says.

"I am better," I tell her.

She says "Hmph!" and leaves me to dinner with Al. We sit at the end of the Hufflepuff table. As his father can put you in Azkaban for life, no one tries to make us leave anymore. Oddballs and lost causes, both. Hufflepuffs are alright.

"Do you think I should've tried out for Quidditch?" he asks.

"I think you should've put more liner under your left eye," I tell him.

"It's just I know I'm not as good as James, and he's not even the best Chaser for Gryffindor. And they *suck*. I probably would've got flattened," he sighs. "Everyone would laugh at a Potter who can't catch a Quaffle. Like they need something else to laugh at me about."

"You're uneven," I tell him. "Come here."

"Do you think I'm a disgrace, Score?" he asks.

"No," I tell him. "But you could try some green shadow if that would help."

I coat his lids as he munches treacle. "I miss Winky's cooking," he says. "Desserts here are rubbish."

"Don't bounce," I warn.

"And I think she gets lonely when I'm not home, you know?" he says. "She's lost without a family, that's why we got her in the first place."

"We should commemorate her and get pissed together," I say. "Completely plastered. All four sheets to the wind. Out to sea, sailing in circles."

He laughs. Emerald sparkles fall to his cheeks. "Should we?"

"We could smuggle in some Firewhiskey from Hogsmeade. No one would notice," I tell him. "Open up, I've got to line them again."

"No one would notice *you* doing it," he tells me. "You're invisible. *I'd* get shipped off to Durmstrang. Have you ever done? Getting drunk, I mean, not going to Durmstrang."

"Mummy lets me drink wine on Christmas," I say. "Beaujolais spins like a Sneakoscope."

"I can't believe you still call her that," he tells me. "*Mummy*. What are you, five?"

"Seven, more or less," I say.

Deep green eyes laugh in silence, lashes spread dark like an artist's brush on skin like canvas. Like he's his own art. My hand pauses.

"I have to marry a blonde," I say.

He shakes his head. "You know, sometimes talking to you is like doing a crosswork puzzle."

"A what?"

"Crosswork. Muggle word game thing, gives you clues and you've got to guess the words," he tells me. "It's like you think around corners. That's so brilliant."

"Malfoys only marry pureblood blondes. I'm vexed," I say.

"Vexed! How did a conversation about Quidditch turn into you getting married?" he asks.

"I could have the ceremony on the Pitch," I offer.

He sighs. "I should've tried out."

Grandmother sends sweets from Turkey, and a letter asking if I've been well. I peel off the wax seal and smooth my thumb over the M. Her script is beautiful and flowing.

"Oh my *god*, is that baklava?" Al asks.

They've been to Ankara and bought some lovely earrings. The house where they're staying is absolutely precious. Mummy wonders if there's anything I want from the Bazaar.

"What's an Ankara, Score?"

They're coming home for a benefit next weekend. Grandfather is so generous, and Wizarding England smiles upon us. Is school going alright? I should write more often, because they love and worry.

"I hope Father serves her the papers," I say. "Who knows when she'll be home again? Then we'd be together all the time."

"You really think so?" he asks.

I nod. "Our fathers won't have to hide anymore, they can tell everyone. Bet I could even move in with you. We'll be like brothers. And sleep in the same room."

"Mmph mumm phmm phmph!" he exclaims. Crumbs spray from his mouth.

"Yes, I'd like that, too," I agree.

My baklava is gone.

I can't concentrate unless the books are organized. If one is out of place, not aligned, bigger on top of smaller, I've got to fix them. A book falls from Al's pile onto his head.

"Ouch," he says. He picks it up off the floor, looks at the title, and tosses it aside. It totters on the edge of the desk, and I have to look away. I straighten my own for good measure.

The top students in each year receive a letter from the Headmaster. Your parents show them around work and brag about how well they've brought you up. Harry Potter didn't like us together until Al got his letter. Now I'm a good influence.

Though he still hates the makeup.

"Why do we have to learn this rubbish, anyway?" he asks. "When are we actually going to use it in real life?"

"Wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure," I tell him.

"But I'm not a *Ravenclaw*. And I've never once seen anything in teacup besides tea!" he insists. "Oh, and one time I had a hair in it. Total grossness."

"Why don't you drop the class?" I ask.

"But it's your *favourite*," he says.

"It's not yours."

He scowls. "Stupid star charts. Saturn should just pick a House and stay there. What's with this constant relocation business, anyway? How do her friends ever find her? She must be lonely. Bet you no one would notice if I made it all up."

"Do it properly, and I'll show you a charm to make your nose hair grow in ringlets," I tell him. He likes charms.

"Er, cool but… why would I want to do that?" he asks.

"Well, you'll never find out if you don't do your homework, now will you?" I say. The Professor calls it tough love. I don't much like The Professor, but Al thinks he's brilliant.

He throws me a look and opens his text.

"And by the way, Saturn is a *he*," I tell him.

He mutters something rude.

He should pick his idols more carefully. I reach behind his back and straighten the misplaced book.

Rose sits on the floor crying. Her tears fall on a biography of Ragnok the Pigeon-Toed. I lean against a shelf and watch the dark paths they make down her cheeks. It's a good place for it; no one cares about the Goblin Wars.

Poppy laughs and curls a finger into her hair. "Obviously I was only using her." She speaks in her library voice. "Such a homely girl, I'm sure doxies nest in her hair. Did she honestly think I wanted to be friends? *Flow charts*, Ewan, that's what a girl wants!"

"Isn't that mean?" Cordelia Dearborn asks. "We're Ravenclaws, not Slytherins."

"In the pursuit of knowledge, anything short of an Unforgivable is fair play," she answers. "Knowledge is power."

"Besides," Ewan says, "she's not really that clever. I mean, she knows a lot, but sometimes it's like the encyclopaedia's open but no one's home, you know? Just the pages blowing in the breeze."

"I still think it's mean," Cordelia murmurs.

"Says the girl who only got nine out of ten on her Transfiguration homework!" hisses Poppy.

Cordelia's face turns the colour of Al's lips when he eats through a straw. She ducks her head and goes back to her Ancient Runes.

I watch her bring her quill from the ink to her page and back again.

She says, "What are *you* looking at, *freak*? Go away." She covers the parchment as though I'd want to cheat off of it.

"You've got number six wrong," I tell her, and go back to Al's star charts.

No one speaks to Rose.

I could, but how would it help? I'm invisible.

James doesn't look like a Chaser now. His voice dropped like a lead broom and hands grew to fit Bridget Capper's breasts. She's a seventh year. She's got them like cantaloupes.

Al's voice squeaks like Ice Mice. "What if he really *was* born in a bin?" he asks. The fourth word is octaves higher than the rest.

"Maybe he was," I say.

"And it doesn't rhyme with *king*, anyway. Does it?" he asks.

"Slant rhyme," I tell him.

He frowns. "Which direction's it slanting in?"

That's why Sly-the-rins all sing-

"Are you two going to sit in the stands all night?" James asks. His Quidditch pads look like misshapen tortoise shells.

"Maybe," Al tells him. "What's it to you?"

"Oh, stop being a git," James says. "I only want to talk for a minute."

I got sick on turtle soup when I was seven. I still can't stomach the smell. It's hard when people keep shoving bowls of it under your nose.

"Do you think having three eyelids would be of benefit to Quidditch players?" I ask.

"Er… sure," he offers.

I ask, "Would you like to try it?"

"I- no. Um, look, Al," he says.

"I don't have anything to say to you," Al tells him. "Why don't you go celebrate with your adoring fans? Oh, right, because you *lost*."

"Oh, grow up, would you!" James shouts. Pointless temper. "I just- tell me what's going on with Dad, okay? I'm worried. I mean, I haven't read anything in the *Prophet* about him, and that's weird. They *always* print rubbish about him. You remember last year about that *curvaceous brunette*…"

"Well, maybe he's just really sneaky about things since then. Who wants their love life plastered all over the front page?" Al tells him. "Or maybe he's not seeing anyone after all."

"I'm not stupid, I know he's seeing someone," James says. "He all but told us as much last year. Why have super awkward conversations about sleeping with someone other than Mum if he's not getting some? I swear to god I'm still scarred from that…"

"Baby. So what do you want *me* to do about it?" Al asks.

"You know who it is. I know you do," James tells him.

"Maybe I don't. Maybe nobody does. Maybe that's why the *Prophet* hasn't printed thirty billion articles on it already," Al offers.

"Maybe you should stop being a total crap brother and just tell me, already," James says.

"Maybe you should stop being a total crap son and spend more time with him, and you'd know," Al says.

"Or maybe," I say, "someone cursed the *Prophet*, and they can't print anything cruel about him anymore."

"Do you think so?" Al asks.

"It makes total sense," I say.

James gives me a turtle look. "You know when you annoy me most, Malfoy? When you *breathe*."

"Shut up, *James*!" Al shouts. "Don't talk to my friend like that!"

"You can't curse a *newspaper*, stupid!" James yells back.

"*You* couldn't," I say.

His face goes redder than his hair, but with more freckles. *Angry* freckles. Such a sad family legacy. "Everything that comes out of that freak's mouth is rubbish! I can't believe you hang out with him! You were always odd, but he's turned you into a total outcast! I mean, just *look* at you! He makes you wear that makeup, and people stare in the halls-"

"He doesn't *make* me do anything, you prick! I like the makeup! I don't have to hide when I'm with Score, this is me, the *real* me! People like *you* always want to change me because you can't see beyond your own fat *ego*!"

James spits. "I should've known better than to treat you like a human being," he says, and storms down the stands and across the Pitch.

Al watches him go. The liner has bled into the creases of his eyes. "*I hope your girlfriend smothers you with her tits!*" he shouts.

James makes a rude gesture.

"Do you think that could happen?" I ask.

"How should I know. I hate him so much. He's such a wanker," he says. His voice breaks *wanker* into six distinct pitches, and he rubs the liner into a smear across his cheek. He kicks the stands so hard the metal sings.

He swears and hops on one foot.

"I'm sorry," I tell him. "I don't know why he doesn't divorce her."

"S'okay," he says. "I mean, it's not okay, but… it's not your fault. Just- what sort of example is he setting for you with all this adultery, anyway? Adults are supposed to do the right thing, that's why they're *adults*. And bloody *hell*, my toe hurts!"

"The Ministry *is* offering really good tax breaks," I inform him.

He snorts. "He'll think *tax breaks* when my dad breaks it off with him. Honestly, he's not *that* good looking. He slouches. And he's sort of high maintenance, too."

I touch my finger to my chin. "It's the pointiness."

"But they like, *adore* each other! Why's your dad pretending he wants your mum still? I mean, could it be that, like… I mean, do you think my dad's bad in bed?" he asks.

"I try not to," I tell him.

He snorts. "No, really. Maybe he's total rubbish at it or something, and your dad wants to get him trained up before he commits. I mean, it'd suck *balls* to spend the rest of your life with someone who was really boring at it."

"Do you think that's why your mother divorced him?" I ask.

He presses his lips together. The gloss has worn off, and he pulls a face. "Great. So my happiness now depends on my dad's sexual prowess. Merlin, that's *depraauwk*-" he clears his throat. "Depressing. Let's go in before I jump off the stands and kill myself."

I agree because there's nowhere I'd go but with him.

They won't take him in Ravenclaw, throw a fit when I try to bring him in. The Slytherins don't mind me spending the night, though. Probably Grandfather bribed their parents. Money can get you in bed with anyone.

Some of them sit and watch us. Nasty looks on green leather chairs. They laugh and whisper behind their hands. Al says they're waiting for us to do something.

"Like what?" I ask.

"Dunno," he says. Shrugs. "Something crazy, or funny, or maybe against the rules so they can report you and get points. They've always thought I'm some sort of Gryffindor spy, anyway."

"Do you need points?" I ask. "I could do something if you want."

He considers. "No. No, I'm good. Not like we're going to win the House Cup anyway. Did you hear what Martha Gudgeon did in the Potions classroom? Frog intestines all over the ceiling! Why is my House full of such idiots?"

"Frog intestines don't seem terribly cunning," I admit.

He sighs. "If only James hadn't been in Gryffindor. Then maybe I'd have had a chance. Though I really don't like *them* either."

"What about Ravenclaw?" I ask.

"No way." He shakes his head. "If I had to answer a riddle every time I needed in, I'd spend half my day in the hallway! And everyone knows to make a decent Hufflepuff, you've got to be really attractive, otherwise you're rubbish. *You* could be in Hufflepuff."

A dark haired girl snorts. "Queer."

"Look, why don't you just *shut up* and mind your own *business*, Claire?" He says. His voice has been steady, but now it wavers. He sounds like a petulant little boy.

Claire erupts into a fit of giggles. The girl beside her makes kissy faces.

He rolls his eyes. "Come on, Score. Let's go to bed."

He sleeps with his head at the foot of the bed, balled up robes for a pillow. Says no one will think anything weird this way. Feet in my face, but I sleep alright.

I wonder what they'd think, anyway.

His voice settles when Rose burns her notes. Their edges blacken, script shrivelling like dying spider legs. I watch as she feeds another page into the flame.

"So I'm going to be first this year, then?" I ask.

She drops the pile onto the floor. "Scorpius! What are you doing up, it- it's nearly four."

"Watching you burn your notes and cry," I tell her. I had a nightmare about Grandmother. She died, and the flesh was rotting off her face. Someone was laughing. A snake twined through her eye sockets.

Rose wipes her cheeks. "They're old. I don't need them anymore."

She gathers the parchment into her lap. Her hands tremble.

"It would be quicker if you just jumped in," I tell her.

She sniffs. "My friends all hate me now. They won't even speak to me. I don't even know what I did wrong…"

"Friends could never hate you," I say.

She stares into the fire and pushes her hair behind her ear. Her nose is red. "Thanks for the lunascope. I didn't say before. It was a really thoughtful present."

"It cost more than your house," I say. Grandfather picked it out.

"You always say the strangest things," she tells me. I wish people wouldn't laugh just after they've cried. It sounds odd.

I tell her, "Al doesn't hate you."

"But he's my *cousin*," she says. "You can't be friends with cousins. They're *family*. That would be cheating. I want to make *real* friends."

"The Minister for Magic's wife is my fourth cousin twice removed," I tell her.

She sighs. "I'm going to bed."

"I could be friends with you," I offer, "but we're related through my Great-Great-Great Aunt Cedrella. Though they did burn her off the tapestry. Also, I'm not sure I have enough makeup. Could we do it on a trial basis?"

She stares.

I say, "Maybe Mondays and Thursdays, and every other Saturday? So it won't upset your study schedule too much."

"Mondays, Thursdays, and… every other Saturday," she repeats.

"Perhaps you'd like to examine the genealogy first?" I ask. "Though the Weasleys are related to everyone, you know." I've never asked anyone to be friends before, but I know Al would want me to. He's the one who asked me. When you're sad, friends make you smile.

But perhaps I shouldn't.

"There's something wrong with you, isn't there?" she says. "I mean, something really wrong with the way your brain processes information or something. It's not normal. You never laugh, the only time you smile is when you're with Albus, and the way you talk is like you don't follow the thread the of conversation. Not to mention the fact that a boy wearing makeup isn't exactly-"

"My Father's never had an aneurism," I say.

She sighs. "You see? That's exactly what I'm talking about. What does your father have to do with anything?"

"Father says I'm artistic," I explain.

It's dark away from the fire, but I think she might be smiling. "Good night, Scorpius," she tells me. "I'll see you later."

I sit and stare into the flames. The embers glow like Grandmother's scorched flesh.

The next day, Rose spends hours in the library rewriting her Charms notes. She doesn't say yes, but she doesn't say no, either.

Al loves the idea of another friend on Monday and Thursday and every other Saturday. Always wanted lots of friends, though he'd never abandon me of course. He talks to her about it. He fears, however, for his carmine.

"Just let me hold onto it, and I'll keep it safe," he pleads.

"Says Aberforth to the goatherd," I tell him.

"Score, pleeeeease…"

"Relationships require sacrifice," I say. "And you *did* already steal her sparkle gloss."

His throat makes a noise like an injured peacock. "I know, but- can't I sacrifice a different colour? *Any* colour, Score, just don't make me share that one. It's my *special* colour. *Pleeeeease!*"

I shake my head and don't tell him I've got him his own tube for Christmas.

He's the only friend I'll ever need.

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Chapter: 4

CHAPTER 4

Being invisible, I can always tell when Grandfather's having old friends to visit. Though it's not that hard; no one else arrives past midnight.

The mirror in the wall above the mantle is as old as the house. They say it was etched using the blood of poisoned Muggles. It speaks Italian. The backing has peeled at the corner, and you can see through from behind the tapestry in the hall.

Grandfather sits drinking with The Professor. Their faces look splotchy, and I scratch at the mercury with my fingernail.

Mad as a hatter, I think. At it again.

"Make no doubt that I love my son, but this is a difficult situation at best," Grandfather is saying. Voices carry, and it's not hard to hear.

"Seems straightforward to me," The Professor replies. "Everything that idiot touches turns to gold, you know it as well as I."

"Ah, but everything he's done until now has been above suspicion! Perfect image and reputation, precious little House-Elf Reform Bill…" Grandfather sneers. "Not to mention half the single women in Wizarding Britain spend their evenings concocting love potions and picking out wedding dresses. Your curse on the *Prophet* will only last so long, and then…"

"The curse will hold, Lucius," The Professor tells him. "As long as a single person on the staff thinks anything malicious of him, they shall remain unable to publish so much as an inference to the Chosen Imbecile or his family beyond basic matters of state. And until the time that such brand of deviance becomes acceptable-"

"Ha!" Grandfather snorts and drains his glass.

"What of Scorpius?" The Professor asks. He pours Grandfather more liquor.

Grandfather tips his head and accepts the glass. "Useless boy. I thought we'd see a change this year, but nothing. Unresponsive as a frightened virgin, with a face just as pretty." The way he says *pretty*, it sounds like a hex. "The best that can be said is that no one could suspect him of anything cruel. I doubt he's capable of the emotion. Or *any* emotion. Shocking that he's to carry on the line."

The Professor nods. "Best to marry him soon in the case he should require… assistance."

"I'm getting old, my friend," Grandfather replies. "I feel it in my bones. Though perhaps you are correct, and a step backward would, indeed, be a step ahead. How shall my family survive without me to pull them from the mire into which they've sunk?"

Does he forget who's sunk them? How much has he had to drink?

I scarcely notice The Professor's absence. He's gone for another bottle. Grandfather shouldn't be stepping anywhere just now, backwards or front. I jump at the feel of the hand on my neck.

"Well well, what have we here?" he asks. "A little spy?"

"I'm of average height and weight for my age," I tell him. I don't much like him. He has eyes like pits and doesn't show his teeth when he smiles. You can't trust a man like that.

His hand takes the back of my robes and pulls me into the sitting room.

"A guest?" Grandfather asks. He's had far too much.

The Professor Summons a chair and throws me into it. He pours me a drink. It is clear as water and smells like vomited wine.

"No thank you," I say.

"This conversation is for *men*," The Professor tells me, "and as you have made yourself part of it, you shall drink like a man."

"Do men allow themselves to be forced in such a way?" I ask.

"*Drink it, Scorpius,*" Grandfather hisses. He composes himself and adds, "It's likely the finest you'll ever taste."

I swallow a mouthful. Clearly not Beaujolais. It tastes like burning.

Grandfather laughs.

The Professor smiles his toothless smile and sips from his own glass. His eyes are hard behind a greasy fall of hair.

I knock back the glass. My eyes water. I don't much like The Professor.

Grandfather laughs as I cough. "Come now, Scorpius, surely you're glad to see The Good Professor. After all, wasn't it your little friend who retrieved him? Brought him out of his lengthy slumber in the Shrieking Shack? *Raised the dead?*"

He knows the story as well as anyone. The Dark Lord's spell on the Death Eaters to preserve them if they fell. The lies it bred to keep others away. How no one came until James stumbled upon him, and The Professor slept on.

I wonder if they'd still call him a hero if they knew the company he kept.

I say, "No, Grandfather, you forget. It was the other one. The Gryffindor. He smells like turtle soup."

"Well, a Potter is a Potter," The Professor says. "Wallowing in the same dung heap, as it were."

"Al has an owl," I say.

He sips his liquor. Seems to enjoy it. "Is that so?"

"When it brings back something nasty from the Forest," I tell him, "he tosses it out."

Glass poised before his lips. "Does he."

I add, "Straight into the bin."

The Professor says nothing.

"What are you going on about, boy?" Grandfather demands.

I mean to answer, *turtle soup*, but my head spins. Too much drink too fast. Don't even know what it was. I may be ill.

The Professor refills my glass. The look he gives me could freeze our fountains in July. I don't much like him. "Are you enjoying your holiday, Scorpius?" he asks.

"No," I tell him. I don't drink.

"A pity," He says.

"Not really."

Grandfather has fallen asleep in his chair. They say people look younger when they sleep, but not Grandfather. His head lolls, and I can see up his nostrils.

"Despite your inference that I am… *something nasty*," The Professor says, "I disagree with your Grandfather's assessment of you. I fear he is being overly harsh."

"I'm sure I don't recall a word he said," I tell him.

"Likely the best course of action," he says. "He's not entirely himself when he drinks."

"Maybe he's never entirely himself," I suggest. "Like saucers. He only brings out as many as he needs to set his teacups on."

A smile touches the man's lips. Wicked. "A nice observation. Percy tells me you have many of these."

My eyes widen. I've forgotten they're friends now. Worked together last year, top secret Auror job. "Did he say anything else about me?"

"He says you are a clever and… handsome young man," The Professor says.

It must be the liquor. My cheeks are warm, and my stomach flips.

"Ah, it seems the apple never falls far from the tree." He laughs. "Not that I suspected otherwise."

I think of trees and apples- Percy's apples- and raise my glass. The liquid burns going down, but I don't mind.

The Professor pours me another, and I drink that too.

This one doesn't burn.

The empty glass, thick at the bottom, feels heavy in my hand. I tell The Professor about three eyelids, and growing wings. I'm my own constellation. I would look beautiful with wings. No idea why I say this.

My head spins, and he asks why I'd need them. Don't I have a broom? Surely I do. Don't I fly with my broom?

Not the same, I tell him. Brooms aren't beautiful.

But am I not beautiful already? he wants to know. Surely I am.

"No, dull." Drab and flat and grey behind the makeup. No beauty. I'm dull.

But he knows a way to fly without a broom, or wings, or anything else. Do I want to know? It's beautiful. He'll teach me. Just come here.

How without wings? Angels have wings. How?

Come here, just so. Sit with me, and I'll tell you. It's secret. Come here.

"Where?" The room twirls, and my head is light as Billywig stings. Where?

Here, don't trip over the table, on my lap, just so. Good, relax, just put your hands there, not scary, is it? Just relax.

His neck is warm against my cheek, my feelings are fuzzy. I think my hands shouldn't be there, but he puts them back. Warm there.

He learned from the Dark Lord to fly. Powerful Dark Magic. Do I want power? People bowing, begging to kiss my feet. Power is beautiful, right?

No, I tell him, power is powerful, beauty is beautiful. Teacups are teacups. I'm invisible.

How invisible? Tell.

People don't see me, they see through me, I do as I like. I know everything.

Clever boy, touch your mouth here, he says. Would you like more to drink? I'll get it for you, anything you want. Clever boy. Isn't alcohol lovely?

"Yes, more," I tell him. Voice strange in my ears. I press my lips to his neck and see Percy's apples, shiny red like Al's lips.

Such a clever boy I am, handsome, clever boy.

His laugh vibrates my tongue.

Grandfather is still asleep. Do I remember? Look. Just over there. Asleep.

The Professor's skin is soft between my teeth.

He asks, "Do you know what blackmail is, Scorpius?"

My tongue is thick in my mouth. My mind reels. I swallow. "Where I tell how you get off on little boys," I say.

His laugh is nails on chalkboards. "Clever boy," he says. "I may have use for you yet."

I want to die. Father says I've got to wait until after breakfast.

"But I want to die *now*," I insist. My eyes are swollen and my throat is dry, and looking at the marmalade makes me want to vomit.

"Let this be a lesson for you," Grandfather says. He hides bloodshot eyes behind his *Prophet*. "Temperance in all things."

That liquor was acid, it burned my insides. "A concept apparently foreign to Bavarians," I say.

"What was that?" he snaps.

I eat my toast dry.

"Your mother and grandmother will be home soon. Aren't you excited? Think of all the fine presents they'll bring," Father tells me. He looks tired but pretends not to be.

"Why can't Al come over?" I ask.

Grandfather clears his throat.

Father sighs. "It's Christmas, Scorpius, we spend this time with our families. Before you know it, you'll be back at school, and you'll see him every day. Why don't you write your friend a letter?"

"What good will that do?" I ask. My stomach hurts something awful. "He still won't be here."

"Well, with the whole family home, you won't have time to miss him," Father assures. "In fact, when you open up what's under the tree, I'm sure you'll forget all about him. Your mother's mentioned a few very rare books that you've been wanting-"

"I don't care. I've eaten. May I go now?" I cut across him. I can taste the liquor in my mouth.

Father stares. "What has gotten into you? I swear I've never seen you act this way in my life!"

"You haven't been watching," I say. And promptly vomit my toast.

Father comes in with a potion and lays his hand on my forehead. I drink, and he pulls his fingers through what's left of his hair.

"This isn't easy for any of us, Scorpius," he says. "I just wish you wouldn't talk about it in front of your grandfather. He only wants what's best for this family, but sometimes I think he doesn't know what that is. You're not like the rest of us. You know that, right?"

"Is adultery supposed to be easy?" I ask.

He lies down beside me. Heavy weight on the bed. "You know how things happened between your mother and I, Scorpius. Everything was a mess after the War, and there was no way to... Sometimes arranged marriages work out, and… sometimes they don't."

"She told me she was in love with you. She was glad it got arranged," I tell him. Mummy used to tell me stories about the wedding. Mounds of flowers and Father so handsome. Dancing like a fairy-tale. Her ring big as a Snitch.

He sighs. "She was just out of Hogwarts, she didn't know what she felt. She was too young, and Grandfather spent a lot of money. And then you came along less than a year later, and…"

"Were you happy?" I ask.

He smiles like rain on a picnic. "I tried to be. I swear to you I tried my hardest, darling. But your mother, she's happy travelling with your grandmother, Scorpius, seeing the world. And I don't want to take that away from her."

"Maybe you already have," I say. "And you just don't know yet."

His teeth press into his bottom lip.

When you're a child, you think your parents can move mountains. Part seas. They never make mistakes, and they love you more than anything. When you get older, you realize they only wish they did.

"Do you love your mother, Scorpius?" he asks.

"Shouldn't I?" I say.

He runs a thumb across my cheek. Smooth and cool. "What if you couldn't see her again? What if she left and never came back? If we divorced, she might not. Divorces aren't friendly, you know. You remember what your friend went through. Though his mother is off her nut of course, raving lunatic if I ever met one, wouldn't know a decent man if she wrote a feature length article on him-"

"She dyes he hair," I say.

"Yes yes, of course she does. Nasty little piece of-"

"Is it about money?" I ask.

"Everything is about money, Scorpius, you know that," he waves it away. "But leave money for Grandfather to deal with. That's what he's best at. I'm talking about *you*. Would it be alright with you to lose her, your Mummy?"

"I'm sure she'll still send cosmetics," I tell him.

He sighs. "Sometimes I think you were born without feelings. Does anything ever faze you?"

I ask, "Father, have you ever blackmailed someone?"

His voice is sharp. "Why? Who's saying I have?"

"No one, Father," I tell him. "I knew you would never."

Slytherins have such uneven courage.

Mummy and Grandmother arrive when I've just awoken. I feel ashamed. I haven't even applied mascara.

Grandmother kisses my forehead, her body straight and proper. She stands next to Grandfather. He doesn't look at her. Mummy dotes enough that someone who doesn't know might think she's glad to be home.

"Oh, come here, darling, I have the most lovely new shade, absolutely the rage in southern Spain, such a glamorous child, you'll look utterly smashing…"

Her fingers are warm under my chin as she glides the powder onto my lids.

"So grown up, Mummy's little baby, such a sweetheart…"

I know she loves me. I know she's sad. I can almost forgive how she pretends I'm a girl.

Though I do look smashing.

That night, Father goes to her room. The moon shines bright off the snow outside her window. I'm invisible in the shadow of the door.

"I'm glad to see you're well," Father says.

"Why would I not be?" Mummy asks.

"That wasn't what I was implying," he says. "I do still care about your wellbeing. I always will."

"Sweet of you, Draco," she tells him. "But I don't recall inviting you into my bedroom."

"I'm still your husband," he tells her. "I *do* care. I don't want to hurt you."

"So you've mentioned," she says.

A moment of silence.

"Astoria-"

"I know what's going on. It's not my concern. I don't want to know about her," she tells him.

"Astoria, it's not what you-"

"I don't want to know. You may still care, Draco, but I don't. I haven't for years. She's not my concern."

"You misunderstand me," Father says.

"And you, me. Do as you like with whomever you like, but keep it to yourself. I won't go through the shame of divorce and have my life ripped from me to satisfy your libidinous whims," Mummy tells him.

He sighs. "I tried, Astoria. I did. With all my heart, I swear to you. I tried to love you."

The silence stretches.

"So you've mentioned," she whispers.

Father doesn't see me as he leaves, but I see him. Hand on his forehead, he slouches back to his

room. Mummy hums *Adeste Fideles* as she readies for sleep.

Happy Christmas, everyone.

TBC

Note: For the sake of clarification (in case I've sent anyone into a panic), Snape is NOT a paedophile. He is a teacher.

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Chapter: 5

CHAPTER 5

Today is Trousers Tuesday. Tradition now for Father. Goes to work dressed as the Muggles do, could pass as one of theirs. Grandfather says it makes us look accommodating. I can't see how; Father sits behind a desk.

His wand is in his jacket pocket beside his tie. He slouches over bacon and eggs, and the end peeks out. He frowns and itches his thigh.

Wool.

The same that he wore the day Al and I met?

I sit in the Auror Office. Percy organises reports, but I don't know he's Percy yet. I only know I like him. Father screams at Harry Potter behind his closed door. He slammed it so hard, the HEAD AUROR plaque went crooked.

"Is that your dad?" the boy beside me asks.

I nod. I know him from Hogwarts, but we've never spoken. Harry Potter's son.

He taps his feet on the linoleum. "What's he so angry about?"

"The ruin his life has fallen into," I tell him.

He says, "Wow. Um, what's ruined about it?"

"He hates his job, and his hairline is receding at alarming rates," I say. "Also, he hasn't got laid in years."

He stares at me.

I reapply my lipstick. Crimson.

"So… you're here because your dad's, like, sexually frustrated?" he asks. "Is he trying to get a law passed against it or something?"

"No, but maybe he should. Harry Potter thinks he's up to something," I tell him.

"Oh. Is he?" he asks.

I shrug. "I just wanted a sandwich."

"You *what*?"

"We were out for lunch, and Father got an owl," I say. "He's being investigated. It's probably Grandfather's fault."

"Sucks," he tells me.

"I *am* very hungry," I answer.

He snorts.

I look pallid in this light. The makeup is a thin disguise. I put the mirror away.

He sighs and stares at the door. "Mum and Dad got divorced yesterday. Like, officially. It's all over the *Prophet*, have you seen? Lily and James went to stay with friends for the day, but there wasn't anyone to pawn me off on. No one wants to be friends with a Slytherin Potter. And he won't let me stay home alone. Which is stupid, that cabinet had hardly even begun to digest me. The marks were gone in, like, days. I've seen you in school before. You're in Ravenclaw, aren't you?"

"You talk a lot," I tell him.

He shrugs. "I'm bored. You're a good listener. What's that thing in your hair?"

"Alice band," I say, and straighten it.

"Your dad doesn't mind you wearing it? And the makeup?" he asks.

"Not much," I tell him.

"Cool," he says.

"Ill-Named Potter and… Mr Malfoy, I presume. Need I remind the pair of you that this is an *office*, and not a Quidditch Pitch? Some of us have better things to do than trade beauty secrets at the top of our voices." It's my first time seeing The Professor. He's newly back from the dead, James exploring the grounds at night, and he looks it. Grandfather said to be polite.

"Maybe some of us should make time," I suggest.

"Watch your tongue, Mr Malfoy," he snaps.

I stick it out so that he can watch it himself. "My compact is in my pocket," I tell him.

He gives me a look like murder.

The boy's mouth hangs open. He leans toward me. "You're mad! Have you got any idea what you just did? That man outsmarted Voldemort himself! He's like, a *god* or something! I'm even *named* after him- Albus *Severus* Potter!"

"Scorpius *Hyperion* Malfoy," I say. "He's a Titan." I extend my hand.

He laughs and shakes it. "You're mad. You can call me Al."

"Score," I tell him.

The Professor is handing Percy file folders. "Have the others sent up post haste," he says. "And schedule the assessment at the place I can't mention in present company. Tuesday afternoon."

"Of course, Professor Snape," Percy tells him. He speaks without looking up. Clever. The nib of his quill scratches across parchment.

"When shall we be rid of these hooligans?" The Professor asks.

"I'm not a hooligan, Professor, I *swear*," Al says. "I'm a *Slytherin*."

The Professor rolls his eyes.

"I'll be taking Albus to my flat over lunch," Percy says. His fingers slide the quill back into its stand. Slender, fluid as the ink. "I presume young Mr Malfoy will leave as soon as his father has finished his discussion with Head Auror Potter."

"When he's yelled himself hoarse, more correctly," The Professor says.

"Of course. Which reminds me," Percy says, "I happen to have come into possession of tickets for the match at Ilkley Moor this weekend. Audrey's promised to take Margaret and Lucille to visit their grandparents- the McLaggen side, they still haven't recovered from their son's death at

the hands of that enchanted hand mixer, terribly tragic- and I was thinking that if you're not otherwise occupied, you might enjoy-"

"How many times must I decline your preposterous invitations before you stop making them?" The Professor demands. "I have no intention of going anywhere with you, be it Quidditch matches, Auror benefits, cauldron exhibitions, or lunches with the Senior Minister Undersecretary of Japan. Do I make myself clear?"

"There's no reason to be upset, I'm only being courteous," Percy says. "Most people in your circumstance would appreciate the offer. A simple *no* would suffice." The quill slips from its stand and lowers to his parchment.

It's true: *no* means *no*.

The Professor draws himself up. His lip curls. "Then as we're exchanging courtesies, let me offer up mine: I do not *date*. But if you are so interested in my company, why not simply proposition me and have done with it?"

Percy splutters. "I- well, I didn't- I would never- I wasn't-" His face turns several different and intriguing colours.

"Father *is* taking a very long time," I announce. "Maybe he's petitioning a law against sexual frustration after all. Would you vote in favour?"

They stare.

Al laughs so hard, I think he may be ill.

Percy excuses himself for a drink of water. The Professor disappears behind a door that disappears after him. He glares at me, Al, and Percy in turn. I decide I don't much like him.

"Do you think that was a yes?" I ask.

"How come I've never met you before? You're so cool," Al says. He wipes his eyes, grinning still. "We should totally hang out."

It would be nice to have a friend. "Alright," I tell him. They'll never allow it.

"Hey, could I try some of that?" he asks. "The, um, lip stuff."

That dimple just below the nose is called the *philtrum*. The ancient Greeks believed it was one of the most erogenous places on the human body. I don't think of this when Father comes out of Harry Potter's office.

"Let's go, Scorpius. I've had enough preposterous bureaucracy today to last a lifetime, and I'm an

hour late from lunch, I'll probably be fired. We can go out some other time for- what in the name of *Merlin* are you doing?" He stops short.

Harry Potter followed him out. He runs into Father, nearly falls over, and swears.

I trace the line of Al's *philtrum* with the point of the lipstick. "Done," I say.

"Dad, can Scorpius come over tonight?" Al asks.

"Not in a million years," Harry Potter says. "What the *hell* are you thinking? Wipe that off your face right now!"

"But Dad!" Al says.

"No buts! Wipe that shit off right now!" He insists. "I can't *believe* you, Malfoy. First I catch you plotting with Snape-"

"He came over for *dinner*, not-"

"-and now your son is putting *lipstick* on-"

"Which is *treacherous and deadly*, I'm sure, Potter! Oh, I bet it's *poisoned Dark Lipstick*, since you seem to think every damned thing my family does is so suspicious-"

"Everything your family does is so completely *unsuspicious* that it couldn't possibly be real! You're wearing bloody *trousers*, for god's sake! I know you're up to something, Malfoy, I just can't prove it yet. But I will!"

"For your information, these are merino wool *Duncan Quinn* trousers, Potter! This suit cost seven hundred Galleons, and if you think I'm slaving away at Gringotts every day to buy rubbish like this when I've got some sort of illegal operations going on behind the scenes, then what's left of your brain is leaking out your arse!"

"This is as good as a soup opera," Al whispers.

"You're not fooling me, Malfoy! I told you in there, and I'll tell anyone who asks- I know you're up to something shady, and I'm going to catch you at it come hell or high water, you bloody squirmy *ferret*!"

"Is that made with chicken broth?" I ask.

"What, is that a threat? Are you *threatening* me now! Got your mind set on finishing what you started sixth year, eh? Going to slice me all the way through this time? You can still see the scar- you *scarred me for life*, Potter!- and I'll never forgive you for-"

"Oh, you'd have done me the same as your sweet aunt and uncle did Neville's parents, and you know it! Don't go all high and might on me now, you were plotting to let *Death Eaters* into the school, and you'd have me crucified for defending myself from your-"

Al sighs. "I can't believe they haven't covered this yet. What were they yelling about for the past hour, anyway?"

"Should I do your eyes whilst we wait?" I ask.

The appearance of the eye pencil ends the argument.

Harry Potter drags Al into his office. His crimson smile shines from under his father's arm. He mimics writing, and his hands form owl wings.

Father pushes me toward the door.

"I'll have you, Draco Malfoy!" Harry Potter shouts. "If it's the last thing I do!"

"I'll be the *best you ever had*, Potter!" screams Father. His body is trembling, and he's red to the tips of-

His hand waves in front of my face.

"Are you listening to me, Scorpius?" he asks.

We're back in our dining room. The Holyhead Harpies' keeper on page three shows her knickers. SCANDAL ON THE PITCH! the headline proclaims.

"Not very clever of her," I say.

"So what do you think about New Years?" Father asks.

"Lovely holiday," I tell him.

He sighs. "What do you think of *going to visit your friend* for New Years?"

"What's the catch?" I ask. Grandfather isn't here, but I know there is one.

He clears his throat. "Well, he's going to have a lot of people there. He, ah, has friends and family, and... not his loony ex-wife, of course, she'd probably torch the place, but… every year, he has this celebration-"

"The Grimmauld New Years *Extravaganza*," I say. "Everyone knows about it. Half the Auror Department is invited. And the Head of the Bulgarian Department for Magical Games and Sports."

"Right, the Extravaganza, Aurors, Bulgarians, exactly," Father says. "He's invited me. As a friend. To, ah, come."

"Might be awkward with all those people around," I say. "Are you having performance anxiety?"

He shakes his head. "No, I- *Scorpius*! Where in *Merlin's name* do you learn these things!"

"I read," I tell him. "Didn't you know?"

His finger irons at the crease between his eyebrows.

"Do you realise you always touch him?" I ask.

He frowns. "What does that mean?" he asks. Reaches into his pocket and pulls out a cigarette. Lights it with his wand. The tip glows orange.

"His shoulder or his sleeve," I say. "You touch his robes. And probably other places as well, but presumably not in public."

He takes a deep drag. He opens his mouth to say something, shakes his head, and takes another. Sighs deeply.

"I can't go, can I?" he says. He flicks the ash onto his plate. "We've been together for how long, I can't even *fucking* go to his stupid *fucking* New Years party."

"But I still get to go, right?" I ask.

He flips his fork onto his plate. It clatters against the china. He tosses the cigarette, still smoking, beside it. "I'm going to work," he says. "Wearing my *fucking* trousers! Stay away from your grandfather or you will regret it. *Forever*. Am I understood?"

"I really think you should petition against sexual frustration!" I call after him.

He swears and slams the door.

Sometimes I wonder which of us is the teenager. I think Father sometimes feels like he's six. I snub out the cigarette next to an uneaten bread crust.

Sometimes I wish I felt that way, too.

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Chapter: 6

CHAPTER 6

Drunk people are really stupid. And stupid drunk people are even worse. A woman with large eyes and live salamanders hanging from her ears holds a goblet of mead but doesn't appear to have drank any.

"The ichimumpkins hide in distilleries," she tells me. "They're small, aquatic creatures. When you drink mead they've lived in, it raises blisters on the tips of your fingers that burst if you scratch yourself. It's best not to drink until you've tested it."

"You're actually quite mad, aren't you?" I ask.

"I'm a naturalist," she says.

"I'm going back under my table now," I tell her.

"Mind the Wrackspurts," she advises. Waves as I go.

"Is she family?" I ask Al.

"Is who family?" he asks. Every time he comes out, drunk people pat his back and congratulate him for vanquishing the Dark Lord. We're safer under the table. I hand him his glass.

"The madwoman," I say.

"Move your foot, it's outside the tablecloth, someone might see," he says. "I still think you should have some. What happened to the four sheets to the wind idea?"

"But the *madwoman*," I say.

"Which madwoman? The one with the chandelier on her head?" he asks.

"No, the one who wears live animals," I tell him.

"Oh, *her*," he says. "Just an old friend of Dad's. She's harmless."

"Don't drink too quickly," I say. "Someone might blackmail you."

He snorts and downs half the glass.

"Where's Percy?" I ask.

He sighs. "I don't see why you like him so much. You always make such a tit of yourself around him. I mean, I guess he's alright, but Uncle Bill's much cooler."

"Percy has smart looking glasses. Bill has half a face," I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. "It's a *war wound*. He got it *battling evil*. Honestly, what's your issue?"

"Haven't you seen Percy, though?" I ask. "Isn't he here? Or has someone overloaded his IN box again?"

"I think you're overly concerned with Uncle Percy's IN box, if you know what I mean," he tells me.

"I don't," I say.

He sighs. "Look, I like Uncle Percy, okay. He's nice, but sometimes he acts like he's got a stick up his, ah, IN box. I used to think Uncle Bill-"

"I protest that analogy," I say. I shouldn't have got him that last glass.

"Fine. Lodge, like, a formal complaint or something, Score," he says. "But haven't you met Uncle Bill's *wife*? Oh my *god*."

"She's foreign," I say.

He stares. "Of all the adjectives for her- a *Veela*- you come up with *foreign*? And Victoire, oh my *god*. She's like the most amazing looking girl I've ever met. I know she's my cousin and all, but she makes my insides feel all jumbled around. I mean, I sometimes even think of her when I… you know."

I look at him until he makes the hand gesture. Alcohol is a strange thing. And I'm not even drinking it.

"Do you think it's wrong?" he asks. "When she's my cousin? I think of her *naked*." Teeth chew at his bottom lip. "Doing things to her."

"There's nothing wrong with thinking," I say. Though my face feels warm.

He clears his throat. "So, do you ever, like, think of things? Or, like, people? When you do it?"

I consider. "I've thought of food," I tell him.

"Like, licking it off someone?" he asks. Blushing.

"Just eating it," I tell him.

"Oh," he says, and looks down at his glass.

I don't think he'll understand about the apples, the shine of their skin, the taste they leave in my mouth after. So I say, "Mostly I just watch my hand. Watch it move. Slick up and down. Dark between my fingers. Listen to it."

His cheeks are red. Face close to mine. He licks his lips. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah, I like that."

It's stuffy under the table. Hot and hard to breathe. Hard to even talk. "Do you need some carmine?" I ask. It comes out a whisper.

He swallows. "Yeah."

His arm brushes mine, and maybe it's not good to think about fruit when you're hiding with a boy under a table.

People laugh by the punch bowl. Someone sings the Hogwarts school song to the tune of an old Celestina Warbeck ballad. Al's breath puffs against my fingers. The carmine trembles.

I press the tip just below his *philtrum*.

Over his shoulder like a nightmare, The Professor's face appears. He makes a noise and pulls me out by the arm.

"Hey!" says Al.

"I need a word with you, Scorpius," The Professor tells me.

I can't break from his grip. "I have to use the bathroom," I say.

"Yes, I can see that. Quickly, and I'll wait," he says.

But the bathroom smells like vomit, and I find I don't need it anymore. The carmine is still in my hand, and I put it away. I check my makeup, but the mirror assures me it looks fine.

"You are quite an intriguing young man," The Professor tells me. He's taken me around a corner where no one will interrupt.

"You searched under tablecloths to tell me that?" I ask.

"I believe your grandfather is wrong about you," he says.

"A lot of people are wrong about a lot of things," I inform him.

His lips do something that pretends to be a smile. "I'm sure a clever boy like you is looking toward the future. I have a proposition of sorts for you." I know it's not a smile because his teeth stay hidden.

"I have a tube of lipstick," I say. "And I still had *that* when I was under the table, too."

"I see that you have come to distrust me, and I regret this," he says. "I have always held your family in high esteem. Might I know why you've come to the conclusion that I mean you ill?"

"Doubtful," I tell him. "May I go now? It's New Years, not Halloween."

He says, "Halloween? By this, I must assume that you are making unkind reference to my physical appearance."

I say, "Yes, why have you physically appeared at Harry Potter's party? Are you a friend? Or does fantasizing about his mother naked for several decades make you somehow family?"

His face contorts, and then he smiles. A real smile. Nasty, but with teeth. His eyes are pits of tar. "Do you know what Legilimency is? It means that when I look deeply into your eyes, I catch glimpses of what you're thinking. You speak thus, yet you feel no hatred toward me; you only wish to be left alone. You are a *delightful* boy, Scorpius. I would be pleased to have you studying under me during holiday."

Studying under me is too easy, but he has a wand, and I don't. "I speak like throwing pebbles into the sea: some words make more ripples than others," I say. "Though with you it's more like tossing waterfowl into an oil spill."

"You feel nothing when you say these things, do you?" That smile stays in place, the real one. "Nothing at all. And you have no fear of me, though you know what I'm capable of. I could destroy you with a thought. Is this stupidity or courage?"

"Are you an evil man, then?" I ask.

His expression changes, but I don't know why, or what into. He says, "Not anymore."

I shrug. "Then what do I have to fear? I'll be going now. Happy New Year, Professor."

Al is gone from the table.

He's not under any of the others. Nor is he in the bathroom or his bedroom. I search the kitchen and think he might be in the closet, but it's James and Bridget snogging. His hand is up her robes.

"Have you seen Al?" I ask.

"Do you *mind*!" she squeals.

Lily is leaned over a puzzle with Hugo. They look like a cheap watercolour portrait, hair painted the came colour.

"Have you seen Al?" I ask. "Or Percy?"

"I haven't seen Al," Lily says, "but I think Uncle Percy is out in the garden. I saw him go out the back with somebody. I tried to say hello, but he's always so busy doing things and going places, half the time you can't even talk to him. Have you noticed that?"

"Maybe," I say.

"It's true," she confirms. "So do you want to help with the puzzle? It's the *Witchteen Magazine* Dream Bedroom. I got it for Christmas, Mum bought it for me. You don't know what it looks like until after you've put it together because it's your *dream*. Hugo's done that whole corner, the one with the pink poufs. Haven't you, Hugo?"

He nods but doesn't say anything. He never does. With family who talk like this, I suppose he hasn't needed to.

"I can't believe Rose stayed home to revise," she continues. "Who misses a party to *revise*? I know she's a Ravenclaw, but aren't parties educational, too? You can't read about drunk people in books. I mean, you *can*, but it's not the same. I mean, have you seen the woman with the chandelier on her head? And that man with the 2-0-2-1 painted across his…"

I don't find Percy. I do find Al. He crouches in the bushes. I squat next to him.

"Your *dad's* here!" he whispers.

I part the branches. They're sitting on a bench together. Harry Potter's lips are on Father's throat.

"Be careful, stay back here. I think that bush is Venomous Tentacula," Al says, voice quiet.

"Do you think he's going to bite him?" I ask.

"Shh!" he tells me.

Looks like vampires. Father tilts his head back. Hands in Harry Potter's hair. Makes me feel itchy. "I don't think that's sanitary."

"Shut *up*!" Al hisses. "I'm trying to watch!"

I turn my back. The night air prickles with cold. I should've put on my cloak. Father makes a noise.

"Bloody *hell*!" says Al.

I wish the bathroom didn't smell like vomit.

"*Boys!* Get back into the house immediately!" I've found Percy, or rather, he's found me. He looks very sophisticated in his dress robes, even with the collar unbuttoned. They match his eyes.

"Hello," I say.

He shushes me and grabs Al's arm.

"Do not spy on your own parents," he says. "It is highly disrespectful."

It's warmer back inside, even if Percy isn't feeling very friendly. "Are you having an unpleasant night?" I ask. "Might I get you a drink?"

"You *know* about them?" Al says. "I thought only Auntie Hermione and Uncle Ron knew!"

"Your father needs his privacy, Albus," Percy tells him. "I don't want to catch you doing this again. And that goes for you as well, Scorpius. Am I clear?"

My name sounds so clever when he says it.

"But how long have you known?" Al says. "Do all the Aurors know? Did he tell you himself? Is he going to-"

"I've known every detail since he switched to men," Percy says. "I'm the *departmental secretary*. Now that's enough, I want you to go check on Winky. Merlin knows you can't trust her around the rum."

"Men. *Men*? Is that plural? Like, more than just Mr Malfoy?" Al asks. "He's been with *men*?"

"*Now*, Albus!" Percy says. He heads back outside.

"Happy New Year, Percy," I tell him.

He locks the door behind him.

"Oh my god," Al says. "My dad's a total slut."

"You already knew that," I say.

"But I didn't know he did it with *men*!" he exclaims. "I thought it was just the women- you know, the one your dad's friends with and the Unspeakable and that Muggle lady and Teddy's girlfriend and those twins!"

"You never told me about twins," I say.

He rolls his eyes. "I did *so*! Those Indian ones who laugh at all the wrong things!"

"I hadn't realised there were two of them," I tell him.

"Oh my god," he says. "Who do you think he slept with? A *man*! Oh, my brain hurts, I shouldn't have drank that last glass. My stomach, too. Is this a nightmare? I think I'm going to have an aneurism."

"Don't do it on the rug," I tell him.

He vomits into the toilet. His fingers clutch the porcelain. He mostly misses the seat. I sit on the edge of the bathtub.

"You might be overreacting," I say.

He coughs and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "I'm puking. I'm barely even *tipsy*, and I'm puking. No wonder you didn't want to drink. I think someone spiked the mead."

"Mead is already spiked," I tell him. "It comes that way."

"Ugh, why didn't you *tell* me? My mouth tastes like stomach lining. I could digest things with my tongue!" He folds himself over the toilet seat like a tragic maiden.

"Father might've been with other men," I say.

He lifts his head.

"Or maybe Mummy is just bitter." I shrug.

He pulls a face when he sees he's put his wrist in vomit. He wipes it on the hand towel. "You know what two men do together, right?"

"When?" I ask.

He spits into the bowl. "In *bed*, you tit, where else? It's different from being with a girl. Its like… dirtier."

"Is that good or bad?" I ask.

"Well, it's good if you're with someone decent. But it's not like you should just whip your pants off for any bloke off the street. It's not like that."

"Why not?" I ask.

He sighs. "Look, I don't know, okay. It just- that's just how it is. I don't make the rules. Maybe you should, like, read some books about it or something, and explain it to me. Then we'd both know."

"Okay," I tell him.

He goes silent, and I think he might be sick again. I pull my shoes across the side of the bathtub, and the soles leave black marks.

"You're a really good friend," he says. "The *best*. I don't want my dad sleeping with somebody else's dad. Just yours. It wouldn't be *right*."

"I'll read some books," I tell him. "I don't want them sending you to a psycho-anatomist. They'll hook eklectricity to your brain and turn you into a plug."

He laughs.

I smile.

"So what did Professor Snape want?" he asks.

A bang on the door: "Excuse me! Some of us have to piss!"

"Excuse me! Some of us *are puking*!" Al shouts.

A pause. "Al?"

He jumps up. "Teddy!"

Teddy Lupin is the plainest person I've ever met, like a smear of brown. Mud on the kitchen floor. But he doesn't need *Scourgify* to clean it.

"Not even midnight, and you're already pissed? Way to go, Al!" he says, and thumps him on the back. "Hey, Scorpius. Long time no see."

"I'm not pissed," says Al, "it was the damned mead. Did you know it comes pre-spiked?"

Teddy laughs. He's done his hair black and his eyes grey. Very handsome. "You're hilarious, you know that?" So unfair.

"You just get here?" Al asks. He punches Teddy in the shoulder.

"Sure, ten minutes ago," he says. "Been waiting for your arse to get out of the bathroom the

whole time. Lara had to try on about fifty different outfits before she found one she liked, and every time she changed, I had to- well, she has on this killer lace bra and panty set, so-"

"Ugh stop, you're breaking my brain!" Al protests. Wrestles Teddy back against the wall.

"Here," Teddy tells him, "give me a right hook- ha! Super Secret Auror Training gets the best of Albus Potter!"

Al laughs, and Teddy pins him to the ground. "Cheater! Arse-face! Trollop!" Al shouts.

"Eh? How do you like that? Philanderer! Lush! Drunk on spiked mead, I'll show you arse-face-" he sits on Al's head.

"Gyaah!" Al shouts.

"Teeeeeddyyyyyy!"

He starts and nearly crushes Al's nose. "Oh, that's the better half calling. Must piss!"

The bathroom door latches. Al grabs my sleeve. "Come on, let's hide, I don't want to see her! He's always touching her in public, and it grosses me out. She's a total skank. I bet she has, like, a ton of SBD's."

"What are those?" I ask.

"They're these things you get when you have sex with bunches of people without protection," he tells me. "They like, turn your junk colours or something, and make you itch. Totally gross."

"Father says always use protection," I agree.

"So does Dad. What do you think it means?" he asks.

"Not sure. I'll research that, too," I tell him. "A Survey of Sex."

He nods. "Cool."

I fill a plate with snacks, and we lock ourselves in his bedroom for the rest of the night. He falls asleep with the sounds of festivities swirling around him. I roll sparkle gloss onto his sleeping lips.

I search out his window for Percy, but maybe he's left. What was he doing in the garden with kissing men, anyway?

I hope he has a Happy New Year.

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Chapter: 7

CHAPTER 7

Father keeps his sex books in the hollow beneath his window seat. I found them when I was eight. I didn't understand, so I put them back. He has new magazines now, on the top.

I thumb through *Witches and Wands: Hard Wood Action!*, but it's just pictures. *Witch Virgin* is the same, as is *Wow! Witches (Volume 3)*. The latter has dog-eared pages and a stain on the cover, though. Inside, naked women do strange things with their fingers. And a butterbeer bottle.

I compare the marked, crinkled pages with the clean, flat ones.

Perhaps you need to be an adult to tell the difference.

Further down, I find *Wonders for the Wizard Willy*. It's pictures also, but has men. You mostly can't see their willies though because of what the witches are doing to them. That's good because the ones you can see make your throat feel tight.

Re-Enchanting Your Witch: Conjure Back the Magic catches my eye because it doesn't start with a W. It's an actual book and has chapters like *Romance for Morons* and *Have You Complimented Her Charms Lately?* Father's used a newspaper advert for a marriage counsellor to mark *Chapter 22: When to Give up All Hope*.

It gets black on my fingertips.

I wipe them on my robes, but they won't quite come clean.

At the bottom of the hollow lies a book the size of a pamphlet. A snitch is stamped on the leather cover. On the title page, I read, *Broom Brothers: Quidditch off the Pitch*.

It's old, and the pages creak as I turn them. Someone has written notes in the margins. Faded ink in an elegant hand. The strategy diagrams make me stare.

If the Score is Unfavourable and your Seeker does not yet Wish to Catch the Snitch, the Chaser may Initiate Manoeuvre 4.7a. as Follows: Grasp your Seeker's Broom near the Tail (diag. f), applying sufficient Pressure to Steady but not Drive him off Course. Your Seeker should Keep the Snitch in Sight, as it may be Difficult to Locate if Lost. Remember: proper Communication is the Key to Success, and the Team Captain should Call all Manoeuvres (cf. pg.23) previous to their-

I shut the book.

Al said it was dirty with men, that you don't do it with just anyone. It doesn't seem dirty to me.

It seems like sport.

I place the books back in their hollow. I hope Father won't notice I've lined up all the spines.

Rose taps her fingers against her Arithmancy text. I stretch my legs across the aisle and rest them on the seat beside her. I wiggle my toes. My socks are new. Al twists and untwists his carmine. I gave it to him today so it wouldn't be confiscated during holiday. Twist: long-short, long-short; in-out, in-out.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Rose says.

"Look, being normal isn't all that great," Al tells her, examining the clean, bevelled edge of the lipstick. He hasn't used it yet. "James is like the most normal person ever, and he's a total berk."

"He's a little preoccupied, is all," Rose says.

Al snorts. "Yeah, right. He wouldn't spit on you to put out *Fiendfyre* if it made him look uncool. All he cares about is Quidditch and being popular."

"That's not true, and you know it," Rose tells him. "He cares a lot about you. Just because he doesn't purposefully do weird things-"

"They're not *weird*, they're *different*. Okay, so maybe they are a little weird. But why should I be like everyone else?" Al asks. "Ever since I was little, all anybody ever said was, *Oh, you look just like your father!* They think because I look like him, I'm going to be like him, and that's rubbish."

"I think you are like him," I say.

He stares.

"You only have egg and sperm as options," I point out.

Rose raises her eyebrows. "What's wrong with being like Uncle Harry? You *do* realise he's basically the most important person in the entire Wizarding world. And Auntie Ginnie is really very sweet when she's not hexing anyone. Honestly, I think it may just be perimenopause. Or Empty Nest Syndrome. She should go on medication, and they could put the whole misunderstanding behind them."

Al rolls his eyes. "Spare me. And Score, even if you do give awesome presents, you are so not on the cool list right now."

"Is there a list?" I say. "Who's on it?"

Al scowls. "No one."

"So tell me what sort of benefits friendship with the two of you will bring," Rose says. "I'm thinking I'll make a catalogue of pros and cons. Or possibly a pie chart."

"Okay, now *she's* on it," Al says. "A friendship pie chart! How cool is that?"

"That's probably relative," I say. "But how are we supposed to talk about my research when she's here?"

He frowns. He twists his carmine down and puts the cap on. Into his pocket.

"What research?" Rose asks.

"Oh, the trolley!" Al says. Throws open the door. "Who wants pumpkin pasties?"

"Don't try to distract me, Albus. What *research*?" Rose asks. She lays her hands on her book like class is about to start.

"Liquorice wand, please," I say.

"It's secret research, Rose," Al tells her. Tosses me a liquorice, and the trolley squeaks its way down the corridor. "You can only know if you're friends with us. And you have to promise to never, *ever* tell anyone. Or we'll hex your tongue out of your mouth."

"You don't know any hexes like that, Albus, and you know it," she says.

"I do," I tell her.

She purses her lips. "Okay. Alright, *fine*, let's be friends. Not like I'm going to alienate my other friends, considering *I don't have any*. Though limiting friendship to certain days is rather silly. What if I'm feeling particularly friendly on a Tuesday afternoon?"

"We need our alone time," I tell her. I bite the end of the wand. If real wands tasted like this, Ollivander's would turn quite a profit.

She rolls her eyes. "Whatever. Now what are you researching? Is it for extra credit?"

"Since you *promise* not to tell anyone," Al says.

"I *do*!" she insists.

"It's sex," I say.

She blinks. "Sex?"

"Sex," I say. "Sex, sex, sex."

Al laughs and says it once more for good measure.

"I- well… where's the point in that?" she says. Her tone is like Grandfather's, but her cheeks are pink. "It's not like you get graded on it!"

"Maybe this is hard for your super scholar mind to comprehend, but sometimes people want to know things for other reasons than getting top marks," Al tells her.

"Albus, people do not *research*," she stresses the word, "sex. They just do it. It's like flying, you know, it's not something you can- god, why are we talking about this?"

Al frowns at his pasties. He has seven in his lap. "Well, that's the thing though, isn't it? Nobody who's done it talks about it. Like, after you've done your cherry, you go mum. And that's total elitist crap. The proletariat deserves to know, Rose!"

"Sometimes I wish you didn't take Muggle Studies," she tells him.

"Father has sex books," I say.

"Wow, really?" Al asks. "What kind?"

"Look, if you two are just going to talk dirty, I'm leaving," Rose says.

"But it's not dirty!" Al insists. "Well, his dad's books probably are, but… anyway, what I'm saying is, I want to be in the know. I don't want to, like, fumble through it for my entire life and get divorced because I suck at it. It's a *life skill*, Rose!"

"People don't get divorced for things like that," Rose says. Pauses. "Do they?"

"They might," he tells her.

"His father never went to Knockturn Alley," I say.

"For what?" she asks.

"Oh honestly, Score, give it up already! Look, it's completely insane. He thinks Dad's going to buy me a hooker when I turn seventeen. Like it's some ancient Wizarding rite or something. Don't listen to him," Al says.

Rose frowns. "Well, I always did think purebloods would have strange and arcane rituals…"

"They *don't*," Al insists.

I shake my head. "You're wrong. I know because I'm invisible."

"Invisible?" she asks.

I explain.

She rolls her eyes. "You're not *invisible*. You just sneak up on people when they don't expect it and catch them saying things."

"Doesn't do much good when they *do* expect it," Al tells her.

"A watched cauldron never boils," I add.

"That makes no sense," she says.

"You've never met Grandfather," I inform her.

Al says, "Look, it's a matter of pride for us, okay? If you can't satisfy your partner, you're not a real man. Also, we don't want to end up with a ton of SUV's like Lara."

"Lara Leigh Lupin," I say. "Absolutely atrocious alliteration."

"I hope Teddy breaks up with her before his bits turn orange," Al says.

Rose clears her throat. "I am going to check on Hugo and Lily. When I get back, I'm going have forgot this conversation ever took place. I advise my *friends* to do the same."

I take another bite of my wand. Her hair sweeps out the door like an auburn storm. She'd be a hit in Egypt. A shame I only have two eyelids.

"So your dad really has sex books?" Al asks.

"Dozens," I tell him. "Hidden in his room. And a Quidditch manual."

Al frowns. "What, naked witches on brooms or something? Like the Holyhead Harpies keeper? Did you see she showed her knickers?"

"No, a strategy guide," I tell him. "Quidditch off the Pitch."

"Oh," he says. "Well… what about the rest?"

I shrug. "Mostly just pictures. And a marriage counsellor advert."

"Whoa," says Al. His eyes go wide. "That's not good."

"It's old. Under a bunch of magazines," I tell him. "They had a fight over holiday."

"Oh. Brilliant, then," he says. "Did you, um. Did you find any, like, man books? Like, blokes diddling each other or anything?"

"Just the Quidditch," I say. "Lots of diagrams. But I'll check back over Easter. Maybe he'll buy more."

"Cool," he says, and opens a pasty. "So tell me about the naked girl stuff. In *graphic detail*."

Half an hour later, he tells me I'm back on the cool list. Though he'll never look at butterbeer the same again.

Al swings his feet out the window of the Owlery. A tawny flies over his head. He leans against the stone and sighs, letter in his hand.

"You're sitting in owl shit," I tell him.

He blinks. "Hey, Score. Didn't see you." Turns back to look out across the grounds.

"Has the Minister cancelled Quidditch?" I ask.

"Not… that I know of," he says. "Why?"

"You look unsettled," I tell him.

He fusses with the letter. Folds and unfolds it. "Unsettled, huh?"

I'm not good at judging what other people think, or how they feel. People don't make much sense, sometimes. They yell when you're wrong, then they ask why you don't yell back. Best not to assume. "Maybe," I say. Though Al would never yell.

"I wish Mum would just *die* already," he tells me.

"Funerals are terribly expensive," I say.

"She wants to like, *steal* me," he says. "They're having a *custody* hearing. Can you believe it? I can't live with her!"

"Seems greedy," I tell him. "She already has the other two."

"Well, technically, she doesn't have any of us," he says. "Dad has full custody, but you know, he's always super busy with his job and stuff, and he didn't know what to do with us. Lily and James wanted to live with Mum, so he just ended up letting them. I used to spend time with her, but I told Dad I didn't want to go anymore. She couldn't make me because she wasn't really supposed to have me anyway."

"So she wants to make you now?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Maybe. I mean, she has to pay Dad, too. Child Support and… Alley Money, they call it. She wrote all those exclusive articles on the last World Cup and made buckets of Galleons, and Dad took a pay cut so he could hire Uncle Percy and Professor Snape. The Wizengamot says you've got to have it all equal after the divorce. She was really angry. She wanted the house."

"It's magically bound to Potter blood," I say. "Even if he died and willed it to her, she couldn't have it whilst a male heir still lives."

"Yeah. How did you know that?" he asks. "Oh right, invisible, forgot for a minute. So yeah, basically Mum got the shaft. I don't think she really wants me, she just wants to make Dad angry. You'd think he was the one who divorced *her*."

"I think he should've done," I tell him. "Father says she has pyromaniacal tendencies."

He snorts. "Yeah. And if I have to live with her… she'd never let me see you. *Ever*. I'd have to… I'd run away."

"Your father could arrest her," I suggest. "She couldn't have custody in Azkaban."

"Dad? Step a toe outside the line? Right," he says.

"Can they take away your children after you've saved the world?" I ask.

He sighs. "That was a long time ago. He's got grey hair now. At his temples, have you seen? You can't be the Boy Who Lived when you've got grey hair. People don't like it."

"We could run away together," I suggest. "To Turkmenistan. Grandmother says they have excellent caviar. You could open a restaurant."

"Yeah, maybe," he says. Stuffs the letter into his pocket. His feet kick against the stone. "Hogwarts looks cool from this high up, doesn't it?" he asks.

"If you fall, you'll have a long time to contemplate the foolishness of sitting on windowsills," I say.

He tells me, "They say if you've got to go, drowning is really pretty painless. Like, dreamy sort

of because your brain loses oxygen."

"Wouldn't it be impossible to compare?" I ask. "You can only die once."

"Dunno," he says. He swings his legs around and slides down onto the floor. Owl pellets by his feet. "It's like, ironic, right? I mean, how the divorce is all Mum's fault, but if she hadn't done it, we wouldn't be friends. I don't know what I'd do without you as a friend."

"Wear less makeup," I tell him.

He snorts. He's not wearing any today. "Honestly, though. You're the best ever. And Dad seems really happy- I saw his picture in the *Prophet* the other day, and he looks like he's even a bit of lost weight."

"I hope so," I tell him.

He sticks out his tongue. Smiles. "Your dad's cool too, I like him. Slytherin and a bit nasty, and I can respect that. And they don't ever seem to get sick of each other, him and Dad. And it's like, them being together is all because of Mum, but I'm still angry at her. It's this ache in my insides. Do you think it'll ever go away?"

"Probably not," I say.

"You know, you're allowed to lie at times like these if it makes me feel better," he tells me. Rolls his eyes.

I shrug. "Father says only lie when you can't get caught."

He sighs, then nods. "Your dad's pretty clever. If they moved in together, would he be my dad too? Step-father or something? Do you think he'd let me call him *Dad*?" he asks.

"*Dad* is low class, you'd have to call him *Father*. And I think he'd have to be divorced first," I say.

"Right, right, one step at a time, I know. But how cool would that be? And then we'd both have, like, a real family. Two parents, everyone in the same house, eating dinner together every night… and maybe we could go camping. I'd really love to go camping."

"Malfoys don't camp," I tell him.

"Look, why don't you just rip *all* my dreams apart, okay?" he asks. "What about hotels? Do Malfoys do hotels?"

I nod. "Really expensive ones."

"Cool," he says. "I bet we could even get room service. And those little mints on our pillows, I love those. And if Lily wises up, we could bring her- she could sleep on the couch or something, and you could do her hair. She could babble to you about nothing all day. Not James though, he's not allowed. No stupid-faced tosspots. He'll have to stay with Mum."

"Maybe your mother should date," I say.

"He'd be eating her stupid mince pies, and we'd be having *Duck Ooh-La-La* or something that's like mouth orgasms. I love this idea. What did you say?"

"Your mother. She should date," I repeat, "and maybe she'd forget to be vindictive for a while."

He pauses. Shakes his head. "Sorry, Score. She's still my Mum, I don't want random guys banging her. Just not on, you know?"

"Maybe they already do," I point out.

"Ugh, stop! That's so sick! Does *your* mum do that?" He makes a face. "Like, wiggle out of her knickers for some bloke she picks up at the pub or something? Or, not the pub, but whatever they have in… where is she now? Turkey?"

"Mummy doesn't wiggle," I say. "It's undignified."

"Bet she does," he tells me. "Bet she's a total whore. Bet she has a secret name, and she puts on strip shows. The men hoot and throw Galleons!"

"Anathema," I say. "She should call herself Anathema."

"No, no," he says. "Something sexy. Like… Sheena. Or… Porsche!"

"That *is* sexy," I agree.

He grins. "Why do you always make me feel better, Score?"

"She has a fake nose ring," I tell him, "and she does belly dances dressed like a Nubian princess." I raise my hands and demonstrate the dance.

He laughs so hard, the owls start scolding him. One of them defecates on his leg.

"That will ruin your robes," I tell him.

When he can talk again, he says, "Your dad's a queer, and your mum does striptease for money! That- ha! That's *awesome*. I mean, I know she really doesn't, but still. *Awesome!* Makes my family seem almost normal."

"I like when you say *ha*," I say.

He stands up. "Come on then, I'm fine now. Completely cured! Let's get to the library, Muggle Studies essay due tomorrow, right? Micro-wives, here we come!"

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Chapter: 8

CHAPTER 8

My Easter is ruined. Al's mouth hangs open as he reads Grandfather's letter. No lipstick because he's hungry, but his eyes look nice. I regard the nearest Hufflepuff until he looks at his corn flakes instead.

"I'm not going," I repeat.

"You're kidding, right?" he says. "This is the chance of a lifetime. Of a- a *dozen* lifetimes!"

"Then you go," I tell him.

He makes a noise in his throat. "You don't want to study with him. Honestly? With the world's foremost expert on Potions, Dark Arts and-"

"He has no teeth," I say.

"Um, I think he does," he tells me.

"Not usually," I say. "You can't trust a man like that."

"You're mad," Al says. "I'd give my left nut to be in your place. And look here, your grandfather says Professor Snape's *seen your potential,* and you *make him proud*. *Proud*, Score, your grandfather's *proud* of you!"

"He shows as few teacups as possible," I say.

"Why do you always have to talk in code?" he asks.

"If you know what it means, it's not code," I tell him.

He sighs. "You have to go. It's only for a week. And he's got, like, a zillion books. Shelves on the back of the *doors*, Score, I've seen them! You're not seriously thinking about missing out on that

much Ravenclaw-y goodness, are you? Rowena is ashamed of you!"

"Rowena Ravenclaw's body has rotted and dissolved into dirt. Dirt is not ashamed," I say.

"Rowena's dirt is. Totally mortified. I think she's going to kick you out of her House," he tells me.

"I know Scouring Charms," I say. "She doesn't stand a chance."

"You're going to miss out," Al says. He smiles like he knows the answer. Ten points for Slytherin. "And not only on the books. You know who's always over at Professor Snape's place, right? They're *friends*. They had dinner with the Senior Minister Undersecretary of *Japan* last month."

I'm reapplying Pearly Pink when I realise. I nearly drop the tube. "Percy!"

Al points. "You got it all over your face, you twonk!"

"Do you think he might take his shoes off?" I ask. Percy's toes would be worth weeks of hell. *Years*.

He snorts and wipes my chin with his sleeve. "You're really hopeless, you know that?" he says. Pearly Pink on his robes.

"What the hell are you doing?" James stands at the end of the table. His Gryffindor red is a parrot in a cage of canaries.

"Does Polly want a cracker?" I ask. I hold out a piece of toast.

"Stop moving," says Al. He grabs my chin. "You're making me smear it worse."

"Al, we need to talk," James says.

"I'm pretty sure we don't," Al tells him.

I wave his hands away and fix the lipstick myself. Too light for Percy. Better to wear crimson for him? Ruby? Scarlet? Carnelian?

"What the *hell* is going on with Dad?" James demands. "Did he make Mum cancel the custody hearing?"

"You talk as though I'm listening to you," Al says. "That's funny."

"I didn't see him for half the Extravaganza, and when I tried his door the morning after, it was *locked*. I know something's up," James insists. "Dad *never* locks his door. I should know, I

walked in on him and Mum once, remember?"

"I remember you breaking my arm once, too, but I don't feel like talking about that either," Al tells him.

"Because you set my hair on fire!" James says.

"You ripped the leg off my Victor Krum action figure!" Al says. "I loved that toy!"

James rolls his eyes. "Oh, would you leave off about that already? I was trying to get him to ride the teakettle like a broom! I was eight! It was an accident!"

Amaranth? Burgundy? Rose?

"Accident my left nut. And how the hell do you know where Dad was for the party anyway, you were in the closet the whole time," Al says.

James hisses. "Don't *say* that so loud! People are going to get the wrong idea!"

What about the Venetian red?

"Get over yourself," Al tells him. "He probably locked his door because he was super hung over and didn't want stupid, noisy people like you coming in. I locked my door, too."

James scowls. "He's not doing something illegal, is he?"

"You know that line they have on the floor at Quality Quidditch Supply?" Al asks. "The one you're supposed to stand behind when another customer's getting rung up, to keep their privacy or whatever? Dad stands behind it when there's *no one else queuing*."

Alizarin? Vermillion? Lovely colours, but will a deep red clash with his hair? When we stand together, will it look awful? "I need a colour wheel," I say. "It's urgent. Meet me in the library." I couldn't live with myself if it looked awful.

"Um, okay," says Al. "So you're going, then? Over holiday?"

"Going where?" asks James. "Is he trying to get you to go someplace with him, Al?"

I tell him, "I forgot. You're not a parrot, you're a turtle. The canaries shall peck out your eyes. Though I do wonder how you talk."

"Out his arse," Al says.

But I don't have time for James's arse, or Rose's funny looks when she joins us near the Muggle Studies stacks.

"What's his problem?" she asks.

Al shrugs. "Dunno. I mentioned Uncle Percy, and he flew into a tizzy. Sometimes I'm not sure where his brain's at."

"Albus, please don't end your sentence in a preposition," she reminds.

No, I can't concern myself with grammar, either. Not even dangling participles, and she's got a very strong opinion on those. I've got to find the proper colour palate, write an essay on the uses of mallowsweet, and study the relative wingspan of eagle owls.

They do have such lovely wings.

I suppose it's natural for Ravenclaws to meet in the library. Months later, and Rose is with us nearly all the time now. She's not like Al, but he likes her, so I don't mind. And it's never my grammar she's correcting, anyway.

"Well I, ahem," Rose says. She lowers her voice. "I wanted to help you both. As we're friends now and, let's face it, no other girl would give you the time of day."

"Wow, that's so sweet of you," Al says.

"Look, about your, er, research," she says, "I wrote to Mum about it."

Al gapes. "You promised you wouldn't tell, Rose!"

She shakes her head. "Shh! Use your library voice! I didn't *tell*. I just wrote that as, you know, a maturing young woman, I had certain questions. About my body and the changes it's going through, and what to expect as I blossom into womanhood."

"Oh my god, you're *blossoming*? Right *now*?" Al squeaks.

She rolls her eyes. "What is wrong with you?"

"Is blossoming painful?" I ask.

She frowns. "Well, my breasts do hurt a little. The book assures that it's temporary, though, as it's the growth of mammary glands that-"

"Please stop talking," Al says. "Just, please."

"You want to know about these things, but when I tell you, you don't want to listen," she accuses.

"Look, I don't want to know the monthly progression of your female bits or whatever," he says.

"I want to know about the actual sexual act and the, like, stuff it involves. Like, how it makes you *feel*, you know? Sex feelings."

"Also, he'd prefer that his penis not fall off," I add.

Al hides his face. "Say that a little louder in the *library*, Score!"

I'm about to when Rose puts her hand on my arm. "Please don't." She turns to Al. "A woman is like a beautiful, delicate flower, and virginity is a precious gift that can only be given once."

"Oh god, here she goes," Al says.

"I like peonies," I say. "Are women like peonies?"

We have peonies in the garden. Grandmother has them cut and put in vases around the Manor. I can stare at them for hours. Pink against white marble is beautiful.

Rose sighs. "Face it, Albus: any man would crawl through one hundred feet of sewer pipe to have sex with a decent looking woman."

"What, so we're crawling through sewage now?" he says. "What the hell!"

"Why would you have sex with a man after he's crawled through a sewer?" I ask. "Is it for fertiliser? Metaphorically speaking?"

"No, it's not for- look. Could you two stop being strange for two seconds?" she asks. "Women have something that men want. And they want it badly enough to do some pretty stupid things. Any woman who values herself isn't going to give it up to him unless he proves he's worthy first."

"Or rich," I say.

"Or really good at Quidditch," Al adds.

"*Worthy*," she insists. "Any girl who sleeps with someone because of something superficial like money or Quidditch skills is… well, she's a *loose woman*, that's what she is!"

"Um, welcome to the twenty-first century," Al says. "We call them *sluts*."

"Did your father sleep with all those women because he lacks self-respect?" I ask Al.

"All what women?" Rose asks.

"Nobody, Rose, don't listen to him, he's crazy. When a man sleeps around, it's because he *can*," Al tells me. "It's macho."

"But he's still a slut," I confirm.

Al shrugs.

"Uncle Harry sleeps around?" Rose says. Her lips purse and brows knit.

"Not anymore," Al says. "Just right after the divorce. He was, like, testing the waters, I think. And maybe a bit lonely."

"That's appalling," Rose says. "It must be a midlife crisis."

"Look, Mum dumped him on his arse, okay. He'd put up with her for a long time, so he had a total right to, like, sow oats," Al tells her.

"Albus, do you even know what these things mean?" Rose asks. "Testing waters and cherries and sowing oats and being macho? Do you understand what STD's-"

"Oh, *that's* what they're called!" Al says. "These Muggle words always confuse me."

Rose sighs. "Your only education in these things has been listening to the older boys talk in the showers, hasn't it?"

Al examines his hands. Bites his thumbnail. Spits it on the floor. "I guess. Not like I'm going to ask *my* Mum for a book. She'd freak."

Rose tuts and shakes her head.

"I could have sex with you," I tell her.

She stares.

"I could check on your blossoms," I clarify.

Al laughs. "Holy *Merlin*, that's a perfect idea! You should totally do it!"

Rose makes a noise. "Absolutely not! How can you even suggest that? That's the most horrid thing I've heard in my entire life!"

"No, I'm serious, you totally should!" he insists. "And it's not like he'd tell anyone- I mean, just me-"

"You have finally lost your mind, haven't you?" she snaps.

I wasn't proposing we do it. I was merely stating a fact. We *could* do it. Not that we should.

Could. As a possibility. Hypothetically speaking.

For the sake of the flowers.

But Al likes the idea, so I let him think I meant it.

He and Rose argue until Madam Pince kicks us out. Rose is beside herself.

"My virginity is a *precious gift*!" she announces. Pokes her finger against my chest.

"So is mine," I say.

She scowls and stalks off, books stuffed under her arm.

"What a bitch," Al says. "You should totally hold out for someone better."

I don't think I'd mind, though. Exchanging gifts with her. Her name may be Rose, but who doesn't like peonies?

Beautiful against the white of your sheets.

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Chapter: 9

CHAPTER 9

The Professor's home is pleasant as a morgue, books lined like bodies on the shelves. Too many to straighten. Dusty. It makes me shiver. He sits me at the table, candles burning above. Drawn draperies make noon look like midnight.

"I may develop eyestrain," I tell him.

"Get all of your cheeky remarks out of your system now," he says. "I won't have them while I work."

I want to ask who *will* have them. But he's like Grandfather: he won't understand. He's stacked a tower of books beside me. A nudge would have it tumbling on my head.

"I cannot read in such chaos," I announce.

He glares at me with tar pit eyes framed by oil slick hair.

"You're quite ugly today," I tell him.

"And you are an ungrateful brat, just like your father," he says, "not to mention the fact that your education is severely lacking. Read chapters one, three, five, and six, and be prepared to give a full summary."

I look at the book he's offering. *Practical Protective Principles*. "I want tea," I tell him.

He slams the book down onto the table. "Read!"

The tome tower totters. The Professor glowers.

"This is not conducive to a learning environment," I say, but open the book.

I flip page after page, The Professor 's gaze on me. Watching every flick of my fingers, lowering of my lids, as my eyes wash the pages. I'm a subject for study. Scorpiology.

An hour passes.

I do hope my makeup hasn't smeared.

"Do you know how your father and Mr Potter first became involved?" His voice cuts the silence.

I turn the page. "Sexually," I reply.

He says, "You told me once that you were invisible. Were you ever invisible inside your father's bedroom?"

"I'm invisible until I make myself seen," I say. I don't look in his eyes. He's mentioned Legilimency. Why would I want to be in Father's bedroom? I know what they're doing in there.

Mostly.

"Then you agree with the two of them being together," he says.

"I agree with moving in with Al," I say. "Harry Potter is a bit fat."

His lips quirk. He schools them back to indifference. Clears his throat. "Do you realise that it was I who got them together?"

"They seem to get together just fine on their own. Frequently," I tell him. "Father's mood is quite improved. I'd say you needn't bother in future."

"Are you being purposefully obtuse?" he asks.

"I don't much like you," I tell him.

He answers, "Without me, you would have no friends, and your father would likely be paying for his nightly affection. You owe me a great service, yet you treat me with the utmost disrespect."

"You got them together out of the goodness of your heart, then," I say.

He laughs. Nasty sound. "Ah, the Malfoy view on benevolence," he says. "And mine as well, as you seem to have guessed. If you must know, the pair of them were driving me insane. If I'd been forced to listen to one more complaint from either of them about the other, I'd have cursed them so thoroughly, they'd never have been able to speak again. Though, of course, the thinking would still have been an issue."

"Thinking *is* an issue," I say. "Have you ever done?"

He leans across the table, face so close I can see his pores. He tilts my head with his fingers on my chin. I look at his nose. "Harry *Potter*," he says the word like spitting, "may have the loudest mind I have ever encountered. His thoughts seep out of it like cat piss, nauseous and unwanted. Your father, on the other hand, hides his thoughts behind a brick wall. I spent months searching for chinks before I found a loose stone."

"Why were you poking around at Father's stones?" I ask.

"Did you hear him complain about Potter?" he asks. "Before the man began so obsequiously shagging his brains out?"

"I hear he does that," I say.

"He said that Potter was ruining his life," he tells me. "That since the Head Auror had put him under investigation, he'd fallen out with his wife, his job was wretched, he had no friends, and his father kept him constantly under his thumb."

"That's not true. All that started years ago," I tell him. "Also, he's losing his hair." I pry at his fingers with mine. I don't like toothless people touching my face. His breath like burnt ham. I'd rather he put my hand in his lap again.

He grasps my jaw so hard his fingernails pinch the skin. No choice but to look into his eyes. Slick vision like algae on rocks. You tumble into the water. "He hadn't realised until Potter pointed it out," he says. "His entire life was a joke, a sham, and he'd never even noticed. Do you want to know what was behind those bricks, what thought your father was so carefully concealing from the world?"

"Your nails are piercing my flesh," I say.

"It was Harry Potter," he murmurs, "obsequiously shagging his brains out. The vision was so clear that I thought at first he'd already done it. But the details on Potter were off. The curve of his hip, the muscle in his thighs, the extra stone of weight his wife nagged about gone from his midsection-"

"How do you know so much about Harry Potter's details?" I ask. I dig my fingernails into his wrist.

"Well now, that is the question, isn't it?" he asks. He releases me, and I rub my chin. Little half moon dents in the skin. "Would you like to know how I see *your* mind, Scorpius?"

"I would like dittany," I tell him. "I scar very easily. Malfoys are delicate."

"You live your life through a curtain. Your world and everyone in it is hazy, remote, disconnected-"

"You live your life behind draperies. Maybe if you opened them, you wouldn't have to burn candles in broad daylight," I tell him. "And your complexion might look healthier."

"It is not myself that I hide," he says.

"I would if I were you. Don't you have any dittany? And I need tea. And your books," I inform him, using Al's word, "*suck*. They're like Inferi, dead and strangling. A library morgue about to topple onto my head. I want to go home."

He throws me a look. "And who would take you there, imbecile? Surely you know your father is at Gringotts, and your grandfather would rather have you with me than anywhere else."

It's true. Blackmail is only useful with an interested audience. I've got a bit part, not even on the playbill. "I'll never like you," I tell him. "No matter whose fathers you fixed up and how often they shag."

"*Like* is optional," he says. "*Respect* is not."

"I didn't put the curtains up," I say, "so it's not my fault you're on the other side of them. Though I do prefer you there."

"And who did put them up, Scorpius?" he asks.

I look down at my hands. The fingers intertwine like threads in cloth. Curtains.

"*Scorpius*," The Professor prompts.

I tell him, "Al is so close, I can feel him through them. He's warm. Percy, too. And sometimes Father, and even Harry Potter. If you press, your fingers push the fabric out. But it's hard to

respect someone through both curtains *and* draperies. You should take them down."

He looks at me for a long moment. Purses his lips. "You," he says, "are giving me a headache. Shut your mouth and read. We shall not speak again until you've finished."

I'm not a slow reader, but I do my best.

When I have to go, I write *Must Piss* and pass it across the table.

The Professor rolls his eyes.

I nearly wet myself at the sight of the bathroom.

It's built into a broom closet in the kitchen. It's anything but a broom closet. It's a larger bathroom than even Grandfather's, with windows in the ceiling and a massive black bathtub. I run my fingers along the rim- granite from the feel- and wonder at the bottles along the wall. Different colours of liquid inside, several warm to the touch.

Strange that one is shampoo.

I uncap each and smell. Some exotic and spicy, others I know: vanilla, almond, strawberry. The last one heated. It glides over my fingertips like oil. The taste matches the scent. Why keep condiments by the tub?

And magazines by the toilet.

I cock my head to read the title, but I think it's Italian. Handsome man on the cover. I relieve myself while staring at it. Best not to touch, of course. Probably cursed. Hexed, at least.

Best to leave it.

Could be dangerous.

I slide a finger across the glossy paper.

Nothing happens.

I pick it up.

It's not so much a magazine as a catalogue. Muggle fashion. New this season, circled in blue ink. Fancy trousers on shiny skinned models. Long legs and tanned flesh.

Men wearing makeup.

I've never seen another man made up before. I want Al here so he can see it, too. Bronzer on

their cheeks, lined eyes deep and- I search for the word- sultry. That's it. Sultry. Eyes pierce you like touches you blush thinking about. Like dreams you've got to *Scourgify* yourself after. Like your stomach clenching, heat pooling, and holding a book in front of you when you leave class.

Thing is on a hair trigger these days.

I put the catalogue back and swallow. Deep breath. Think of Arithmancy. Grandfather's nostrils. The Professor's teeth. His nose.

His draperies.

I look in the mirror as I wash my hands. My makeup is all wrong. I see it now. Hair, too. I've been so foolish. I'm not a girl, and nothing I do will change that.

Was it wrong of me to try?

I wash my face with a bar of olive oil soap. Stare at my reflection in the mirror, soft pink skin and thin lips. Pointy chin. White blond hair I'll probably start to lose before I hit twenty.

It's too much, and I put the makeup back on.

The Professor throws me a look when I return to the table. "Everything taken care of to your… satisfaction?" he asks.

I nod and return to the books.

I pay no attention to what he brings for dinner, but it's not so bad that I can't eat it. I haven't noticed it's night when he says, "We shall continue tomorrow. Your things are in the room upstairs. Go."

Thursday night, I can't sleep. The Professor's got one up on the Ministry Trace, and he's been trying to teach me the Patronus Charm with a Boggart from the attic. Best with Dementors, but works on anything scary. My memory's not happy enough. Grandmother stands with her hands bloody and tells me everything is my fault. Once, she touches me, and The Professor has to *riddikulus* her under the sofa.

I'm not sure the blood will ever come off.

I think I'll have some milk, and I go down to the kitchen. The Professor's door is closed, but he's not here. With a nose like that, I'd hear snoring. I knock to be sure. Perhaps he's visiting Grandfather.

The house has six hidden rooms. Maybe more, but from knocking on walls and feeling under rugs, I find six. You must need magic to open them because they won't budge. The desk has a hidden compartment in the bottom drawer. I do get that open. Old, dusty magazines inside.

Muggle magazines.

Naked girls with bad hair.

I flip through the pages. More slender than Father's girls. None of their bits shaved. Fingers in their mouths. One lies over the front of an automobile. Another has wheels on her boots. Article on role-playing: *Ever fancied a naughty nurse?* it asks.

Most educational thing I've read all week. Who knew they sold such costumes? Al might want one.

Though I'm not sure what a "nurse" is.

I go to put the books back and see a notch in the bottom of the drawer. Another hidden compartment? I try to work my finger into it, then the end of a quill, but it doesn't open. Perhaps a wand would work, but I can't chance it. The magazines are a decoy. I'll have to wait until I turn seventeen.

I awake on the sofa the next morning. The draperies are pulled back an inch apiece, and the sun lights the dust particles in the air. Percy holds out a teacup.

"Good morning, Scorpius," he says. "Have you been enjoying your time with Professor Snape?"

I smile. "Good morning, Percy." Thank Merlin I put the makeup back on. Even the wrong makeup is better than no makeup at all. And the lipstick *is* neutral.

Percy looks very handsome, though his shoes are still on. Black with a buckle on the side. "I like your shoes," I tell him.

He smiles. "Why, thank you. That's very kind. Don't you want the tea?" he asks.

I forgot he was holding it. I don't like sugar in my tea, but if Percy put it there, it's fine. Percy can put anything anywhere he likes.

He runs his fingers along a bookshelf and sighs at the dust. "Man can outsmart You-Know-Who, and he can't manage to keep his own home clean," he says.

"I heard that," The Professor says. He's in the kitchen.

"I keep telling him to redo the place," Percy tells me. "Wouldn't it just look sharp with black shelves and alabaster accents? And the floors in marble, a sort of triangle pattern, would definitely open it up, not to mention keep things cool in the summer. I'm sure you've seen the bathroom, and that looks lovely-"

"A toilet and wash tub served just fine before," The Professor says.

Percy sighs.

It all makes sense now. "Are those your magazines?" I ask.

"Oh, did you see those?" he asks. "It's where my shoes came from, actually. Of course they're specially made, I had to travel to Rome to get them-"

"I wish *I* had shoes from Rome," I tell him.

He smiles. "Here, let's get the catalogue, and I'll show them to you. They're a bit on the expensive side for a teenager, but-"

"Grandfather's the richest man in Britain," I tell him. "He could buy and sell you five times over."

The Professor snorts. "I'd like to see him try."

"I'd like to see you *stop yelling from the other room*," Percy says.

"I am not yelling. However, this is my home, and if I so choose, I shall yell *whenever I please*!" The Professor yells back. A sound like folding newspaper.

Percy rolls his eyes.

The shoe magazine isn't the one I looked at earlier, but it's still clever. It has those same men, or at least ones like them, made up into sultriness with a bit of powder and cream. Eyes like sex. One of them has Al's hair.

Percy says I can keep it. Last season's styles, he was going to bin it.

I tell Percy they should have more ginger models.

The Professor yells for me to stop dawdling. He sits me down with another Charms book.

Percy reclines by the window on a stained settee. The sun shines through the crack in the draperies onto the book in his lap. Across his cheek and the corner of his mouth. On the bow of his glasses, his hair when he tilts his head.

I smile and don't pay much attention to what I'm reading.

Percy smokes.

I had no idea. He pulls out a pack and taps it on his thigh. Holds a cigarette between two long fingers. Lights it with his wand. Cheeks hollowed, tip an angry red.

Smoke from his lips.

I swallow. Try to find my place again, but the pages fan under my fingers. The book shuts with a thump.

Percy makes to hide the cigarette behind him. He sighs. "I've been trying to quit."

The Professor coughs.

"Yes, well, *cut down*," Percy amends.

"Father smokes, too," I tell him. "He's been trying to do it more often."

"It's a wretched, filthy habit," he says. Waves the cigarette about. "Don't start because you'll never be able to stop afterward, Scorpius. Horrid addiction."

I nod, but it seems quite nice.

The Professor swoops across the room. Looms over Percy. "You," he announces, "have got ash on *my book*!"

Percy makes a noise and brushes at the page. "There, it's fine. No harm done."

"That is the 1891 *first edition*, signed by the author! Have you any *idea* how much that book *cost*?" The Professor demands. He Vanishes Percy's cigarette.

Percy raises his chin. Gleam in his eyes. "Well, more than my cigarette, I should hope!" he proclaims, and lights another.

The Professor glares.

Percy takes a long drag and blows smoke in his face.

The Professor clears his throat and swoops away.

Percy smiles at me.

I smile back.

He brings the cigarette to his mouth again. Soft pink lips around the slender white cylinder. I wonder what it would feel like.

Lips part. Smoke drifting out and over his *philtrum*. The Greeks were right: being a cigarette would be so lovely.

I swallow.

He takes another drag.

"Professor," I say, "I need to use the bathroom."

"Go, go!" he shouts. "Merlin's *sake*, how did any of us make it past fifteen?"

I wonder that too, sometimes.

Even when Winky's sober, Grimmauld Place smells a bit. Musty, like old things. Maybe it's in the walls, or the carpets, or the ugly paintings they still can't get down that pitch a fit when you walk past.

Father drops me off for the Express. He smells like Grimmauld Place and cigarette smoke.

"Did you have a nice time with Professor Snape?" he asks.

"Not really," I tell him.

He sighs. "Well, did you learn something, at least?"

I shrug. I don't think he'd approve of costuming articles and sultry eyes. Percy's magazine in my school bag.

"It's an honour to have him instruct you. He's a great man, Scorpius. One of the bravest you'll ever meet," he tells me. "You wouldn't exist if not for him."

"He's got a Patronus like a deer," I tell him.

He blinks. "A Patronus? What would he need a Patronus for? He showed it to you?"

"A doe," I say. "Very pretty. When are you divorcing Mummy?"

"Clever segue, but we are not talking about this right now, Scorpius," he says.

"Seems like we are," I say.

"You're mistaken," he tells me. "Now, behave yourself."

I ask, "Behave myself *well*, or-"

"Enough. We're not talking about it. End of conversation." His lips press together.

"Are you still sleeping with her?" I ask.

"*Scorpius!*" His face is so red, it's nearly purple.

I raise my chin. "When I turn seventeen, I'm going to run away with Al to Turkmenistan and make my living as a sturgeon fisherman," I tell him. "When I'm a famous exporter of caviar and he has his face on napkins, then you'll be sorry you yelled."

Father groans. "Scorpius," he says, "you would try the patience of a *saint*." Pressing that finger between his brows, he shakes his head and checks the time.

Invisible, I sneak my hand into his pocket and close my fingers around his carton of Benson & Hedges.

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Chapter: 10

CHAPTER 10

Al tilts his chin and throws the boa over one shoulder, puts a hand to his hip and poses for the mirror. The negligee hangs off one shoulder. Cigarette in his fingers.

Moaning Myrtle shrieks with laughter.

"I like it," I say.

He grins. "Look like a fucking *star*, don't I?"

I nod. Hold my cigarette by my side but don't smoke it. Percy said not to, and besides, it tastes like rubbish.

Al takes a drag of his. Only coughs a little. Carmine where his lips touched.

The red of the boa matches his lipstick. I charmed it that way. It looks stunning against the black satin. Hair a glorious mess. His emerald eyes smoulder.

"You're wearing girls' clothes!" Myrtle laughs. "You're dressed like a *girl*!"

Doesn't look like a girl, though. Boots laced up his ankles and flat chest drawing the negligee down. The strap falls to his elbow, and a dusky nipple shows.

"I like it," I repeat, and twist the cigarette in my fingers.

"Fucking sexy. I'm sexy, right, Score?" he asks. "Just like those Muggle blokes in the magazine, right?"

I nod.

He grins and twirls the boa. "Wicked. This is the best birthday ever."

I agree.

Myrtle doubles over laughing.

I turn up the music. Something loud and angry on the WWN.

"Hey, pass me the firewhiskey," he says.

I take a sip and hand it to him. It's half gone. His throat works as he swallows.

"Want to try it?" he asks. He holds out the boa.

I shake my head. "It's your birthday."

"My birthday," he says. "Wicked. Best fucking birthday ever."

"You say *fucking* a lot when you're drunk," I tell him.

"I'm not drunk," he claims. "Just tipsy. I figure it was all the biscuits I ate at the Extravaganza that got me sick then. Sugary ones with the fucking… that sprinkly stuff. I had, like, twelve of them. But I'm not drunk now, I have a very high tolerance. Really fucking high. Right?"

I shrug.

"Anyway, you only turn fifteen once, right? Got to celebrate," he says.

"You only turned fourteen once, too," I point out, "but it lasts for a whole year."

He takes another drag. "Yeah, but fourteen sucked arse. The only good thing about fourteen was you. Fucking *crap* age, fourteen. They should ban it. Fifteen is going to be much better."

"Your nipple is showing," I tell him.

He laughs. Turns in circles. Waves the boa and takes another pull off the bottle. "Want to touch it?" he asks.

I bring the cigarette to my mouth. Run it over my bottom lip.

"I'm trying out for Quidditch next year," he says before I can answer. Pulls the negligee up to cover. "*Fucking* Quidditch. Going to get Dad to help me. He used to play seeker, I'm going to try that. You should try out, too. Are you going to smoke that thing, or just dangle it from your lips?"

I bring it back to my side. "Are you going to wear that during matches?"

He grins. Crazy edge to his eyes. I know him well enough to see this. "Dunno. Maybe I just will. Maybe I'll steal all of Claire's clothes and wear them all the time. Not that I stole anything. She left her crap in the common room, s'not stealing when you leave your crap places. Makes me look…" he stares into the mirror, "*bling*. No, not bling. *Glam*. I look glam, right, Score? Fucking glam."

"You're drunk," I tell him.

"You're going to be in so much *troooooouble*!" Myrtle squeals.

He laughs and tips the bottle back. A new song is playing, louder but not as angry, and he moves to the sound. Eyes half lidded and dark. Takes another drink.

I stare at his hips.

"You going to do yourself up, too? Like in the magazine? All glam and… mmm… fabulous?" he asks. "You should do it now." He hands me the firewhiskey.

I take it but don't drink. "I need a haircut," I tell him.

He laughs and musses my hair. "Do it over summer. Then when you come back, you'll look completely different, and nobody will know who you are."

"I think they will," I say.

He laughs harder and takes the bottle back. Drinks deeply. "Want to know what else I stole?" he asks. "Besides the dress?"

"That's not a dress," I tell him.

He leans in, wild grin on his face. Eyes like secret assignations. "Her *panties*!"

I swallow.

"These tiny little things with a string up the arse. My *balls* are hanging out! Want to see?" he asks. "I'll show you. Want to see…?"

I try to swallow, but there's no spit in my mouth. His fingers are pulling up the satin. I try not to look. He murmurs, *Want to see, Score?*, and I whisper, "I don't think that's hygienic."

He laughs like a madman. Fingers fall to his sides. He twirls about and tickles my chin with the boa. Pulls me in and presses his lips to my cheek. "Best fucking birthday *ever*!" he proclaims.

"You're drunk," I remind him. "And you have lipstick on your chin."

He smiles. "I am so far from drunk, that drunk and I have never even met. Like that fake Muggle cheese in plastic that never met a cow. I could go all night!"

Ten minutes later, Myrtle flees because he's vomiting. The sound of it makes the bile rise in my throat.

"Yuck," he says, wiping his mouth, "I must be drunk. I don't even feel sick. Like, I just puked, but I totally don't care. Do you think I'm drunk?"

"I think you're wearing girls' panties," I tell him. I've been thinking it since he told me.

"I love you, Score, I really do," he says. "You're my best best *best* friend. Even if you are sort of a stick in the mud sometimes. Damn, what time is it? It's late, isn't it? Are we past curfew? I'm in so much fucking trouble if I get caught like this…"

"I'll wash you up," I say.

He waves me away. "No, no, I'll do it. You'll wipe the skin right off my face. You're so rough with a flannel, it's really not kind, and- where's the firewhiskey?"

It sits under the sink. He grabs it and downs the rest of the bottle. "My birthday," he says with a tippy bow. "Officially accomplished."

Getting the negligee off proves tricky. He tries pulling it over his head but burns himself with the cigarette. He wanted to smoke them all but has to save the last three.

"Just pull it down," I tell him. "Over your hips. Your shoulders are too big."

He won't have it though, and makes me hold the cigarette. "Stupid fucking thing," he says, and gets it caught around his head. Finally gets it off and stands there in boots and pink panties.

Why make panties that nothing fits into? Maybe it fits for a girl. But not for him. Arse cheeks hanging out. Elastic separating his bits. Far too small. Poking out the top. Pink and wet against his stomach.

Mine are too small now, too. Hair trigger.

I look at the cigarette instead. His lipstick on the end. I put it to my lips. The smoke burns my lungs.

"All right, let's go," he says. Back in his robes now, black satin in his hand and bag thrown over his shoulder. He takes the cigarette for one last drag. Grinds the dog-end into the tile.

"Can I sleep with you?" I ask.

The Slytherins whistle when we come in. Laughter like Quidditch jeers. I forgot to wipe his lipstick from my cheek. Al throws Claire's negligee into her lap. "I don't think you'll want that after what I've done with it," he says.

"Ew, get it *off* me!" Claire squeals.

I cast an Imperturbable on his curtains because he can't concentrate. "I'm *so* going to regret this tomorrow," he says. "Hangovers galore." Flops face down onto the pillow.

I lie opposite him, but he tells me not to. "It's my birthday, I deserve one night without your toes in my mouth. Come up here." Pats the mattress.

He hasn't done a good job of cleaning off the makeup. Liner smeared on his lids and his lips still pink. He wraps an arm around me. "I love you, Score. You're my *best* friend," he whispers.

"I love you, too," I tell him. "But you're going to break out if you don't wash your face better. That foundation isn't noncomedogenic."

He smiles and pulls me closer. Rests his forehead against mine. "Love you so much, Score," he says.

His breath is liquor-y warm against my chin. I slide my hand up his arm and across his shoulder. The soft little hairs on his nape tickle my fingertips.

"Al?" I whisper. "Are you still wearing those panties?"

But he's fallen asleep.

Rose is quite stern the next morning. "For shame, Albus! Imagine if your father found out. Do you even consider the consequences when you do these things?"

"Um, could you maybe not talk so loud?" he asks. "My head is killing me."

She sighs. "You could get yourself expelled pulling that sort of a stunt, do you realise that? You as well, Scorpius. I can't believe someone from my own House would wilfully take part in such shenanigans. It's disgraceful."

"Shenanigans," I say. "Is that what it was? I like that word."

"Oh, don't you start with me!" she accuses.

"Rose, inside voice, *please*," Al says. "My head is about to explode. And my lungs *burn*. How does Dad go to work in the morning after he's been out to the pub? Ugh, get that bacon away from me, Score, it smells like misery…"

"Uncle Harry drinks on weeknights?" Rose asks. "Do you approve of this?"

"I *beg* of you," Al says, and covers his ears.

She turns to me. "He's Head Auror. When he drinks, it is a matter of *national security*. Do you feel secure with a drunk Head Auror calling the shots? Honestly, do you? Is this any way to run a country?"

"He goes out with Father," I tell her.

"He *what*?" she says.

"I don't think they drink much, though. They mostly talk. They're very friendly now," I say.

"No offence," she says, "but my dad doesn't have much good to say about your dad. In fact, whenever anyone mentions his name, Dad's face gets really red, and he swears and leaves the room. Says just thinking about some of the things that man does might be contagious."

"No offence," I tell her, "but you're quite rude today."

She gives me a look.

I butter some toast.

She panics about examinations.

A lot of people do. You'd think they'd have better things to panic about, but perhaps their lives are just that dull. That's one good thing about being raised in a family like mine: anything short of Dark uprisings or prison time slides off your back like water off an *Impervious*.

The Dark Lord could rise again, and Al wouldn't look up from his nail polish. Mummy's sent a package with every colour in the rainbow, and some the rainbow hasn't thought of yet. He puts a different shade on each finger.

"I need a manicure or something. Don't you think?" he asks.

"You'll chip them playing Quidditch," I tell him.

"My life is crap," he says. "Though Amelia's is worse. If she hadn't been so awful to me during Transfiguration last week, I'd help her with her notes. Looks like she's going to cry."

Amelia MacDougal has seven stacks of parchment that keep sliding into each other, onto her lap, or to the floor. They seem to have a mind of their own. Several of them are curling up and blowing her raspberries. "She *is* crying," I say.

"Sucks to be her," he tells me. "I like the black, actually. Is it too much? Too rock band wannabe? Too vampire? Too I-cry-in-dark-corners? Score, what do you think?"

"The black is perfect. But is it alright to let her cry?" I ask.

"Look, I asked if I could borrow her book for like, two seconds because Arthur turned mine into a ground squirrel, and she gave me this look like *death*. I'm not helping her," he says. "And neither are you."

"If she cries too loudly, it might disturb us," I say. "Shouldn't I make her leave?"

"Oh," he says. "In that case. I thought you were being nice."

"I'm not nice," I say.

"I like that about you," he tells me.

Madam Pince sends Amelia to the infirmary. One page of her notes lies under the table, still twitching.

Al tears it into miniscule shreds.

"You're nice to me, though," he says. "And you're decent to Rose, even though she's snotty and ungrateful and won't even sleep with you."

"I like you," I tell him.

He nods. "But you like Percy too, don't you? More than you like Rose?"

"I do like Percy," I say.

He spreads the pieces out on the table. Pokes at a few, but the hex seems to have been broken. "Do you, um. Do you like him more than you like me?" he asks.

"I don't know what that means," I say.

"It's a pretty straightforward question," he tells me.

"I like birds," I say. "And I like pineapple. Also, the way a new quill sounds when it first hits parchment. But does a new quill sound better than pineapple tastes? Are birds' wings more beautiful than fresh ink smells?"

"Wow," Al says, "you really know how to overcomplicate something."

"Complicated things are complicated," I tell him.

"So then who's more complicated?" he asks, frowning. "Me, or Percy?"

I think of Percy's fingers, his lips around a cigarette, and how his feet would look sliding out of his shiny black Lattanzis. I think of Al in black satin, eyes like embers, pulling on a firewhiskey bottle.

"Claire's panties," I tell him. "Most complicated thing I've ever seen."

Al sighs. "Never mind," he says. "Let's just revise for Potions."

I feel like there's something he's not saying.

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Chapter: 11

CHAPTER 11

Al has never seen Father's office before. Though it's not really *his* office; other people work there, too. Father is in the front though, directly under the sign saying CUSTOMER SERVICE. A security troll lumbers by the door, and Harry Potter shakes some man's hand.

Al laughs at a placard on Father's desk. It says, *Sarcasm is not the only service I provide*. Someone has scratched in beneath it, *BUT IT IS MY BEST*.

"Ready, boys?" Father asks. He's in his grey robes which do nothing to brighten his complexion. He looks worn and tired and ready to beat the daylights out of the next person who wants to open an account.

"I think you need a break, Father," I tell him.

"Yes yes, they call it *lunch*," he says.

"This place is cool. I could totally work here," Al says.

"You probably could," Father mutters. "Potter, are you nearly finished?"

"No, it was my pleasure, all in a day's work," Harry Potter is saying. He wrests his hand away. "Must go now, very busy, but do stop by the office, just set up an appointment with my secretary."

The man nods like his chin is on a trampoline and tips his hat. Father rolls his eyes.

"Remind me to tell Percy never to let that man set foot in my office," Harry Potter says. "Where were we then, everyone ready?"

"At your beck and call, as usual," Father says, though he doesn't look angry.

Harry Potter has them seat us at the back of the restaurant, away from the other patrons. It's a booth with shiny red seats. The waiter brings us waters.

"This place is so lowbrow, I practically have to duck while sitting down," Father says. He looks at his glass as though it offends him.

Harry Potter snorts and puts his hand on Father's thigh.

Al smiles at me over the rim of his glass.

The food is fine; I don't feel the need to duck at all. Father complains, and Harry Potter listens and nods a lot. Makes soothing noises at appropriate intervals. He must think we can't see his hand. What it's doing probably isn't legal in a public venue.

I could eat lunch like this every day.

"So I told you about my plan to become seeker, right, Score?" Al asks around a bite of bread.

"Yes," I say, "but I'm sure you'd like to explain it again."

He rolls his eyes. "Just wait. Slytherin shall vanquish."

"I do hope so," I tell him.

"Dad," he says. "Hey, Dad. You'll help me practice Quidditch this summer, right? I'm trying out."

Father was saying something rude about Goblins, and he sighs.

"Next year?" Harry Potter says. "Are you sure?"

"No, *last* year," Al says. "Honestly, Dad."

"Well, I don't know if, ah, this next year would be a good time to start," he answers. "It is your OWL year, and with your… you know, with James still playing…"

"James is a twat," Al tells him.

"Al, *please* don't talk that way about your brother," he says. "And watch your mouth. You never know, there might not even *be* Quidditch next year…"

"No *Quidditch*!" Al exclaims. His mouth hangs open. "That would be anarchy! Governments would topple! Planets would collide! And- and I'd fart monkeys!"

"That *would* be anarchy," I agree.

"Are you entirely sure this corned beef is edible?" Father asks.

Harry Potter sighs. "The corned beef is fine, Malfoy. And… we'll see, Al. You know how busy I am right now at work."

"Come on, Dad, you can't be *that* busy," Al says. "You go out with Mr Malfoy all the time."

"Look, why don't you play with your uncle? You know he's been asking," he says. "He'd love to spend some time with you."

"Just a couple nights a week," Al urges. "I'm trying for seeker, and I know you played in school. *Please*, Dad? It'll be like father/son bonding."

"Alright, well… maybe later in the summer, okay Al," Harry Potter says. "I've been up all hours of the night lately- bloody cursed idols are showing up everywhere, we've had to put an embargo on trade with Greece-"

"I told you the East is bringing this country to ruin," Father says. "It's like I was saying about the flying carpets-"

"Wow, so helping out people you *don't even know* is way more important than your own son. Really cool, Dad," Al says. He tosses his bread onto his plate.

"I'm sorry, Al," Harry Potter says.

"Yeah, you *are* pretty sorry," Al tells him.

"We will talk about this later," Harry Potter says. "Do not make a scene in the restaurant."

"*Fine*," Al tells him. "I'll practice with Uncle George. Bet he's loads better than you, anyway."

Harry Potter gives him a look.

"Could we have ice cream after?" I ask. "If no scenes are made?"

"You're not helping, Scorpius," Father says.

Everyone goes back to eating, but the food doesn't taste as good. I pick at it and flip my chicken over. The underside of the breast is white and sickly.

Al leans toward me, thunder in his eyes. He whispers, "Bet there'd be a scene if everyone knew what he was doing to your dad's crotch."

I agree.

Father has moved on to tailors (*Charge absolutely outrageous fees for snipping a bit of cloth, one wonders how they justify it legally…*) when Al pulls out his eye pencil. He's barely touched it to his lid when his father notices.

"Don't even think about it," he says.

"Dad!" Al protests.

"I said *no*, now put it away," he insists.

Al rolls his eyes. "Jeez, you're being such a jerk today! It's just eyeliner!"

"I know what it is, and I told you you're not to wear it when you're out with me," Harry Potter says.

"You're fighting a losing battle," Father tells him. Sighs and contemplates his water glass. Takes a drink and makes a face as though it tastes bad.

"It's not a Dark Object, Dad, it's *makeup*," Al insists.

"Al, please, I'm really not in the mood for this today," Harry Potter says. "This was supposed to be a pleasant lunch out, and you're ruining it for everyone. I don't mean to be short with you, and I'll try to fit Quidditch into my schedule, but I can't make any promises. I'm really stressed to the gills with work and your mother and- just no makeup, alright?"

A moment's pause.

Al says, "Scorpius's dad lets *him* wear it."

Harry Potter sets his fork down with a clunk. Shifts on his seat. "Do I look like Scorpius's dad?" he asks.

Al tilts his chin up. "You have more hair."

Father chokes on his water.

"That's enough. Give it to me. The eyeliner, right now." He holds out his hand.

"You used to understand," Al says. Stuffs it into his pocket. "Why don't you *get it* anymore?"

"I have no idea what you're saying. Give me the eyeliner," Harry Potter says.

"You of *all* people should understand!" Al tells him. "My self-identity is being torn from me! I'm being forced to conform to their rigid and unyielding social norms! They want to shape me into one of their cookie cutter moulds! I'm being *disenfranchised*!"

"You're being *loud*, people are *staring*, and I want you to *please* sit down and calm-"

"I'm not *like* them! I can't pretend I am anymore! How can you not *get it*, Dad? I thought you knew! You're the only one who *could*-"

"Albus Severus Potter, you are *embarrassing yourself*-"

"Because being *what I am* is so embarrassing! Merlin forbid I'm not perfect like your other children! Because *you're* perfect, aren't you, Dad! Everybody's saviour, not a toe out of line, can't be seen with his *nancy* little Slytherin son-"

"Albus Severus, this is your last warning!"

"Al," I say, and touch his shoulder. He swats my hand away.

"You're such a *hypocrite*!" he yells. "That's what you are! A fucking *hypocrite*! You're *feeling up* Score's dad, and I can't even line my *bloody* eyes! I *hate* you! I hate you I hate you I HATE YOU!"

He overturns his glass, knocks his chair to the floor and slams the bathroom door. Opens it up and screams *I HATE YOU!* one more time.

Everyone in the entire restaurant stares.

Father groans and covers his face. "Perfect way to keep a low profile, Potter. Bravo. This day just gets better and better."

Harry Potter clears his throat. "Sorry, folks," he announces. "Appleby Arrows fan. You know how it is…"

The other diners nod and go back to their meals. The Arrows just lost to the Cannons and went from being ranked first, to twenty-second. Broken bows littered the pitch. Cannons fans queued for hours at St Mungo's to have the magical arrows removed.

"Makeup never killed anyone," I announce. "It's nontoxic."

"For Merlin's sake, Scorpius," Father says, "just- just finish your chicken. You've hardly touched it."

My chicken used to be a beautiful bird, with colourful plumage and a clever beak that plucked maize from between sharp stones. It clucked and laid eggs in a nest of straw, and dreamed of one day escaping its confinement to live a life unfettered by the demands of poultry spices and omelette connoisseurs.

But now it's just a dead looking slab turned upside down on a plate.

I push it away.

"I'm not hungry," I tell him.

Harry Potter sighs, rights the chair, and picks up the glass. Charms the water back into it. Pockets his wand and taps his fingertips on the tabletop.

"I could help him with Quidditch," Father tells him. "Even teach him how to cheat properly. I wouldn't mind. You know that, right?"

"There's no Quidditch next year, it's the bloody Tournament," he says. "I'm not supposed to mention it. And I'm scared to *death* for James because I know he'll enter, and Ginny's threatening a custody hearing after all, and if Snape curses one more member of my staff-"

"Really, another? Who did he curse now?" Father asks.

"It's Perkins, he- please, Malfoy, the curses are no joking matter. I've been to St Mungo's twelve times now, and no one's been able to counteract mine yet," he answers. "A bit embarrassing, actually. Head Auror being cursed…" Sighs and flattens his fringe.

It pops back up worse than it was before.

"Speaking of embarrassing, you seem to have a particular skill for making boys cry in bathrooms," Father says. "Are you just going to leave him there?"

He shakes his head. "This is all my fault. He's been so good natured about this whole thing… and

he's never been upset with me in his life. I suppose it's finally catching up to him that his father's dating another man," he says.

"Really, I don't think he minds," I tell him. "He was more upset when you slept with Teddy's girlfriend."

His face reddens.

Father raises an eyebrow.

"That… was a mistake," Harry Potter says. "And she wasn't his girlfriend at the time. And if you could possibly not mention it again, as she was in training at the time, so it was technically against Auror regulations…"

"And the Muggle woman, I don't think he much cared for her either," I tell him.

"That was- he never even *met* her, I got pissed one night and brought her home from the-"

"You really don't need to go into detail, Potter," Father says. "My food is settling badly enough as it is."

"She was a mistake, too," Harry Potter says. "I had to Obliviate her the next morning when she got a glimpse of the house-elf heads. Utterly humiliating experience…"

"Also, the twins," I say. "Though I hadn't realised there were two of them. Did you?"

He clears his throat. Looks down at his plate.

"Sweet *Merlin*, Potter, at the same *time*?" Father says.

"That… wasn't so much of a mistake," he admits. "Though I did feel horribly guilty after, I truly did. Now if we could please stop talking about my sex life and concentrate on Al for a moment-"

"Though he may be impressed that you managed to snag an Unspeakable," I tell him.

He shakes his head. "What Unspeakable?"

"You shagged an *Unspeakable*?" Father says, eyes wide.

"What are you talking about? I didn't-"

"Now that *is* impressive," Father announces. "I hear they're harder to crack than a magically reinforced chastity belt. And half of them *wear* the things!"

"I never- look, there was no Unspeakable!" he insists.

"It's alright, we know you can't talk about it," I tell him.

He sighs. "My god, I have damaged my son beyond repair, haven't I?" he asks.

Father says, "Mine as well, apparently. But are you going to wallow in your own inadequacies- or possibly hyper-adequacies, if the Patil twins have anything to say about it- or are you going to go talk to your son? Buck up, Potter."

He nods. "Alright. If I'm not back in twenty minutes…"

"Then I'll assume you've cut him in half, and send for St Mungo's," Father finishes. "Just go."

"Don't worry, I was already damaged beyond repair," I tell Father.

He sighs. "Why am I not shocked to hear that?"

Five minutes later, he's getting antsy, and my chicken is making me nauseous. I have the impression it's going to start clucking at me from beyond the grave. And perhaps boycotting spatulas. I ask again about the ice cream, but Father just lights a cigarette.

"Do you remember when you first found out about us, Scorpius?" Father asks. Smoke drifts out between his lips.

"I thought he was eating your tongue," I tell him.

"No, no, the time *before* that," he says. Frowns. "Why in Merlin's name would he eat my tongue? We were- never mind, I don't want to know. But you do remember, right? When he spent the night?"

I do remember. "Grandfather's malice runs on black pudding," I tell him.

He sighs.

It's true, though. You've never seen a man eat black pudding until you've seen Grandfather. He's shovelling it in- though not shovelling really, because that would be undignified- when Harry Potter walks into the room.

"Er, wrong turn," he says. "Place is like a maze. I'll just, um… if you could maybe just direct me to the front door…" His top button is ripped. Hair even more mussed than usual. He's maybe bitten his lip.

Grandfather stares.

"Is Al here, too?" I ask. I'm thirteen. I don't know these things.

"This is, ah, a bit… awkward…" Harry Potter starts.

"Please," says Grandfather. "Do sit down." He's recovered now, his face a mask of civility.

Harry Potter's face burns. "No, that's ah-"

"Oh, but I insist," Grandfather says. "What sort of a host would I be if I sent the Head Auror out the door without breakfast?"

He clears his throat. "No, really, it's-"

"Why, I can imagine any number of Ministry officials who would be utterly appalled to hear that Harry Potter spent the night at my home- as a guest of my son, no less- and I pushed him out into the street without so much as-"

"Fine," he says. "Okay, fine. I don't want anyone thinking you're a, er, bad host. Or anything."

Grandfather seats him across from me, next to Father's place. Where Mummy sits when she's here. Though she never really is.

They're talking about foreign trade and goods seizure policies when Father comes in.

He swears. Face white as parchment.

"Ah, good morning, Draco. I was just discussing with your… *friend*," Grandfather says, "some matters which might interest you. Were you aware that-"

"Don't do this, Father," he says. "Don't."

"I assure you, I am doing nothing," Grandfather tells him. "Though if you are implying that I am detaining Head Auror Potter for less than savoury purposes, such as, perhaps-"

"*Stop it*," Father hisses.

"Your breakfast is getting cold, Draco," he responds. "Please sit."

Harry Potter stands and pulls out Father's chair.

He sits.

"Could you please pass the sausage, Grandfather?" I say.

"Pass it?" Grandfather asks. "Oh, I should think your father quite capable of that."

"Father?" I say. "Sausage?" He doesn't look at me.

Harry Potter hands it across, but the table is too wide, and I can't reach it. I move my knife like a wand. He gets the hint and floats it across to me. Smiles.

"Do you need some dittany for your lip?" I ask.

Grandfather makes a noise and raises his cup. Snorts into his tea.

"Stop," Father tells him.

"It is sort of funny," Harry Potter says. "You have to admit."

"Hilarious," Father drawls.

"I think it's funny," he answers. "Ironic, at least."

Father sighs and pours himself some tea. "Do you even know what *ironic* means, Potter?"

He snorts. "Yeah, I think I've got a pretty good idea at this point. You?"

Father looks at him. Licks his lips. Swallows. "Yeah, maybe."

"Well, now that we have that cleared up," Grandfather says.

"It *is* funny," Harry Potter says again. His eyes look like amusement.

"Oh, will you shut *up*!" Father says. Tries very hard to hide his grin. "There is nothing the least bit funny about this! I should've known Professor Snape was up to something when he-"

"Snape?" Harry Potter cuts across him.

"He told me you'd been *stood up*," Father says. "Came to my office and told me where to find you. *Offer to buy him dinner*, he says. *Insult the imbecile who's left him waiting. Offer him a-* well, you probably know what he told me to offer. Do you realise that man knows everything?"

"Snape," he repeats.

"It's almost like he can read minds," Father says. Contemplates his teacup.

"You are an absolute- who did he tell you to insult?" Harry Potter asks. "The *imbecile*? He told you that? The *imbecile* who'd stood me up? God, that- that's funny. Really. I mean-" he starts to laugh.

Father tries not to. "It's not funny! That man hates you! I thought you'd assault me, and I could

blab it to the media!"

"You are good at that, Father," I tell him.

His friend Pansy came ranting about it one night. How she'd never speak to Father again because the entirety of Wizarding Britain now knew about Harry Potter's salacious affair with an anonymous *curvaceous brunette*. Now Potter's conscience had kicked in, and Father had deprived her of a completely decent and strings free shag that very evening, and wasn't he *ashamed* when he knew Marcus wasn't due back from Switzerland for another bloody *month*?

Her words, not mine.

I didn't grasp it at the time. Maybe I still don't.

Switzerland?

"Why thank you, Scorpius," Father says. He laughs.

"It *is* funny," Harry Potter repeats. He starts to laugh again as well.

"Well, now that we've all determined the relative hilarity of the situation," Grandfather says.

But no one listens to him. They're laughing too hard.

Grandfather chews his blood pudding vey deliberately. He absorbs the malice through his teeth.

Harry Potter stays for breakfast. He eats a full plate: scrambled eggs, bacon, sausages, tomato, mushrooms, hash browns, beans, and even the pudding. He drinks three cups of tea.

Small wonder he's overweight.

"You are ridiculously late for work," Father tells him.

He looks at his watch. Swears.

Father says, "It's been fun, Potter. I'll see you around, I suppose."

"You talk about it like it's over," Harry Potter tells him. Wipes his mouth with a napkin and dabs at the swollen part with his fingertips.

"You're telling me it's not?" Father says.

Harry Potter stares at him. "You're jerking me around, right?"

"It was… interesting," Father says. "Nothing more, nothing less." Looks down at his plate.

"No. Oh no, you're not pulling this shit on me, Malfoy. If you think for one *instant* that-"

"*Perhaps*," Grandfather interjects, "we might all take a few moments to consider the best and least… detrimental course of action before-"

"You know what this thing between us is, what it *means*, and you can't just *dismiss* it! Don't *fuck* with me, Malfoy!" Harry Potter hisses. Maybe he thinks I can't hear. Maybe *I'm* in Switzerland.

"Funny, I think I already have," Father says.

Harry Potter stares at him.

Father stares back.

Harry Potter swears and stands. Kicks in his chair. He storms out the door like his own personal thundercloud.

Father hangs his head.

"Do not fear, Draco, this can all be smoothed over," Grandfather is saying.

"You're going the wrong way, Harry Potter," I call. "That hall goes back to the parlour."

Cursing from the hallway. He thunders back in and up to the table. Picks up the teapot, and dumps its contents onto Father's lap.

Father swears and jumps up, pulling his robes away. "What the *hell* are you doing, you lunatic?"

Harry Potter tosses the teapot to the ground. It shatters into a million pieces. "When can I see you again!" he demands.

Mummy's favourite teapot. All the magic in the world couldn't piece it back together now.

Father makes a noise in the back of his throat. Drops his robes and brings a hand to his mouth. Takes a shaky breath.

"*Malfoy*-"

"If you would allow me to escort you out," Grandfather begins.

"Malfoy!" Harry Potter repeats.

Father chews on his bottom lip. Brings his fingers to his temple. They tremble. "Tonight," he murmurs. "And tomorrow night. And the next night, and the next, and the next and…"

Harry Potter breathes like the air is heavy. "Well…" he says, "well, good."

Father nods, eyes on his feet. "You are… ridiculously late for work, Potter," he murmurs.

"Tonight," Harry Potter repeats. "I'll Floo you."

Father whispers something I can't hear.

Harry Potter swallows.

"Father, you're going to be late too," I tell him.

He sighs and turns away. "Thank you for the wakeup call, Scorpius," he says.

Harry Potter smiles at me and finally finds the right door.

Grandfather cleans up the mess and charms Father's robes dry. "Draco, you must inform me of your strategies before implementing them. If your plan is to blackmail Harry Potter in some way, I assure you that I have decades of experience to offer. You need only-"

"Scorpius?" Father says. "How would you like to visit your friend tonight?"

I smile.

"What are you so happy about?" Father asks. We're back in the restaurant. Shiny red seat under my arse. Dead looking chicken on my plate.

"Just thinking," I tell him. "It was really quite romantic, you and Harry Potter. I hadn't realised."

He nods and looks into the middle distance. "It was, wasn't it? That's the artist in you, you see, mind open to the wonders of the world. I'm glad I started you young on the piano. But did your friend feel the same when you told him?"

Huge grin on Al's face. *We'll be together all the time now!* he proclaims.

"He said it was the most wicked thing he'd ever heard," I tell him. "I'm sure he's only upset about the makeup."

Father asks, "And what would you do if I told *you* that you couldn't wear your makeup?"

I shake my head. "Don't worry. I know you would never do something so senseless, Father."

He sighs. Takes a long drag off the cigarette. Smoke out his nose. His name to a T. "Why don't you go check on them?" he says. "I'll get the bill. I've got a bit of pocket change, anyway."

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Chapter: 12

CHAPTER 12

Al sits under the sink, knees pulled to his chest. His elbow rests on the pipes, black robes against silver. Head bumping against the basin. His face is red.

Harry Potter sits beside him, legs stretched out across the tile. Hand on his shoulder. "I love you no matter what," he's saying. "No matter what the answer is. Or even if there isn't one."

"I know there *is* one," Al says.

"Well then, no matter how long it is in coming," his father tells him. "It's unconditional love. Alright?"

Al wipes at his eyes and nods. "But you… I mean, you did love Mum, right? It wasn't just some sort of… thing?"

"Of *course* I loved her, Al," he says. "And honestly, a part of me always will."

"But you love Mr Malfoy, too, right?" Al asks.

He sighs. "Al…"

"It's okay, Dad, I know you do. When anyone else complains half that much, your jaw goes all tight," Al tells him. "You *like* it when he gets into one of his moods. You like making him feel better, like you're his hero. And sometimes when you think nobody's looking, you stare at him like you want to lick every inch of his body."

"God, where do you *get* these things?" Harry Potter asks him.

"You want to fill his navel with honey and eat chocolate off his arse cheeks. And you can come out from the doorway, Score, I've totally spotted you," Al says. Smiles at me from behind swollen eyes.

"Are you ill?" I ask.

"Only mentally," he says. Bangs his head against the sink when he stands up. Rubs at it as his father pulls himself to his feet.

"Oh, then that's alright," I tell him.

"Ugh, I look like *hell*," he says to his reflection.

The mirror answers, "They say the truth hurts."

"Come here, where's your eyeliner?" his father asks.

He pulls away. "Dad, *please*! Don't *take* it!"

"Calm down, Al, I'm not taking anything," Harry Potter says. "If it makes you happy, you can wear as much makeup as you want. Just… not around your mum, okay. Or Uncle Ron? And possibly not Uncle Charlie either, but I'll get back to you on that one."

He snorts. "Okay. Thanks, Dad. My eyes are all puffy now, though, I can't put it on."

Harry Potter ruffles his hair. "My ears are always open, okay? You can talk to me anytime. Preferably without screaming obscenities in restaurants, though."

"Where would be the fun in that?" Al asks.

"Ice cream," I tell him. "The fun would be in ice cream."

"We'll get ice cream another time," Harry Potter says. "Now, I've got to retrieve Mr Malfoy and get him back to work before he starts abusing the kitchen staff. You two will be alright alone for a while, right?"

"I think we can handle it," Al says.

"You'll want to hurry," I advise. "The kitchen staff are fairly stationary targets."

Al makes a show of not wanting his father to kiss him, but I know he doesn't mind. If Father sat on lowbrow bathroom floors for me, I wouldn't mind either. What he does mind is how bad his eyes look.

I advise cucumber slices, or tea bags soaked in cold water, and watch him sort through a pocketful of lipsticks. He's got a black tube from somewhere, cheap and Muggle looking, and when he puts it on, he looks it as well.

I ask, "Why didn't you tell me you were going to make a scene? I could've helped. Grandfather says I'm very good at it."

He sighs and examines the lipstick in the mirror. "I didn't *plan* on it. I'm annoyed with myself, actually. We finally get to go someplace nice together, and I ruin it."

"It's not really that nice," I tell him.

"He just made me so *angry*," he says. "But it turns out there's this Triwizard thing going on next year, so there really *won't* be any Quidditch. Dad was in it when he was at Hogwarts, and it's super dangerous. He saw some boy *die*. I guess it might be okay to give up Quidditch if people might die. I've never seen anyone die before, it might be cool."

"Father's seen people die. He says it makes you vomit," I tell him. Though I'd sooner wet myself.

His black lips hang open like a decaying corpse.

"You must take that off. The Tournament hasn't even started yet," I say. "Stomach acid is hard on tooth enamel, and urine has such an odour."

He frowns and wipes the black off with a wad of toilet tissue. "Do you think he puked because it was gross? Or, like, super scary?"

"His voice sounded strange, so I didn't ask," I tell him.

"Never mind then. Your dad's really brave, and if that happened to him, I'd probably hack up my own intestines or something. I'm totally not watching," he says. "We should sneak into the Restricted Section and search for sex books and avoid the spew fest."

"If he were brave, he'd divorce Mummy. He's as much a coward as she is," I tell him. "Maybe worse."

He frowns. "Why's your mum a coward?" he asks.

I tell him, "Some people just are. What answer don't you have?"

"What answer for what?" he asks. "Hey, do you think this one's okay? Hot pink?"

"Very retro," I tell him. "Your father said he loves you no matter what the answer is."

"Okay, I'm assuming retro is a good thing and putting this on, right?" he says. He revives the 1980s across his lips. Puckers and almost looks himself again.

I pucker back.

He smiles.

"There you are," I say. "You're back."

"Yeah," he says. "It's me. Do you know there's this continuum?"

"Yes, but hot pink usually goes with any of the neons," I say.

He snorts. "Not colour wheels. A *sex* continuum. Dad told me."

"Does it run on a chocolate scale?" I ask.

"A *what*?"

"When women say chocolate is better than sex," I tell him. "With equivalents in grams. Or maybe teaspoons if it's in liquid form."

He sighs. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Auntie Hermione told Dad about it. It's this whole scientific thing, like research and everything."

"It would be better with chocolate," I inform him.

"Well, probably," he concedes. "But here's the thing: it's not, like, *unusual* to be attracted to someone who's the same sex as you. I mean, there's straight as a broomstick on one end and ginormous poofter on the other, but most people are actually attracted to *both* sexes at least a little. It's called *bisexual*. So it's normal."

"If you say so," I tell him.

"It's not me who says so," he says. "It's *research*. Muggles spent oodles of money to figure out who wants to bang who and why."

"They must have a lot of free time," I say.

He shrugs. "Maybe Muggles think about it more than Wizards do. Maybe they're more open minded and liberated and stuff, and they totally wouldn't crap themselves seeing two blokes snogging in public. Maybe they're all over more decent human beings."

"Or maybe they're just bored without Quidditch," I suggest. "Do you want me to do your eyes?"

"Do you know where you'd fit on it? The continuum, I mean?" he asks.

His lids are a mess, but he needs something dark and untidy to counteract the lipstick, anyway. "It would be best to be directly in the middle. That way, you'd have twice as many options," I tell him.

His brows scrunch, and he sucks his lip between his teeth. Pink smeared on white. "Dad says he might like men more."

"Father's a man, so that's probably good," I tell him.

He sighs. "Do you really think we'll get to go to that hotel? The one with mints on the pillows and complimentary room service and you doing Lily's hair? Sometimes I feel like it'll never happen. Like everything's too screwed up, and we'll end up in limbo forever."

"Limbo's right in the middle," I say. "Neither heaven nor hell. Limbo is bispiritual."

"But they have to make a decision eventually, right? I mean, in the end you have to choose either heaven or hell," he tells me. "Not choosing is a total load of cack. We all have to- wow, lipstick on my teeth! We have to choose eventually. Right? Even you and me."

Harry Potter arrives before I can answer.

"Well, your father's back at work, and the cook accepted an autograph in lieu of a mental breakdown," he tells me. "I'll drop you at home, and- God's sake, is that the style these days? If you were standing on a street corner, I'd arrest you, Al."

Al doesn't like that, so I ask, "Are you getting laid tonight?"

Harry Potter stares.

Al laughs. "I think that means he wants to spend the night. Can he, Dad? Please? I could really use some help revising my Ancient Runes. OWLs are less than a year away, and I want to get a jump on so Rose doesn't beat me senseless."

"Her freckles would be quite incensed if you didn't," I agree.

"Sometimes my life feels like the Twilight Zone, do you know that?" Harry Potter asks.

"Is that an hour ahead of Greenwich Mean Time?" I ask.

"No, I think it's that new shop next to Borgin and Burkes," Al tells me. "The one with the vampire stuff, right, Dad?"

"Home," Harry Potter says, shaking his head. Maybe all fathers get that look when their sons talk too much. "Let's go."

Apparently he is getting laid tonight because Father drops me off just after dinner.

We revise Ancient Runes against the green of Al's duvet. It brings out his eyes. Still rimmed in messy black. He forms rude words phonetically but is annoyed that there is no *sh* sound in runic. Impossible to curse properly without it, he says. Whatever were the ancients thinking?

"Your bed is comfortable," I tell him.

"Yeah, because you're *hogging* it all," he says. "Just because your bed is five times as big doesn't mean-"

"No, write it in runes," I say. "Translate: *Your bed is comfortable*."

"Think I should use *ea* or *ur* for berk?" he asks.

"*Bed*," I say, "not *berk*."

He sticks out his tongue and pokes at my side. Wiggles his fingers against my ribs.

I look at him.

He sighs. Fingers pluck at my robes. "So unfair you're not ticklish. Don't you have any weakness?"

"Ballet puts me to sleep," I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. Hands smooth over my stomach. Touches like petting cats. "Ballet puts everyone to sleep. That's not a weakness."

"Father thinks it's lovely," I tell him. "Do you crave feline companionship?"

He shrugs, and his hands do something that makes me want them closer.

I clear my throat. "Grandfather says it's shameful putting innocent young witches in pink Muggle haberdashery and parading their basically bare bottoms before the public." He may have been drinking when he decided that. Al's fingers make my cheeks pink.

He snorts, "basically bare bottoms," takes a breath, and shoves a pillow in my face.

He's quite ticklish. Squirms and laughs and makes noises with my fingers on his sides. Seems to have forgot I'm not and twitches his fingers against me. Though I'm not sure why he'd think I'd be ticklish *there*. Just really, really warm. Too warm. I have to pin his wrists.

"Translate," I say, leaning over him, "*Your bed is*-"

He licks my chin.

"Translate *that*," he tells me.

I shake my head to clear my mind.

He stares up at me, eyes deep and shining like a forest in an afternoon rain.

I swallow and search for something else to look at.

I notice, "You're laying on your book." Release his hands and pull it out from under him. The pages are wrinkled.

He laughs. Runs a hand over my hip and pats at my arse. Feels nice. "You're sort of a nutter," he tells me. "But don't worry, I still love you."

I love him, too.

The days grow warmer as my robes grow shorter. I'm taller than Al now, and showing what Grandmother calls an *alarming amount of ankle*. My legs are sometimes too long and my hands too big, though I'm still skinny as a wand. Rose writes reminding us to keep up with our studies. I get a spot on my chin that won't go away until Al pokes a needle into it and squeezes.

Growing up seems inconvenient.

Father shuttles me back and forth between home, Grimmauld Place, and Spinner's End. Loses more hair. Maybe it's not growing up that's inconvenient, but life. I read a lot. No one talks about Mummy, even after she comes home for a weekend. Father seems tired, and Harry Potter may have gained some of that weight back. They see each other once a week, sometimes less.

Al worries.

"I saw Dad reading the other day. Not reports, a *book*," he tells me. "Dad *never* reads."

"Perhaps he's trying to better himself," I suggest.

"Better himself? Come on, this is *Dad* we're talking about here," he says. "He owns exactly seven books, and five of them are about Quidditch. The other two are from Auntie Hermione. He uses them as bookends for the Quidditch books."

"Was it one of those he was reading?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "It was this dating book, something about wizards with hairy hearts," he says. "I think he's upset because your dad won't commit. You can't take your family on holiday to fancy hotels with someone else's husband. That sort of thing gets really bad press."

"The Professor's curse is still on the *Prophet*," I remind him.

He frowns. "Hey, why don't you talk to Professor Snape about it? He'd know, right? I mean, he knows pretty much everything. He's practically a genius or something. Right? Can you ask him, Score? About Dad?"

I tell him I will, but I still don't much like The Professor.

The next time Father takes me, I ask him, "Is sex quite an athletic activity?" He's reading reports about the War. I'm halfway through an advanced Transfiguration text.

He stares.

"Hypothetically speaking," I amend. "If one were to partake, would it be likely to burn a lot of calories?"

The clock ticks off the seconds.

"Have you heard of it?" I ask. "Sex?"

He keeps staring. Maybe now it's a glare.

A glower, perhaps.

"If you don't know, just say so," I tell him, and go back to my reading.

I read other things as well, Protection Charms and Dark Arts and how important it is to carry a bezoar. He asks how I haven't been kicked out of Hogwarts when everything that comes out of my mouth is rubbish.

"Essays only need the answer," I tell him. "They don't want anything from you."

"And what do people want?" he asks.

I shrug. "Why don't you ask them?"

He regards me for a long moment- he likes doing this- and says, "There is something wrong with you. You are damaged in some way, are you not?"

"Al collects Chocolate Frog cards," I tell him. "He has twelve of you. He keeps one under his pillow."

"And this statement relates in what way?" he demands.

I say. "You've chosen the wrong apprentice You'll never bend me to your will. You should give up whilst you're still ahead."

"Get back to work," he orders. "And not so much as another *peep* from you, am I understood?" Turns on his heel and stalks from the room.

"Peep," I say.

"*I heard that!*" he informs me.

I'm getting better, but he tells me I'm not ready to fly yet. The magic is powerful but hard to control. Turning is difficult, I'd break my nose against a tree. I tell him he's more at risk of that than I. He teaches me a spell called *Langlock*.

The Boggart still scares me stupid.

He yells and curses and hits the back of my head. Makes me go without dinner. Says I'm weak.

I fear he always will.

"I need a haircut," I tell Father.

He looks at me. "Your hair is fine."

"It's so long, Al started braiding it yesterday," I tell him.

"Tell him not to," Father instructs. He's frowning down at an invoice from Grandmother and Mummy's latest shopping spree in Grenada. "Merlin, they can spend the Galleons. Ninety for a pair of shoes?"

"Those are mine," I tell him. "Specially made in Rome. They must've just been sent. I do hope I get them soon. Though I still need a haircut."

Father flips the parchment over and swears. Long list of purchases on the back. "I had my hair the exact same way when I was your age. There's nothing wrong with it."

"It's impeding my social development," I say. "Also, I'm going to keep pestering you until you can't stand it any longer, so you might as well accept it and move on."

He sighs. "What in Merlin's name do you need ninety Galleon shoes for? Answer me that first."

"They're the best," I tell him.

He considers. Nods. "Good answer. A Malfoy deserves the best, no matter what the cost."

"Percy has them," I add.

Father looks back at his parchment. "Have you been seeing a lot of Percy lately?" he asks.

"No, but hope springs eternal," I tell him.

He runs his fingers down the column of figures. "So you have no idea why he's been coming here, then?"

I blink. "Here? He comes here? Why wasn't I informed?"

"I stopped in last week for some of that wine that makes your friend's father fall all over himself- Merlin knows I could use a bit of help these days- and saw him walking down the hall like he owned the place," he says. "If you see him, why don't you ask him for me? Don't tell him I told you to, though- he likes you, so he's more apt to spill his guts."

"I have approximately seventeen questions in my head," I tell him, "but I'm not sure which one to ask you first."

"How about *none*," he suggests. "Save them for Percy. We'll get you a haircut when we go for your school supplies. Until then-"

"No, Father, *before*," I cut across him. "And new robes as well. I can't wear these to Rose's birthday. You can see my watch when I raise my arm, look."

"That watch cost three hundred Galleons," Father says.

"And my ankles," I say. "They might give Rose's mother indecent thoughts."

He flinches. "Merlin forbid! Alright, this weekend then, haircut and robes. And I don't care how gauche your mother says it is, I'm getting the things hemmed up half a foot."

It's the first time he's mentioned her by name. I think he didn't mean to do. Pulls at the neck of his robes like they're too small.

"I could kill her," I tell him.

He freezes.

"No one would know," I say. "I'm invisible."

His face pales like bleached bone. "I don't want to hear you talk that way ever again, do you hear me, Scorpius?" Father whispers.

I nod.

He's right: it's not her fault. She's in over her head. Tradition and duty and love and hate all get in the way of what we need. We can't help it; sometimes things just go to hell.

"Promise me," Father says. None of his family in Azkaban ever again.

"I promise," I tell him.

Though I *could* kill her. It's in my blood.

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Chapter: 13

CHAPTER 13

Rose stares, hand over her mouth. Her hair quivers in the breeze. She must have three times what a normal person does. You could lose a comb for weeks in there.

Al laughs and pats my back. "See? What did I tell you?"

"About what?" I ask.

He snorts. "You look *wicked*. All the girls are going to want you now. Total witch magnet."

"I got a haircut," I tell him.

"And your makeup is really sexy, and you've grown like, five inches," he says. "And those robes look *really* good on you. So what does it feel like to be a total sexpot? Do you feel like parading down runways, or lounging about in skimpy briefs to show off your svelte figure?"

"I feel like cake," I say.

He nods. "Yeah, me too. Hey Rose, when are we eating?"

"Are there mints?" I add.

Her face has gone the same colour as her hair, though with more of a pinkish tint. She squeaks and scampers like a frightened animal.

Al shrugs.

Everyone tells me I look very grown up. Al's mother says it through gritted teeth; he's wearing tinted gloss and black fingernail polish. His grandmother says I look very handsome.

"Your hair is very red," I tell her. Or at least, I think it used to be.

She smiles and says I should eat more.

"These rich families and their fancy foods," she laments. Shakes her head. "What you need is

some good, hearty fare to put some meat on your bones. I don't know why Harry doesn't bring you two over more often, dear. It's like he's hiding you away from the rest of the world!"

"Father might be afraid you'll sit on me," I tell her. She does know a lot about food.

She looks at me. Frowns. Shakes her head and tut-tuts. Says something about lacking social interaction at a young age.

But I think she means well.

Walking through the Burrow is like wading through red tide. So much ginger it chokes out the natural wildlife. Fishes turned belly-up in the halls.

"Do you think it's proper etiquette to wear your Prefect badge outside of school?" Al asks. He's found a bowl of frosting and runs his fingers across the porcelain. Smears blue and bronze confection across his tongue. Perches like a bird on the countertop.

"I don't have a Prefect badge," I tell him.

He rolls his eyes. Licks his lips. "I *know* that, but Rose is wearing hers, and I think it's in bad taste. It's her birthday and all, so I don't want to be rude, but honestly. Is she going to dock us points?"

"Is there any cake batter?" I ask.

"Sorry," he says. "Must've got washed. This is the buttery kind though, not the super sweet stuff. Here, try some." He says. Offers his fingers.

I close my lips around them. Wrap my tongue around and pull the last of it off with my teeth.

Al swears. "I didn't think you'd actually…"

"It's good," I tell him.

He stares at his fingers, sticky wet with my spit. Pops them into his mouth.

"I think that's illegal in Wales," I say.

"Want some more?" he asks.

On the third mouthful, he pulls me in between his knees. Wraps a hand around the back of my neck. Fingers in my hair. Frosting to my mouth, then his. Then he forgets the frosting and it's just fingers. My mouth to his: warm, soft and wet.

I lean in so that I can lick them at the same time he does. Sends tingles through me. His fingers

press into my neck, and my tongue brushes his.

He knocks over the bowl when the door opens.

"This isn't what it looks like, I swear! I was just- oh, hey Uncle Percy," Al says.

He looks handsome in blue robes. He's wearing those shoes I imagine him taking off. "Here, let me get that," he says. Seals the porcelain together with a flick of his wand.

"Do you want some frosting?" I ask.

"It's gone, Score," Al says.

"But your fingers still taste good," I assure him.

"Er, right. Um," he scratches behind his ear. "So what's up, Uncle Percy?"

"Oh, I just thought I'd get away from the commotion for a moment or two," he says. "You know I don't do well with unruly crowds. Having people constantly bumping into me and forcing hors d'oeuvres down my throat makes me terribly jumpy."

"That would happen to anyone," I tell him. "It's the fish smell."

"What fish?" Al asks.

"The algae killed them," I say.

"Actually, I think that's the new dungbombs George is working on," Percy says. "My, but you've grown, haven't you, Scorpius? Severus did mention it, but I assumed he was exaggerating when he said he thought you'd been dosing yourself with Extending Elixir! And you look very smart with that haircut, and those robes are exquisite. Well done."

Percy says such clever things, sometimes I can't even answer.

"Wow, get a room," Al says.

"For what?" I ask.

He rolls his eyes. "Come on, let's go harass Rose with your *exquisite robes* some more," he says.

Which reminds me: "Percy? Father says he saw you at Malfoy Manor. He asked me to find out why, but told me not to tell you that he asked me to ask you. He does these things sometimes. It may be the inbreeding."

Percy laughs. "Just having a bit of a drink with your grandfather, of course. He keeps his shelves

well stocked. Nothing secret about it."

"Is he blackmailing you?" I ask.

"Of course not! Why would you ask something like that about your own grandfather?" he demands.

Al offers, "Um, because the man hates Weasleys so much, he'd rather cut his own hand off than shake one of yours?"

"Those are hard to get back on," I tell him.

Percy sighs. Looks very nice doing it. "Well, I admit he was a bit… apprehensive at first, but ever since I made a few disparaging remarks about plugs, he's seemed fine. Severus vouched for me as well, of course, that was the key point. And I do believe he was impressed with my knowledge of writing implements. I explained to him about my collection, and-"

"Uncle Percy, no one is impressed by your quill collection," Al tells him.

"You collect quills?" I say. "That's so avant-gard."

"I now have two hundred and fourteen in my collection," he states, chest puffed. "And… one quarter… but we won't get into that. Very traumatic for all parties involved. Though the healers at St Mungo's were very helpful, and Charlie says he can barely tell the difference anymore."

"I *so* don't want to know what that means," Al says.

"Which aspect of quills do you find most enriching?" I ask. "Their length? Breadth? Circumference? Weight? The way the nibs fit into-"

Al covers my mouth. "Score, please. You're embarrassing us both."

But Percy considers. Brings his fingers to his chin. "The way they feel in your grasp. You can tell a quality quill by its weight distribution. If you close your eyes and slide your hand along the shaft, your fingers should come naturally to rest at the optimal location for-"

"I'd like to touch your quills sometime, Percy," I say. "In the optimal location."

"That would be lovely," Percy tells me.

Al groans. Tugs at my sleeve.

"How long ago did you start collecting?" I ask. "Recently? Or was it when you worked for the Minister?"

Percy stiffens.

Al swears. "Didn't anyone tell you not to mention Shacklebolt?" he hisses in my ear.

"No?" I offer.

"*Thirteen years*," Percy announces. His jaw tightens and nostrils flare. "I gave that man *thirteen years* of my life, I was the most devoted employee anyone could've asked for-"

"Of course you were, Uncle Percy," Al cuts across him. "You're the best. No one can run a report like you can. And when it comes to filing, you're practically a-"

"I put in *thirteen years* of dedicated service," Percy says. "And how do you think he repays me?"

"How?" I ask.

"Oh god, don't promote this, Score," says Al. He hides his eyes behind his hand.

"He *sabotages* me!" Percy exclaims.

Al sighs. "Uncle Percy, the Minister for Magic did not sabotage his own receptionist," he tells him.

"If you'd seen what that man can do with a cup of coffee, you'd change your tune!" Percy insists.

"I hate coffee," I tell him. Though I've never tried it. Smells horrific, though.

Al pulls a face. "I've heard this story a half dozen times, and it sounds crazier every time," he says.

Percy raises his chin. It trembles. "Every day for *thirteen years*, he set his coffee cup on the *left side* of his hanging file folder. Well, the left from my perspective, as he's right handed, of course. My left, his right. Until March the twenty-first. *That* was the day! When I went to hand him his morning messages- from the *right side of the desk*, just as I'd done for the past *thirteen years*-"

I hold my breath.

"-his cup of coffee was *directly* IN MY PATH!" Percy exclaims.

"Someone make it stop," Al groans. Covers his ears. Faces the wall.

"These things do not happen by chance!" Percy insists. "It was purposeful! And he *kept doing it*! For a *week*! I was so distraught, I could scarcely sleep at night! Do you know how difficult it is to properly hand reports over the top of a cup of *steaming coffee*? Imagine if a paperclip had suddenly sprung loose!"

"You should've sued," I say. "Father would've sued. Did you sue?"

Percy clears his throat. Draws himself up to his full height. "No disrespect to your father, Scorpius," he says.

"It's fine, you can disrespect him all you like," I assure him.

"He may prefer such methods, but I am a strong and resourceful member of the male gender! I rely upon my own wit and capabilities to lead me to my destiny!" Percy declares. "So I did the only thing- the only reasonable, *manful* thing- I could have!"

"You added cream and sugar?" I ask.

"I *resigned*!" he announces.

Percy should write a book. I'd buy out the first printing. He enlightens with every word.

"Now, I'll admit I might've been slightly less tactful about it than I had intended," he says. "But I hadn't slept all week, which was hardly my fault, so I feel that calling in the Aurors was out of line. The coffee wasn't hot enough to scald, and those land deeds were easily mended. And the affair did demonstrate the efficacy of the Ministry's fire prevention systems. I was doing them a favour, in the long run."

"Is it over?" Al asks. "Please tell me it's over."

"Yes," I say. "Is that why you work for Harry Potter now?"

Percy nods. Seems to be calming down. "He offered me a job on the spot. *Some* people recognize the importance of order in their offices!"

"His secretary had just gone into early labour," Al says. "And he had six trials pending."

"Yes, well," Percy says. "That doesn't change the facts. And I've been there ever since."

"And you're not going to be there much longer if you keep calling him *sir* outside of work," Al says. "Uncle Ron's really taking the piss about it. It's driving Dad bonkers."

Percy sniffs. "I think he appreciates the gesture."

Al rolls his eyes.

George walks in with dungbombs.

They do smell like fish, a bit.

Rose stares at me instead of eating her cake. We sit at the end of the table, so none of the adults tell her not to.

"Look, you don't have to keep watching him, he's not going to explode or anything," Al tells her. Peels the frosting off my slice. Drops a slab into his mouth.

"I might," I say.

"Well, the possibility is pretty small," he says. "People usually don't."

"Birds usually regurgitate their food to feed it to their young," I tell him.

"…et le fils m'a dit qu'il ne l'a jamais vue, mais elle savait qu'il mentait, alors elle lui a dit que…" Victoire tells her sister. Her elbow jabs my side. Veelas have sharp extremities.

Rose clears her throat.

Al looks at her.

"You have contextualization issues," she says.

"I have *what*!" he says.

She sighs. "Not *you*. Him." She points at me. Her nails are coated in lacquer.

"You'll need frosting first," I tell her. "I can't eat that."

"Mais non!" Dominique says. "C'est pas vrais! Tu veut me dire que quand il l'a vue, il a pensé qu'elle…"

Rose's cheeks are pink. She lowers her hand. "More proof for my point. You say things without proper situational context, and others can't understand you. It's probably a socio-lingual disorder. You should really undergo a screening. I've been reading up, and you demonstrate several classic symptoms for autism, although-"

"You know, insulting him isn't going to get his hands into your knickers any quicker," Al says.

"I *beg* your pardon!" she exclaims.

Al laughs. "Hey, I think that rhymes- knicker, quicker… bicker… sicker…"

"Is that where she keeps her blossoms?" I ask. "I'd like to see.

"She's probably got a whole flower garden in there," he tells me. "Just waiting to be, ah, hoed."

She purses her lips. "Sometimes I wonder why I talk to either of you at all. You know I hate when people joke about my name!"

"Who's joking about your name?" Al asks. "I'm joking about you wanting him so bad you're practically drooling on yourself. Maybe if you apologize to Score, he'll still-"

"Oh mon dieu, quelle horreur!" Victoire exclaims. Knocks me in the ribs again.

"The French are really annoying," Al says. He reaches over and flicks the back of her ear.

She pulls a face and swats at him. Turns back to her sister. "Alors, qu'est-ce que…"

"Alright. Fine. So maybe I find him… mildly attractive," Rose admits. "In a very… abstract sense. But you two are still social maladjusts, and if you think I'm just going to jump into- into *bed*-" she hisses, "with him, you're wrong. Just because he's ridiculously handsome and rich, and completely willing, and quite obviously very clever because he's managed to get through Hogwarts as second in our class without speaking a word of sense since he entered-"

"You're not really building yourself a very strong case here, Rose," he tells her.

"The average British teenager's first sexual encounter occurs at sixteen and one-half years of age," she announces. "I'm still far ahead of the curve."

"Yeah, well time is really not on your side on this one," he says. "You've got to skank it up before you start losing your looks."

"What on *earth* are you two talking about?"

Rose's mother looks just like her, but with wrinkles and brown comb eating fuzz instead of auburn. She's brought more pumpkin juice.

"Statistics," I say.

Al whispers, "Because *banging your daughter* is clearly the wrong answer."

"Is it?" I ask.

She sighs. "Albus, how many pieces of cake have you had? You *know* you get sick if you eat too much sugar."

"I do not!" he protests. "I've got a stomach like steel!"

I ask her, "What was *your* approximate age during your first sexual encounter?"

She stares at me, wide mouthed. Gulping like plimpies.

Al nearly vomits his frosting from laughing.

Rose follows us to the bathroom.

"Why do you two *insist* upon ruining my birthday?" she demands. "For the second year in a row, no less!"

Al hangs his head over the toilet.

"How much do you know about continuums?" I ask.

"Do *not* try to change the subject, Scorpius! I bet it's your fault James and Lily and Auntie Ginny didn't come, too!" she accuses.

"Dad was planning to come," Al says. He clutches his stomach.

"Yeah, well he's not here, is he!" Rose says. "If he'd said he wasn't coming, Auntie Ginnie would've!"

"He can't help it! Someone was *murdered*, Rose!" Al says.

"They should really make a law against that," I tell him. "At least on your cousin's birthday."

"Oh, I wish you'd be quiet, Scorpius," Rose says, "because it's really hard to be angry with someone who makes my knees wobble! And I know what you're saying is rubbish, but it suddenly sounds really clever!"

"It *is* clever," Al tells her. Moans. "Oh sweet frosting, why do you do me wrong?" he laments.

She purses her lips. "I don't think we can be friends anymore. My stress has been raised beyond containable levels," she announces.

"Ugh, I'm never eating cake again," Al says. "You know, Dad turned down a weekend in the Alps for your stupid party, Rose. Score's dad rented this place with a view of the mountains and a hot tub the size of a Troll- I saw the brochures, and the price wasn't even *listed*!"

"Father broke a very expensive vase in frustration," I say.

"Someone really does need to petition against that," he tells me.

"Oh *honestly,* Al. What could Uncle Harry and Mr Malfoy *possibly* do in a Troll-sized hot tub together?" Rose says.

"I thought your mother bought you a book," I tell her.

"Look, Rose," Al says. "Life isn't black and white like a textbook. It's this whole continuum with infinite possibilities. Just because things don't fit into your narrow little worldview- with Score looking like a twelve-year-old girl and Dad being unfailingly hetero-"

"I looked like a twelve-year-old girl?" I ask.

"You did a bit," he concedes.

"Cool," I say.

"Hetero-what?" Rose asks.

Al sighs.

A knock on the door.

"Hetero-*what*!" Rose insists.

"Albus, I've brought you something to calm your stomach," Rose's mother says.

Rose throws open the door. "Do you know anything about this?"

"About what, Rosie?" her mother asks. Hands the potion across to Al.

Rose crosses her arms over her chest. "About Uncle Harry and Mr Malfoy," she says, "and Troll sized hot tubs in the *Alps*."

Her mother sighs.

"Oh, I can't *believe* you've been keeping this from me!" she erupts. "Don't you *value* my education? Alternate lifestyles are a very current topic of study! What else are you hiding from me? Next I'll find out you and Dad have become *vegans*!"

"Well," her mother says, "most processed foods nowadays have been produced at least in part by Muggles, and you know how I feel about minimising our carbon footprint, sweetie…"

Rose makes a noise that might be a rude word in Mermish and pushes out the door.

"Was this really the optimal time, Albus?" her mother asks.

"Um, yeah?" he says. Much better after the potion. "Not my fault you didn't tell her you became a vegan. Though I didn't know bangers and mash counted, and Uncle Ron has them pretty much every weekend at the pub with Dad."

"Oh, does he?" she asks. "We'll see about that." Cracks her knuckles.

Now is probably not a good time to offer to do her hair.

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Chapter: 14

CHAPTER 14

I don't wear my Percy shoes. I leave them in my trunk and every so often open the lid a crack and peek at them. I've hexed the trunk so no one else can, though I do show them to Al.

"Wow, you've really gone round the twist, haven't you?" he asks.

"I've been for a while," I say.

"Yeah, but you've *really* done it this time," he says.

"I blame the haircut," I tell him.

It seems to be driving everyone insane. The girls stare and whisper behind their hands, then break into peals of laughter when they realise you've seen. Walk up to you and stutter and run away. The boys snort and pretend they don't watch you out of the corner of their eyes. When the students from Durmstrang arrive, they point and slap each other's backs, and speak loudly in a language that sounds like swallowing their own tongues.

The Beauxbatons students ignore me, but they're French, after all.

Headmaster Ogden addresses the Great Hall from behind his podium. Stands on his tip-toes though I'm guessing he's fully grown by now. We're packed in like notes in the margins of Rose's texts. Al squeezes in between the two of us. She was writing too quickly and had to add him in when she was revising.

I put my arm around him because my notes are always well organised.

"And now the three Champions shall be revealed," the Headmaster proclaims. His boyish face looks eerie blue behind the flames of the cup, like a ghost story. The young wizard walking through the deserted forest stumbles upon witches at a cauldron, but they're not really witches at all, they're-

"It's sort of embarrassing our Headmaster's got worse acne than Olivia Midgen," Al murmurs. His breath tickles my earlobe.

"Just be glad he's not five anymore," Rose says. "That was a really nasty accident he had in the Department of Mysteries, and he's recovering much more quickly than anyone predicted."

"The tantrums were sort of fun, though," Al tells her.

"McGonagall didn't think so," I say, "though I do think her wig looked better that colour."

"Shh!" says Rose.

The Goblet flames high and shoots a piece of parchment into the air. Ogden grabs it. Clears his throat. His voice breaks like Al's did last year as he announces, "And the Durmstrang Champion is…"

"McGonagall wears a wig?" Al says.

I nod. "Owen Transfigured it into a llama. Though he might not have meant to."

"Shh!" says Rose, but I've missed the name. A boy whose ancestry includes Trolls stands, hands raised and bellowing in what might be Gobledegook. Other Troll-Goblin hybrids cheer and grab his coat and punch him in the shoulder.

Seems like a very violent school.

The French Champion has a name like silk between your fingers. His looks aren't half so smooth: he has curly hair.

The Goblet launches the last piece of parchment. Rose crosses her fingers.

"And the Hogwarts Champion is…"

"James, James, James," she says.

"Shut *up*!" hisses Al.

Ogden unfolds the paper. A hush falls across the Great Hall. The silence buzzes in your ears.

Rose renews her, "James, James, James, James…"

Al groans and Rose screams when Ogden says his name, but he does look like a Champion. Broad shoulders and one fist raised, face set like Rose's during last minute examination revision.

"If he's Hogwarts' great shining hope, we're *fucked*!" Al shouts in my ear. People are yelling and

clapping, and the Gryffindor table looks like the Grimmauld New Years Extravaganza at midnight.

I wonder if James realises the vomit in store for him.

"I think I'm sinking into a deep depression," Al tells me. We're with Moaning Myrtle, and she pretends the cigarette smoke bothers her. Coughs and fans her face.

The lipstick has worn so it's pink where the cigarette sits. He must've been practicing because he doesn't cough at all. The ash lengthens until it drops onto the tile.

"I've never been in a depression before," I tell him. "How does it look? Quite oblong? Pear shaped?"

He sighs. "Grim. Barren. Hopeless. Black as my lungs are going to be when I finish this pack."

"Oh, mine too!" exclaims Myrtle.

"I could get some firewhiskey if your liver would like to join the depression," I offer.

He shakes his head. Takes a drag. "Look, if you haven't noticed, Score, you're not exactly invisible anymore. People stare at you from across crowded rooms. Girls blush when you raise your hand in class. They think you're *mysterious*. And I'm pretty sure I saw Madam Pince fondling one of your bookmarks the other day."

"She sometimes does these things," I tell him. "It can't be helped."

He says, "You haven't got a snowball's chance in a dragon's *mouth* of getting liquor in here."

I prove him wrong.

"You Transfigured it into a *what*?" Rose says.

"It wasn't going to be confiscated that way," I tell her.

Al tips the bottle back. Licks his lips and hands it to Rose.

"Well of course it wasn't, but it's not exactly normal to be carrying something like… like *that* around with you!" Rose says. She holds the bottle against her chest.

"They only suspect innocuous things," I tell her. "Why would someone Transfigure something disallowed into something suspicious?"

Al snorts. "I still can't believe you walked all over Hogsmeade with a bra hanging out of your pocket," he tells me. Pats me on the back. "Now everyone thinks you got some, too. Nice work.

You going to drink that, Rose?" He asks.

She sighs and takes a sip. Makes a face.

"Just chug, and you won't notice," Al says.

"You know, it's a testament to our friendship that I didn't turn you in for this, even if Myrtle can't tattle because she's watching the Head Boy bathe. I'm a *prefect*," she says, "hiding in a girl's bathroom with two *boys* drinking *liquor*. It's only because I fear the effects on your already strained psyche."

"Yeah, I cry every night about Dad being deliriously happy with someone he loves," he says. "It's really tearing me up inside."

Though he hasn't seemed so happy lately. They've hardly seen each other. Father's writing is cramped. But I'm not telling Al.

She rolls her eyes and seals her lips around the mouth of the bottle. Tips her head backward and comes up spluttering.

"That's a girl!" Al says, and pats her on the back.

"Blergh," she says, and hands me the bottle.

Our fingers touch, and she nearly drops it. "Sorry," she says. Her cheeks are pink.

"You remember that law against sexual frustration your dad wanted to get passed?" Al says.

I nod and drink.

He laughs.

"My head feels strange," Rose tells us.

Six chugs later, she manages to get her arse stuck in a sink.

"Is that even physiologically possible?" Al asks.

"I don't think that word means what you think it means," I tell him.

"My thigh is caught under the tap!" she announces. Doesn't seem terribly concerned.

"Lubrication!" Al exclaims. "Turn on the water, and you can slide out!"

But all she does is get wet.

"People will think I lost bladder control!" she declares. "How embarrassing!"

Sends Al into a fit of giggles.

"You are both so very drunk," I tell them.

"And *you*," Rose says. Throws her hair back. Points a finger at my chest. "Are so very *sexy*. Arithmantic principles cannot begin to hypothesize upon the depth of your eyes. Your cheekbones make Stalinist theory look like child's play. If my behind were not inextricably stuck in this washbasin right now-"

"Rosie, you fucking *minx*!" Al laughs.

"-I would undoubtedly endeavour to take *distinct* advantage of your body!" she proclaims.

Al is a giggling lump on the tile.

"But it does seem quite stuck," I say.

"Oh," she says. "Well, shit."

"Is there a particular aspect of my body of which you'd most like to take advantage?" I ask.

Her eyes widen. "Your grammar," she says. "You have the most lovely sentence structure sometimes, I could swoon! Oh, but your body. Your *body*, with lines and breaks like a well formed essay!"

She squirms in the basin, tries to push herself up. Her hands slip against the porcelain and legs splay. Robes pull up to reveal white skin above a black sock. A rivulet streams down her leg and drips off the toe of her shoe.

"No more alcohol," I tell her. "You're cut off. And so are you, Al."

He hoots and bangs the floor with his fist.

I turn the bottle back into a bra and stuff it into my pocket.

Definitely cut off.

I wonder why ghosts' mouths need to move. Do they have ghostly vocal cords? Undead larynxes? And if their lips form words, why do their feet not touch the ground?

Hovering inches above the floor, Professor Binns explains about giants. Cordelia's head bobs as she catches herself falling asleep. Rose leans toward me. "Are you taking notes?"

I shake my head. "Already read about it."

"Me too," she says. "I wanted to say, I… I hope you're not upset about the, um. How I acted the other day. What I said to you. In the bathroom."

"I'm sorry your robes ripped on the spigot," I tell her. "I would've Transfigured it into a snake, but I was afraid it might bite."

She shrugs. "It's fine. They're just robes."

"Do you find it strange that ghosts' mouths move?" I ask.

"I hadn't thought," she says. "But I was wondering about, um. You know, what you and Al were researching last year. Are you still working on that project?"

"Sex?" I ask.

My voice isn't as quiet as hers. The girls behind us titter.

Rose throws them a look and whispers, "I've read a lot, and sometimes it makes me think I know something when I really only know *about* it. So I've decided to come out of my proverbial shell and experience the world through my own eyes instead of living it vicariously through literature. Of course, that won't diminish my respect or admiration for the written word. In fact, when life presents me with certain opportunities, I feel it would be *disrespectful* to the literature not to experience them."

"Like sex," I clarify.

The girls squeal.

"Yes," she says, rolling her eyes. "Like… like sex. So what I'm saying is… I don't want you to misunderstand me. I have a lot of self respect, Scorpius Malfoy, and I possess a very high opinion of my capabilities, both physical and mental. I do not crave attention, nor am I debasing myself to gain standing in others' eyes, and I'm not deluded into thinking that love and sex are equivalent. But maybe I didn't properly think it through before… declining your offer."

"Though you do well talking about it," I tell her. "Have you practiced?"

"I thought you were trying to take advantage," she says. "But I should've known better. That would require actual emotion. Anyway, I've given it a lot of thought since ah, my birthday, and… given the circumstances, I've decided that… I'm interested."

"Those two words seem to have required excessive preamble," I tell her.

She sighs. "Look, do you still want to do it with me, or not?" she asks.

I shrug. Al would want me to.

"Okay," I tell her. "When?"

Whilst the rest of the school screams about cockatrices and James's biceps, she leads me to the Shrieking Shack. The Professor slept here for twenty years. The Dark Lord's spells kept people away. Not a bad place though; the floors creak like they could pelt you into oblivion. Wallpaper peeling in strips off the walls. Windows dusty and cracked.

"Is here alright?" Rose asks.

Grandmother would be appalled.

"Lovely," I say.

"Don't look," she says. "Turn around, it's embarrassing."

The bed looks nice. She's charmed it clean and pulled back the sheets. Starched white cotton. She must've brought the pillows from her bed. A good place for sex, I should think.

"Score, what are you doing? You're still *dressed*," she says. She's not. Naked and small except her storm of hair. More of a cloud today. Pale, smooth skin. Covers herself with her arms, modest.

"Don't laugh," she says. "I'm a late bloomer."

"Chrysanthemums don't bloom until autumn," I tell her. "That's why people plant them."

She's not Chrysanthemums, though. She's peonies. A blossom peeks out from behind her wrist. I reach out press my fingertips to it.

She gasps and turns away. "It's strange if you've still got clothes on," she says.

I take my things off and set them by the bed. The air feels cold against my skin. I lick my lips and swallow. Lungs feel tight. Being naked with people you're about to have sex with does strange things to you.

"I didn't think it would be that big," she says. "I mean, your- you know…" She gestures.

"It's of average size," I tell her.

"Oh," she says.

I pull it up more so she can see. She brings her hand down, pauses, and touches the tip. Doesn't feel so nice when I touch it. Like she has magic in her fingers. Some power girls have.

"You make a very fine girl," I tell her.

She smiles and kisses me.

Your first kiss isn't what people say it is. But then, most of them are probably clothed when they have it. Her mouth is warm and wet and soft. Tongue in my mouth. Tastes like toothpaste. It's good that I only wore lip balm.

She brings one hand to my neck; the other further down wraps around me. I nearly bite her. I'm glad I don't. She might've stopped.

"Score," she says. Breath against my lips. "Touch me."

I kiss a bit more because it's warm and the room is cold and ask, "Where?"

She presses my palm against her chest. "Here," she says.

Her head tilts, and I think of Father in the garden on New Years, so I kiss her neck. Tastes like salt, but not bad. Then further down: her shoulder, her collarbone. Blossoms so close, and I lick a bud. Pull it between my lips.

Her hands in my hair, and I wish she hadn't let go further down. Her eyes closed, she doesn't see me look up. "Touch me again," I tell her, my lips still on her skin.

She makes a noise and brings my hand between her legs. I don't know what to do there, so she puts her fingers against mine and moves them.

My mouth is quite dry.

"You sure you want to?" she asks. Breath coming in puffs.

I'm not sure. It's all strange and foreign and tingly, but that's probably the wrong answer. "I'm sure I don't want to stop," I tell her instead. It's not a lie.

It seems good enough.

She takes me by the hand and leads me to the bed. Sits on it and looks at me like I'm supposed to do something. "Your hair is red everywhere," I tell her.

"I think you're really very handsome now," she tells me. "As handsome as you are odd. Maybe more."

"I've always looked this way," I tell her. "Only the hair is different."

She shakes her head and motions me beside her. "It's not the hair. All of you is different now."

I don't disagree because I'd like her to touch me again.

She lays me down and smoothes her hands across my stomach. "You know what to do, right? Even if it hurts me a bit, you shouldn't stop," she says. "That's normal, as it's my first time. Just don't go too fast, or push really hard."

"Your gift," I agree.

She takes a deep breath and reaches behind the pillow. Hands me a silver packet. "I did all of the spells, of course, but just in case… I know it's Muggle, but…"

I flip it over for directions, but all it says is TEAR HERE with little arrows. I recognise it when I have it opened. Used ones swimming in Father's toilet bowl.

"Why is it purple?" I ask.

She shrugs. "I just grabbed a handful."

"A large handful?" I ask.

She says, "Please just put it on, Score. You're ruining the mood."

I do, and she leans over and kisses me. Kisses and kisses until my arms wrap around her and my mouth tastes like hers. Like we're the same being.

I wonder how much of her spit I've swallowed.

She slides a thigh over mine and braces against my shoulder.

Sex isn't bad.

It's not what people say it is, but Rose makes lovely noises, and her skin is petal soft. Blossoms all around me, and even if the walls aren't marble, she's still peonies. I admire them in their vase after, wet still with dew, and think about how I'm the one who put them there. Cut them from the garden with my own hands.

I smooth my fingers over her hair.

"I was nervous," she says. "But it was really nice. You were really sweet. A bit… distractible, but this *is* you we're talking about. I heard Poppy telling Claire after Potions that Owen only lasted about three minutes, and having to remind you what you're doing every so often is much better

than that."

"Would you like a makeover?" I ask.

She laughs. "Only if we do this again sometime."

"Alright. When?" I ask.

She kisses me.

It's a good gift. She could've given it to anyone, but she chose me.

I like her.

"So?" Al says. He's waylaid me before dinner and pushed me into a broom closet. He holds a Lumos to my chest. A damp mop dangles in his hair.

I look at him.

He rolls his eyes. "Well, how was it? How do you feel? Was it brilliant? Are you like, a man now?"

"It was quite floral," I tell him.

He says, "Huh?"

I tell him about the petals, the buds and her blossoms, and peonies against white marble and faded wall coverings. How it feels to go into the garden and cut them yourself. Arrange them in a vase of sheets.

He shakes his head. "Stop, stop. You're making it sound like an Herbology project, and Professor Longbottom is *not* sexy. I need the details, Score, the *details*! Come on! I mean, did she scream? Or cry?"

"Was she supposed to?" I ask.

"Some girls do," he says.

"I wouldn't like people crying on my face," I tell him. "My makeup might run."

He rolls his eyes. Flicks the dangling mop yarn behind him. Makes a face. "Was it like in your dad's books, though? Did it make you feel powerful? And like, all warm and gooey inside after?"

"I don't recall feelings of gooeyness," I tell him. "But I did use protection."

"Oh, well that's good," he says. "They say you should."

I nod.

"But it feels incredible, right? That's why people do it," he prompts. "That's why our *dads* do it, because they like making each *other* feel incredible. It's like a connection. Right?"

I tell him, "It's hard to concentrate with so many flowers."

He sighs. "Why do I get the feeling that you and Rose finally getting in a bit of slap and tickle is of absolutely no benefit to me whatsoever?"

I want to make him understand there was neither slap nor tickle, but the words don't come. All I can say is, "She's peonies."

He chews at his lip. Brings his wand to his side. "Right. Fine. Peonies. Anyway, James sucked arse at the Tournament," he tells me. "Last place by a mile. They had to run these massive cockatrices through this obstacle course without actually pushing them through by magic. James was so far behind, he ended up using a full Body-Bind Curse and dragging the thing across the finish line by the neck. *Really* embarrassing. I should've stayed in the library and revised. Or, I don't know, pretended someone wanted to get naked with *me* and wanked."

"I'm sorry," I say. "Sex is complicated."

He shrugs. "I know it's not your fault. Complicated things are complicated, you said it yourself. You know, when I asked you about Uncle Percy."

"Percy *is* complicated," I agree. "I like him."

"Yeah," he says. Nods. "But you like peonies too though, right? They're your favourite flower? That means it went okay with Rose."

"Peonies are beautiful," I tell him.

He looks at me for a very long time. Smiles and touches his fingers to my chin. Soft yet rough against my skin.

"Yeah," he says. "Yeah, they are."

I smile and ask, "Could we get dinner now?"

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Chapter: 15

CHAPTER 15

Al thought she'd follow me around and write love letters and want to hold hands after. He doesn't understand why she's sitting with James and Cordelia and a stack of books on Ashwinders.

"You're choosing *this* over us?" he says, throwing James a look. "Over *Score*? Honestly?"

"Your brother needs help," she says. "He's our Champion, and I feel that until the Tournament ends, my loyalties lie with him."

"Your loyalties were lying somewhere a bit different during the first task," Al says. "With their legs spread."

Cordelia goes red and hides behind her book.

Al gestures toward her. "And what the hell is *she* doing here?"

Rose looks stern. "She's *helping*. And I'm sure if I'd realised what dire straits James was in, I would have come to his aid much sooner. No offence, Scorpius, it was more than satisfactory and I would really like to do it again some time, but this takes precedence," she says.

"You could still have the makeover," I say, and straighten her books.

"Can't the Champion have some of his own friends help him instead of stealing mine?" Al asks. "He has about a billion of them. I have two."

James mumbles something and flips a page.

"His friends play Quidditch and ogle girls," Rose says. "They're hardly the scholarly type. How are they supposed to get him through one of the toughest competitions known to Wizardkind?"

"Well where's his stupid girlfriend, then?" Al demands. "Why isn't she here? Or doesn't she know how to read?"

"She *graduated*!" Rose tells him. "Last *year*!"

James slams the book shut. "She dumped me," he says. "On my *arse*. And ever since the first task, all my so-called *friends* can do is laugh at me behind my back!"

Al snorts.

"Yeah, I'm sure you're enjoying this, aren't you?" James says. "Bet you sit around all day gloating

about what crap I was and how you knew I'd fail all along. Your stupid, worthless brother in so far over his head, his *eyeballs* are floating!"

"You're mixing metaphors," I inform him. "Or do you need to use the bathroom?"

"I don't *sit around gloating*," Al says. "In fact, I try not to think about you at all, it's a waste of brain power. I'd rather contemplate ways of squeezing ping pong balls inside butterbeer bottles without breaking them."

"Oh!" says Cordelia. "Oh, I know!" She raises her hand.

"Wow, calm down," Al tells her.

"Look, either help or leave us the hell alone," James says. "I don't feel like looking like a total fuckwit for the next task too, okay?"

"Yeah, good luck with that," Al says. "Considering you were born that way."

"How exactly does a fuckwit look?" I ask. "Are there certain distinguishing characteristics?"

James sighs. "I still can't believe you slept with him, Rose."

"It was a physically and emotionally enlightening experience," she tells him. "I'm broadening my horizons. Also, his dreamy good looks make me swoon. I can't believe *you* didn't tell your own brother that you broke up with your girlfriend."

He rolls his eyes. "Because he wouldn't have razzed me at all about *that*," he says.

"What, so you care what I think now that you don't spend half your life with your hand in her knickers?" Al says. "Or her robes over her head?"

"Albus, *shush*!" Rose warns him. "You're going to get us kicked out, and these books are our only hope!"

"Why would her robes be over her head?" Cordelia asks.

"I have no idea," James tells her. "Just ignore him. What have you found?"

"Oh," she says. "Well, despite being useful in curing agues, Ashwinder eggs are-"

"Hello, I'm *still standing here*!" Al announces. Points at the ground by his feet.

Cordelia hides behind the book again.

"Look, can we talk a minute, Al?" James asks. "In private?"

I follow them to the Goblin stacks.

"So?" Al says.

"*In private* doesn't mean *with Malfoy listening*," James tells him.

He rolls his eyes. "Like I'm not going to tell him every word you say. Now what do you want?"

James sighs. "Rose told me. About… about Dad and… Malfoy's dad. I mean, don't be angry with her, she didn't *mean* to tell me. She thought I already knew. You could've said something, Al. I was up nights worrying about Dad, thinking the only comfort he had was Winky's cooking, and you know she tends to add too much cooking sherry…"

"Because you really would've believed me if I'd told you Dad was a ginormous poof," Al tells him.

"Well of *course* I wouldn't have believed you, but I'd have written him saying you were talking crap, and he'd have told me it was true!" he says. "That's all I wanted- the truth! And don't go saying you kept it from me because I'm prejudiced or something, because I'm not. I mean, I'm *trying* not to be. I've thought about it a lot since I found out, and I've decided the Queers can do whatever they want as long as they keep it to themselves."

"Dad *was* keeping it to himself," Al insists. "And he's actually *bisexual*- it's a technical term. *Scientific*. Means he likes both men and women. It's *normal*."

"And logical," I point out. "It doubles one's chances for pleasurable monogamous intercourse."

James makes a face. "Stop using creepy words, Malfoy. You're making it really hard to be supportive."

Al rolls his eyes. "You're a total homophobe, just face it."

"Look, it's not my *fault*! It's just gross! Blokes are *not* attractive! " James insists. "They're all hairy and smelly and loud, and they fart! Who the hell would want to snog one?"

"Er, members of the female gender?" Al says. "And anyway, not all men are like that. People practically line up to get a glimpse of Score. I could sell tickets."

"Malfoys don't fart," I agree. "It's improper."

James runs a hand through his hair. "Sure. Girls, female gender, sure. Al, can I um. Can I ask you something? Without you going completely mad over it? About what you… I mean, about girls. Or… not girls. Or something. Because, I mean, I *am* trying to be supportive. I want to be a good son, you know, and a good brother, and I realise I haven't been the best in the past-"

"Yawning here, James," Al says. "Get on with it. Or don't, because it sounds stupid."

He sighs. Shakes his head. "Never mind. Wasn't important anyway. I should get back to the books."

"Whatever," Al tells him. "And don't go around telling people about Dad, either."

"Stop being an arse, of course I'm not going to tell," James tells him. "I love him. And… and you too, even if you are a little prick most of the time."

"Whatever," Al repeats. He scowls at a bookshelf. Sticks out his leg to trip his brother when he walks past.

James throws him a look and clenches his fists. Keeps walking.

"I hate my life," Al says, and pulls out his carmine. Hands it to me.

The tube is nearly gone, red worn down to a nub. I don't wear colours like this anymore.

"He was going to ask about me, wasn't he?" he asks. "About me liking boys. Because I wear makeup and never had a girlfriend. He thinks because of that, I'm *automatically* some sort of arse pirate."

I shrug.

"Don't you want to ask me about it, too? If I'm like one of those girls lining up to gaze at your cheekbones?" he asks. "If I want to draw little hearts with our initials in them? If I think of you naked and dream of what it was like for Rose when you had her in the Shrieking Shack?"

"Not particularly," I answer.

He sighs.

"Tilt your head up," I tell him.

"Do peonies come in red?" he asks as I cover his bottom lip.

I nod. "But you're going to make me smear if you keep talking."

When I finish, he tells me, "My life is one huge smear."

"I thought it was a depression," I say. "A dark, oblong one."

"It is," he says. "One big smear of oblong depression across some old hag's chin. That's my life."

"Does she have whiskers?" I ask.

"Definitely. And a big wart. Right here, with hair growing out of it," he points to his cheek. "And it's not carmine lipstick she's smeared, it's some ugly colour she got in the bargain bin that's like, three years old and kind of sticky because humidity got to it. That's my life. It's effing *perfect*."

"But they can never take away your sarcasm," I assure him.

He snorts.

"Do you want to help your brother prepare for the Tournament?" I ask.

"And what," he says, "help him not embarrass himself so he doesn't bring shame to our school and the family name?"

"It does seem that he's trying to reach out to you," I tell him. "In a metaphorical sense." Even *I* can see that.

"And I'm supposed to accept it, just like that, and become friends?" Al asks.

I shrug.

He shakes his head. "Fuck that," he says. "Let's go see if Claire's left any of her things in the common room again. I could use a bit of glam right now."

I ask, "To draw attention away from the smear?"

"Whatever," he says.

And I realise now what to buy him for Christmas.

Father is unhappy. It oozes out his pores. His salad is tossed about like socks for the wash, and he hasn't touched his capon.

Grandfather's eaten half the bird. "Now now, Draco," he says. "Sulking doesn't suit at your age. I think we both knew from the beginning how this would end, and if it's headed in that direction, it's all for the best. Now, simply put on a strong face to the world, and-"

"Why don't you take your *strong face*," Father says, "and shove it up your *arse*."

Grandfather looks appalled.

"Could I watch?" I say.

"Shut your mouth, Scorpius," Grandfather orders.

"Don't you talk to my son that way!" Father hisses.

Grandfather's chin pulls up. "I shall speak to your son however I please. If you'd allowed me to raise him, this family would not be in half the trouble it's in. Severus informs me that the boy's development in practical magical application is ridiculously delayed, and he's barely able to create a wisp of Patronus after all this time. Splendid way to carry on tradition."

"Since when has anyone in this family needed a Patronus?" Father demands. "Can you make one?"

"Since when has anyone in this family thrown a tantrum about falling out with his *boyfriend* and disrespected his own *father*?" Grandfather answers. "It's disgraceful. At this moment, Draco, I am ashamed to call you my son."

"Well, maybe if you'd been ashamed a bit sooner, I wouldn't be in this bloody *mess*," Father tells him. "You've set up my entire life the way you want me to live it, and it's *shit*!"

Grandfather looks at him, face wiped clean of emotion. Raises his wine glass to his lips.

"If you want to know why this family is in trouble, look in the mirror," Father adds.

"Or through the one in the wall above the mantle," I suggest.

Grandfather clears his throat. Hard to hear me in Bavaria. "I would appreciate that you not take your anger with your own inadequacies out on me," he says. "I have laboured long and hard to redeem this family, including having found you a perfectly acceptable wife, a fact for which you have never shown me any gratitude-"

"She wasn't my *choice*, Father! I never warmed up to her!" Father insists. "You *know* I like my women with meat on their bones, and you get me one with curves like a broomstick! Maybe if I'd been able to marry someone I *wanted*-"

"Yes, well now you've found someone you want, and it seems you can't keep this one around, either," Grandfather tells him.

"Because I can't get rid of the *first* one!" Father shouts. Bangs his fists on the table. "*Damn* it!"

Grandfather sips his wine. Sets the glass down. Picks up his fork and knife and cuts a piece of meat. Chews very deliberately.

"This is your fault," Father says. "You did this to me, and you need to fix it."

He swallows. "An interesting conclusion," he says, "but the only way I could rid you of your

wife is punishable by prison time, and I find that the atmosphere does not suit me."

"Not *her*," Father says, dismissing the notion with a wave of his hand. "I'm talking about *Potter!* He's spending all his time at the office, and the moment he starts to overwork, the curse kicks in, and that *awful* rash comes back. Mending personal relationships is the *last* thing you want to think about when you've got hives all over your arse! Why can't you make Professor Snape undo it? Is it really too much to ask for your only son? Is *this* how much I'm worth to you?" His cheeks are splotched like he's been running.

"You seem particularly tense this evening, Draco," Grandfather says.

Father laughs. "Oh, do I? Whyever should I be tense when I'm working my arse off ten hours a day at a *joke* of a job whilst my personal life falls apart? It's a good thing I don't have it hard like *you* do, Father, or I'd never manage. Benefit concerts, charities, funds for underprivileged students… I hear you've been entertaining *Weasleys*, of all people-"

"Ridiculous lies!" Grandfather cuts across him.

"So you're trying to tell me you didn't invite Potter's secretary over for drinks? Because I saw him here, and he said as much to Scorpius," Father says.

"Percy has a quill collection!" I announce.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Grandfather insists. "If a Weasley did enter my home, it was certainly not because I invited him."

"So he broke in, is that it?" Father demands. "Should I file a report at the Auror's Office? With the secretary, perhaps?"

"Perhaps someone else invited him," Grandfather suggests. "Though who that might be, I'm sure I couldn't say."

"Couldn't?" Father says. "Or *wouldn't*?"

"*Couldn't*. Even mentioning the name would be entirely *impossible*. Now might I suggest, as a way to calm yourself," Grandfather says, "a visit to a certain establishment in Knockturn Alley? They've just brought in a lovely woman, of Oriental descent no less, who will give you the best… message… money can buy."

"*Shocking* how that doesn't appeal," Father snaps.

"I hope she washes her hands after," I tell him.

"Do not speak of affairs which you know nothing about," Grandfather orders me. "I tire of your voice. Indeed, your very presence grates upon my nerves."

"I know about sex," I tell him.

"Reading about it in books does not qualify as *knowing*, despite what your Ravenclaw cronies may tell you," he says.

Father adds, "And if I find you've been digging through my personal belongings, you're going to be in some serious trouble."

"I don't mean books," I say. "I've done it."

Grandfather snorts. "Done what?"

"Please just be quiet, Scorpius," Father says. "I love you dearly, but this is not the time."

"I'm sorry you're having a bad day, Father. But if you think I'm a virgin, you're wrong," I say.

Grandfather gags on his wine.

Father gapes. "You've had sex?"

"I've just said that," I tell him. "Twice." I hold up two fingers because he seems slow today.

Grandfather's coughed his drink down the front of his robes. Red on grey. Looks like vomited blood.

"With a- a *girl*?" Father asks.

"Well, it doesn't count with your own hand," I say, "does it?"

Grandfather stares. Wine dribbles down his chin.

A strange hooting escapes Father's lips, and he yanks me toward him. "I'm so proud of you, Scorpius!" he says, and presses his lips to my cheek.

"Father, my makeup," I tell him.

"Oh," he says. "Oh right, yes of course. I'm just so *proud*-"

"People do it all the time, it's nothing to be proud about," I tell him. "Actually, I think parents are supposed to be appalled. You should probably scold me. And let go because you're rumpling my robes."

He does let go, and his smile is sunshine breaking through clouds. "Well, it's a very big part of becoming an adult, and a father can be proud of his son all he likes. So tell me about your

girlfriend. Is she a classmate of yours?"

"She's not my girlfriend," I tell him.

"Even better," he says. "Casual sex is the only way to go at your age. So is she pretty? Clever? Blonde?"

"She's a half-blood," I tell him.

Grandfather makes a noise like a badger being attacked by a hawk.

"Good," Father says. Nods. "Half-blood is good. Is she a- she's not a Gryffindor, is she? Because despite where my personal preferences may lie, that lot are trouble."

"I have better sense than that," I tell him. "Though as I'm not marrying her, I don't think it matters."

Father laughs. Rubs his hand in my hair so I'll have to redo it after dinner. "I knew you had it in you, Scorpius. Well actually that's not true, but I *hoped* you did. I've been dreaming of grandchildren since you turned four. Not that I didn't still want a baby brother or sister for you, but at that point, it seemed-"

"*Tell me you used protection!*" Grandfather hisses.

"Oh, so you didn't die of shock after all," Father says. Rolls his eyes. "What luck. Now Scorpius, just because I'd like a grandchild doesn't mean I want one *now*, you realise. Also, even though she may *say* she's a virgin, it doesn't necessarily mean she's including that time under the bleachers with Derrick Bole. Felt like pissing acid, I could've *killed* Pansy for that…"

I nod and turn to Grandfather. "It was purple."

"What does that mean?" he asks.

"Father knows," I tell him. "It's this Muggle balloon contraption, kind of sticky, comes in a shiny packet. You roll it onto your-"

"Scorpius," Father says. "Please don't use the *M word* at the dinner table."

"She cast some spells, too," I assure.

Father beams.

"Are you and Harry Potter going to break up?" I ask.

Father answers maybe too quickly, "Of course not."

"*Draco*," Grandfather says.

"We're *not*," Father insists. "It's just a rough patch, that's all. Everything will be fine. I'll buy him something ridiculously expensive- gold, maybe, a new watch- and a bottle of that wine that puts him over the edge, and everything… everything will work out. As a matter of fact, I'm feeling so reassured, I think I'll pay him a visit this evening."

"You do recall that your son is visiting Severus tomorrow," Grandfather says. "And this weekend, your wife-"

"Yes, yes," Father tells him, "Professor Snape, wife, all manner of people I don't want to deal with right now. I haven't forgot."

"Do I get to visit my friend?" I ask.

Father smiles like all is right with the world. "Of course you do!"

I smile back because it's best to humour him when he's deluding himself.

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Chapter: 16

CHAPTER 16

Al gives me a hug like being mauled by bears, but Harry Potter seems at odds with nature.

Grimmauld Place still smells strange.

"I told you I'm busy, Malfoy. I don't have time for this," Harry Potter says. "I'm dropping Al off at his grandparents' for the rest of the week tonight-"

"Dad!" Al protests.

"I won't have you sitting here alone during Christmas!" he snaps. "You're not a *hermit*!"

Father lays a hand on his shoulder. "Just a quick dinner, I promise- I've made the reservations, got us a private room, the wine is on ice..."

He brushes away Father's hand. "I've got a *million* things to do. Percy's taking the week off, and he keeps stopping in to 'check up' on his replacement and panicking about where his stapler's

been put. I have sixteen minor cases and three major going to trial in the next month-"

"Just for dinner," Father cuts across him. "That's all."

"-*which*," he continues, "in case you haven't done the math, makes it literally *impossible* for me to attend them all without a Time-Turner, and meeting myself in the halls gives me a ferocious headache. Ginny's threatening to take me to court for child endangerment because I've 'allowed' James to enter the Tournament- even though he's already seventeen- because she gets anxious if she goes too long without suing. And to top it off, Perkins still can't get that ticking noise out of his ears whenever he lays down to sleep-"

"Potter-"

"-and my *arse is killing me*!" he finishes.

Father sighs. "If it's that bad, why don't you bring Professor Snape up on charges?" he asks.

"Right, brilliant idea," Harry Potter tells him. "Get the Unspeakable who crafts the unbreakable curses fuming, *that* would time the pass!"

Al gasps. "Professor Snape's an *Unspeakable*?"

"Al, please," his father says. "You know I can't talk about it."

"Well, if it would help any to share your sorrows, my arse would welcome a bit of pain," Father says. Looks like he means it.

"Malfoy, there are *children* in the room!" Harry Potter rebukes. Face changes colours.

"We could turn around," Al offers.

"Or not," I say. "Whichever would be most helpful."

Harry Potter makes a noise and covers his face.

"Just a couple of hours, Potter, please," Father says. Voice soothing like a harpsichord. "You can relax and forget about your troubles. And I'll Transfigure our chairs into couches, so you won't even have to sit. You can have your dinner lying on your belly." He wraps his fingers around Harry Potter's wrists and draws the man's arms around his waist.

Harry Potter sighs. Rests his scar against Father's shoulder. "Okay, fine. One hour. Couches, private room, but no wine. I'm exhausted, I'd fall face down in my soup and drown."

"Well, we can't have that, can we?" Father says. Pauses. "And what about my arse?"

"Mention it again in front of my son, and I'll arrest you," Harry Potter mutters into his robes.

"That's the spirit," Father tells him. Pats him on the back.

Al snorts and drags me up to his room.

I settle into his bed with his Astronomy text. He perches on the edge and stretches a leg across to his bedside table. Plants his foot next to a box of Muggle facial tissues.

"It's a good thing your dad came," he tells me. "Dad's been in an awful mood. Completely stressed out. Been gulping down those little packaged biscuits like nobody's business. And he practically *attacks* fish and chips. I'm shocked he doesn't weigh three hundred pounds by now."

"Father might prefer fat men," I say.

He gapes.

"Some people do," I tell him.

"That's gross," he says. "Fat people are gross."

I shrug. "More to love."

He shakes his head. Toes at the tissues. "No way, your dad's cracked. Though I guess it does make sense about his arse. You know, the less sex they have, the fatter Dad gets. The fatter Dad gets, the more your dad wants him. Like this chain reaction of blubber. Totally gross," he tells me, "and cracked. But strangely logical."

"Do you think cellulite is like blossoms?" I ask.

"*Please* don't start talking Herbology sex again, Score," he says. "Professor Longbottom does *not* appreciate it."

This is probably true, so I instruct him, "Tell me about Jupiter's moons."

"I hate dances," he tells me.

"Then you're in luck," I say. "They don't hold them on Jupiter."

"Not *Jupiter*," he says. "The Yule Ball. It's stupid. That's why I decided not to stay over holiday. Well, that and getting Dad straightened around. Why didn't you stay? I bet Rose wanted to dance with you."

"That would be a step backwards," I tell him, "considering we've already had sex."

"Getting girls in bed isn't the only reason you dance with them," he says.

"It's not?" I ask.

He grins and shoves at my shoulder.

I smile.

"Are you going to do it with her again?" he asks. Turns so he's beside me. Rests his head against the bedpost.

"Maybe," I tell him.

"Or you could do it with someone else," he suggests. "*Anyone* else. You know that, right? That's what all those girls mean when they stare and giggle, is that they want you big time."

"Or maybe they just like to stare and giggle," I say. "Girls do things like that."

"No way," he says. "They want you. Like, naked and laid out on flower petals. Or maybe them on the petals and you somewhere above them, I'm not sure."

"That sounds nice," I say.

"I bet their panties are wet for you. Did you know girls did that? Got wet?" he asks. "I heard Harper talking about it."

"Is it from urinary issues?" I ask.

He snorts. "No, you dummy, it's because they've got an *open system*. When they get turned on, their body lubes things up to prepare, and it sort of leaks out."

"That's disgusting," I tell him.

"No it's not. It's sexy. It's like, the girl equivalent of getting stiff. You've basically got girls with major wood for you every place you go, every minute of the day," He says. "Don't you think that's cool?"

"I'm more interested in Jupiter's moons," I say. "They're sure to be on our OWL."

He rolls his eyes. "You are *not*, Score, don't lie! Jupiter versus deflowering all those girls? Yeah, right! Oh my *god*, I can imagine it- you shoving your cock up some girl's tight little-"

"Deflowering?" I say.

"-bet it feels like heaven having you in there, all hard and hot and like this *full* feeling-"

But that's what they call it, isn't it? Deflowering. Snipping away their blossom, putting it in your vase so no one else can have it. Looks beautiful but can't live like that. Wilts and dies.

"Oh my god I'm so fucking *horny*!" Al exclaims. Throws his arms wide and collapses onto the bed beside me. "I've been wanking, like, ten times a day! It's like sex is the only thing I can *think* of anymore, it's driving me *mad*! When does this teenage hormone thing wear off? It's *murdering* me!"

Rose shouldn't have given her gift to me.

"Score," Al says. "Hey, Score. What do you think our dads are doing? Think Dad's got his hand in your dad's lap? Your dad likes it, doesn't he? Being felt up. Getting his prick rubbed in public. Yeah, he loves that…"

I shouldn't have accepted it. It was wrong of me. Peonies in a room where no one can see them. I should've said no.

Al's hand is on my leg.

Under the robes, above the sock, against the skin of my calf. It slides across, up and over my knee. I see it moving beneath the fabric, slowly, steadily upwards.

I feel my thigh, and I feel his hand- rough, callused fingertips- but they seem miles apart. Like it's happening to someone else: warm fingers on soft skin, prickling and setting off nerves, but not mine, not me. His face red and breath panting in some dream. Fantasy of him straining beneath his robes.

It can't be real.

Flowers dead and rotting on the floor.

His fingertips graze my pants.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

He gasps and pulls back. "Nothing! Doing nothing!" he squeaks.

My head swims like too much wine, and it must be true. It was someone else. I imagined it.

"So, um," Al says. Lays down beside me. Squirms into the duvet. Face still red. "So tell me about Jupiter."

I feel funny. Maybe I should write Rose and apologise. I ask, "About the planet, or its moons?"

"Either!" he declares. "Anything you want!"

I tell him about both.

Later, I'm annotating his text when he says, "You know about that whole invisible thing of yours?"

"A thing or two about it, I think," I tell him.

"I just wonder sometimes…" he sighs. "I wonder if you're maybe even invisible to yourself."

"Isn't that where it starts?" I ask.

Father usually laughs when he comes back from dinner. Grins like portraits of happy children. Tonight his face is like stone.

"Come on, Scorpius," he tells me. "We're going."

"Where's Dad?" Al asks. "What's wrong? Did he get called in to work?"

Father grabs my arm and pulls me off the bed.

"This is manhandling," I tell him. "I protest."

"Score? Score, what's going *on*?" Al cries.

Father all but forces me into the Floo. I see Al's face over his shoulder, eyes wide and filled with something that chills my bones.

Self-delusion is never the answer.

Malfoy Manor has strange acoustics. Most of the time, you've got to raise your voice to get it to carry across a room. Tonight, I hear them fighting all the way from Father's wing.

They don't hear my knock on the door. Or when I open it.

"Your *father*? It's no one's fault but yours!" Harry Potter is yelling. "It's been two and a half years, Malfoy! Two and a half *years*, and you're still wearing your *wedding ring*, for god's sake!"

"What the hell do you expect me to do, Potter? She's not like your wife, she doesn't *want* a divorce! She's happy!" Father shouts.

"No one is happy living a lie, Malfoy! Offer up a few hundred thousand Galleons and have done with it! I'll pitch in if you want! I'll go into debt and pay the whole damned thing! She can travel all she likes, no one will even know the difference!"

Father insists, "I told you, it's not about the money! She doesn't want a *divorce*! It's *disgraceful*, she'd look like an undutiful wife-"

"Who the fuck *cares*, Malfoy! When was the last time she was a wife to you, anyway? Eight years ago? Ten?"

"I can't hurt her like that, none of this is her fault! She's the mother of my *child*, for Merlin's sake! I don't hate her, I couldn't! She was an innocent girl, she thought she loved me!"

"An innocent *Slytherin*, right," Harry Potter spits. "Do you even remember what it felt like to touch her? The way she tasted? How she moved with her thighs wrapped around- don't you walk away from me, Draco Malfoy! You walk away, and this is fucking *over*!"

"That's a lie, and you know it! You *need* me-"

"I need you like I need a full frontal lobotomy, Malfoy! I'm the fucking *Chosen One*, I could have a different man every night, and you know it! Do you think I'm going to put up with your bullshit forever? Lie to people I love- people who *respect* and *trust* me- when you can't be arsed to legitimate our relationship to- *shit*!"

Something hits the floor with a *ting*. It rolls along the smooth marble out the door, and comes to a rest against my toe. It's Father's wedding ring.

"I hope that one leaves a scar, too!" Father shouts. "Are you happy now? No more ring!"

"Fuck you, Malfoy, I should've known! I should've *guessed* you were going to string me along, perfect revenge for all the-"

"You don't *understand*! Everything is so easy for you because everyone *adores* you! We're two sides of a coin, Potter, they hate me as much as they love you!"

"Oh, shut up, already! You're a fucking *coward*! You were *never* going to divorce her!"

"I *was*!" Father insists. "I *am*!"

"*Liar!*"

"But my family-"

"EXCUSES!"

"*Please*, Potter, I *swear*-"

"For god's sake, Malfoy, do the *right thing*!" Harry Potter screams. "For once in your *pathetic*

little life, stop thinking about how other people see you, and do the *right fucking thing*! DO THE RIGHT THING, GOD DAMN IT!"

Father doesn't scream back. He doesn't say his life isn't pathetic, or insist what he's doing is right. He doesn't storm out the door.

He bursts into tears.

I pick up the ring. Its design worn smooth from years of wear. I remember vines from when I was small.

I put it in my pocket.

"Bloody fucking *Hell*, Malfoy," Harry Potter is saying. "Why do you do this to yourself?"

"I'm not *brave* like you," Father says between tears. "I'm *not*."

"But you can be, Malfoy," Harry Potter tells him. "I'll help you. We'll do it together."

Father sobs. "I *can't*. I… don't know how…"

Harry Potter sighs. "You've got to, Malfoy. I can't live like this anymore. It doesn't matter how I feel, how much I love you. This is *killing* me. If you don't serve her the papers when she comes for Christmas…"

I don't hear the rest of what he says because Father is crying too hard.

I think of Al, the way his face looked when Father dragged me out. How much worse it would look if he saw this. But I can fix it.

I don't want to. But I know what I've got to do.

Harry Potter sits on the floor with his arms around Father, who sobs against his chest. He shakes his head when he sees me, but I don't leave. I crouch beside them and wrap my arms around Father.

He coughs. "Merlin, Scorpius, what are you doing here?"

"I'm sorry," I tell him. I press my cheek to his wet one. My shoulder rests against Harry Potter's arm. "I love you, Father."

"I love you too, Scorpius," he says. He's still crying. "I'm sorry your father can't keep it together. I try, but I was never- I could never-"

"Shh," Harry Potter says. "Shh."

"I'm sorry," I say. "I never said. It's my fault. I ruined everything. It's my fault."

"Nothing is your fault, Scorpius," Father tells me.

"It is," I tell him. "I didn't tell you, so it is."

"It's *not*."

I shake my head. "Ask Mummy. Ask her about the baby."

Father strokes my hair. "What baby, Scorpius?"

"Grandmother took care of it," I say.

"What are you talking about, Score?" Harry Potter asks.

"I'm invisible," I say. "They don't know. Ask Mummy"

"Ask her what?" Father says.

I'm seven.

Mummy and Grandmother are home for Christmas. I'm hiding behind the curtains. I'm going to sing them Christmas carols. What a surprise! I suck my fingers. I've never been invisible before.

"I feel very badly, Narcissa," Mummy says. She lies on the bed with sweat on her forehead. Her hands clutch her stomach.

"You'll be fine, darling," Grandmother tells her. "Everything will be fine. We'll be in Albania tomorrow night, and all this unpleasantness shall be forgotten."

Blood on her hands.

"I should have suffered through it," Mummy says. "This was wrong. I was wrong…"

Grandmother cleans herself, a flick of her wand and the blood is gone as though it were never there. All traces of what she's done Vanished. She lies a palm over Mummy's hands. "Shush now, my love, you've done nothing wrong. You gave him Scorpius, and that was enough. You did your duty, satisfied tradition…"

Mummy's chin trembles. "I love him, Narcissa," she says. "I always have. I always will..."

"I know that, darling," Grandmother soothes. "I love him as well. But he doesn't share the feelings you have for him, and he had no right to ask for more. You know it's true. Going further

would have been vulgar, and that's not what you want. One child is an heir, but more is a complication, a *liability*. If only you'd ended it sooner, you wouldn't feel such remorse."

I realise I've bitten my fingers. Blood on my hands now.

Mummy begins to cry. "*But I wanted a girl!*"

Grandmother comforts her whilst a sad, scared little boy stands behind the curtain all night, afraid they'll notice if he goes. His fingers sting. He pisses himself and feels the warm liquid run down his legs. Cries silent tears.

But he's not me. I won't ever see that boy again.

Makeup for me after this. I'm her girl now.

Her invisible girl.

"Explain what you're saying, Scorpius," Father says. His eyes swollen red, but tears gone. "Explain about the baby."

I see Mummy's face, shiny and sad. "Ask Mummy. I don't want to talk about it," I say.

"Scorpius, please." Father says. "Tell me."

"I don't want to talk about it." Blood on Grandmother's hands. Her lips against Mummy's. I repeat, "I don't want to talk about it."

"Scorpius, please, what-"

Mummy crying and the baby's blood, and I'm still seven and I don't want to talk about it. It's my fault. I don't want to talk about it. I don't want to talk about it! Don't want to talk about it don't want to talk *don'twanttotalk*-"

I realise I'm screaming, DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT, DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT! at the top of my lungs. I press my hands over my ears.

DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT ITDON'TWANTOTALKABOUT-

Strong hands on my shoulders pull me into an embrace. My words smother against soft robes. Warmth and love, and it calms me, quiets the screaming in my ears. I close my eyes.

When I open them, Father is in his desk. Throwing papers over his shoulder. "I'm going to kill that whore, I swear to you. *Kill* her!"

"Malfoy," Harry Potter says.

"*Merlin* up the arse with a *broom*, I'm an idiot!" Father says.

"Please don't kill anyone, Malfoy," Harry Potter says. His arms are still around me, and I wonder if fat raises body temperature. I feel a bit dizzy. "Because then I'd be an accessory to the crime, and I'd hate to have to report me to myself for failure to report to myself that-"

"Bloody fucking SHIT!" Father shouts. "Where are those papers? Not the *reasonable* ones, the crazy ones I had written up when I was sloshed! The ones where she gets *nothing*!"

"Calm down," Harry Potter says. "You don't even know what this is about. Go and talk to her-"

"Oh, I'll *talk to her*," Father tells him. " I don't give a *fuck* what it's about, no one upsets my son. No one, do you hear me! NO ONE!"

"They hear you in Belize, Father," I say. My throat hurts.

Harry Potter rubs my back. "You alright?" he asks.

My eyes are dry. I check my makeup, but it's properly in place. Everything hidden behind the curtain. I slip the compact back into my pocket and the memory beneath the others: meeting Al, Dad falling in love, lipstick under tables and frosting on fingers and hands on my thigh. Percy's dark eyes. Stack them in order, big under little, line up the spines.

"Never better," I tell him. Al will be happy. I've fixed it.

Father swears. "I don't even know where she *is* right now!"

"Belize," I tell him. "Lovely beaches."

Father crows in triumph and holds a stack of parchment in the air. Kisses the paper. Kneels and wraps his arms around both me and Harry Potter.

"I oppose strangulation," I tell him.

He smiles and cups my chin. Expression flickers like candlelight. "I love you, Scorpius. Nothing is your fault, alright? Everything is going to be fine now. Father's going to take care of it."

"You don't need to resort to using third person," I say.

"And even if it were your fault- which it's not!- I want you to know that I'm always proud of you," he says. "Good parents love their children no matter what."

"I know that, Father," I tell him.

He smiles.

I turn to Harry Potter. Wrap my arms around his middle. From this angle, he nearly has a second chin. Looks exhausted. I slip Father's wedding ring from my pocket to his. "After the divorce, can I call you *Dad*?" I ask.

He presses a hand to his temple and sighs. His hair is turning grey. "We'll see, Scorpius," he says. "We'll see."

But I know he'll let me.

Good parents love their children no matter what.

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Chapter: 17

Note: The book Score is reading is called *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde. It's fabulous and creepy, and you should read it!

CHAPTER 17

Grandfather is still odd and incoherent from learning of my sexual proclivities. It's a bad idea to leave me with him. Father is off trying to find Mummy at expensive Belizean resorts. Al is at his grandparents', and they're asleep by now.

Dad takes me to stay with The Professor. They hiss at each other in the kitchen. Percy lights more candles and asks if I want tea.

I tell him I don't.

"Are you excited about the Tournament?" he asks. "Isn't it quite interesting having foreign students in the school? I was an integral part of the Tournament held just before the War, you know, the one that Head Auror Potter won. I stood in for one of the judges, a very big responsibility for a young man just out of Hogwarts. Very dramatic. I'm sure you've read about it, the situation concerning Mr Crouch…"

He keeps talking, but I don't hear. I just smile and nod and watch his lips move. They look soft. His breath smells like wine.

The Professor storms into the room. Glares at me.

I raise my hand and flick my fingers to shoo him. "Percy is imparting wisdom," I say.

Percy laughs. "It's fine, Severus, I don't mind him staying. It's only one night."

"It is your last night here," The Professor insists.

Percy shrugs. "I know you'll make it up to me."

"You," The Professor points a finger at my face, "are an inconvenient *brat*."

"Please don't traumatize him any further, Snape," Dad says. He slumps out of the kitchen and runs a hand through his hair. "I've got to get in to the office. I really appreciate it, Percy."

"Not at all, sir," Percy tells him.

Dad sighs. "We're not at work. How many times have I asked you not to call me *sir* when we're not at work?"

"I'm not sure, sir," Percy replies. "Would you like me to run a report?"

Dad stares.

"Of course, it would only be an estimation, unless you'd like me to record from this point forth and average the-"

"Please," Dad says. "*Please* no more reports, oh my *god*!"

"You can run me a report, Percy," I say. "Any time of day or night."

"You're sure you're alright?" Dad asks me. Rubs his knuckles across my chin. "You seem alright, but I won't leave you if you're not. Dark Arts will still be around in the morning, and if I've got to spend Christmas with them, then so be it. Ugh, those damned Idols…"

I nod. "I'm with Percy," I tell him.

"I have a way with young people," Percy assures him.

"I like when you have your way with me, Percy," I agree.

The Professor makes a noise.

"You owe me, Snape," Dad tells him. "This is the least you can do."

He snarls but says nothing.

Dad musses my hair, nods to Percy and steps out the front door. The crack of his Apparition rattles the hinges.

Percy turns to The Professor. Crosses his arms. "And what exactly do you owe him for this time?" he asks.

"The object was for him *not* to overwork," he says. "What sort of imbecile purposefully gives himself hives? I want him out of my hair at the Ministry so that I might accomplish some actual work, as well as… various unnameable endeavours of which you're quite aware. "

Percy raises his eyebrows. Drums his fingers against his elbow.

"The curses are linked," The Professor tells him. "I can't negate one without getting rid of them all simultaneously. And I know you don't want that."

"I didn't ask for curses! All I asked was for a bit of privacy so that-" he clears his throat and glances at me. "This is neither the time, nor the place. But it does make me *distinctly unhappy* when you do these things, Severus. He is my *boss*."

"I've done nothing wrong," The Professor claims.

"I can't believe the Dark Lord didn't see through you," I tell him. "Also, have you washed your hair?" It looks clean. Maybe that's how he intends to keep Dad out of it?

His logic escapes me.

He opens his mouth to answer, but Percy shakes his head pats him on the shoulder. "I'm getting another drink," he says. "Actually, several." Saunters out of the room.

The Professor watches him go. Tilts his head. Turns to me and clears his throat.

"You should be nicer to Percy," I tell him.

"I am nice to Percy on a regular basis," he tells me, "which has been made irregular by your unwelcome arrival."

"At least let him redecorate the house," I advise.

"You shall stay here," he says. "In this room. You shall plant your backside on that sofa," he points, "and read. Or sleep. Or twiddle your thumbs and think of wings. Whatever it is you prefer to do when you are summarily *not bothering other people*."

I tell him, "I need to fix my hair first. Dad messed it up."

He blinks at the word *Dad*.

"Severus!" Percy calls. "I have a glass of Merlot with your name on it!"

"Does he mean that in the literal sense?" I ask.

He sneers and spits, "Behave yourself!"

"I will," I say. Then, when he's closed the door: "Badly."

After I fix my hair, I find the book Percy was reading before. The one he dropped ash on. I pull it from its clamshell case and sit.

Muggle book. Gilt lettering, bit of restoration to the spine tail. Must be famous to have cost so much. I open it.

Tale of a young Muggle who charms his portrait to take on the true image of his wrongs, whilst he stays beautiful and innocent looking forever. He stares in awe at the cruel twist to his painted lips after he's caused the suicide of his fiancée.

I'm thinking of how horrid it would be to kill yourself over someone who could never love you as much as his own reflection, when Percy walks in. A glass of red wine rests in his hand, his fingers twisted around the stem. "Ah, I should've guessed," he says. "Oscar Wilde."

"He fairly gushes with *bon mots*," I tell him.

He leans on the back of my chair. The wine sloshes but doesn't spill. I set the book aside just in case. It would be bad if The Professor killed him. "Could I try some, Percy?" I ask.

He smiles, lopsided. Hands me the glass. I find where he's put his lips, and drink from there.

"Up to Malfoy standards?" he asks.

I nod and hand it back. It slips from his grasp and spills on his fingers before I can catch it. He swears.

"It's fine," I tell him. I mop up with my robes. My fingers brush the back of his hand.

He says, "Hmm," and knocks back the last of it. Sets the glass under the chair. Wobbles as he stands.

"Are you drunk?" I ask.

He laughs. "You're a good boy, Scorpius," he tells me. "I like you."

"I like you, too," I say. "You're barely slurring."

He drapes himself over the chair. "Are you alright? Severus says you've had a bad time of things tonight. Arguments, divorces…" Waves a hand in the air. "Literary homoeroticism…"

"I'd like you even if you did slur," I assure him. "Those last two were very big words." And he looks so handsome no matter how he talks.

"Well, I'd like you if you slurred, too," he says. Grins and sways. Rests his chin on the chair back and gazes down at me.

His dark robes bleed into the night, his face soft in the light of the candles. The curve of his jaw, pink in his cheeks from the alcohol. Deep, intoxicating eyes. Parted lips.

His cheek is warm.

The faintest hint of stubble prickles my fingertips as I run them across it. Tingles my senses. I trace down with my fingers until they reach his lips. Moist with wine. Soft as silk.

My breath catches in my chest.

He says something I don't hear because my heart is beating in my ears. His breath puffs against my skin.

I think of Rose and her peony kisses, being wrapped up with her, around, beneath, within. I hear the noises she made, feel her hands on my shoulders, thighs around my waist. How it felt to find my release inside her.

It was nothing compared to this.

Percy's fingers close around mine. "Scorpius, please," he murmurs.

The world shifts back into focus, scent of flowers still hanging in the air. He sets my hand in my lap. It looks small and pale against my robes. Callus from where my quill rests. Clear lacquer on the nails.

"You misunderstand me," Percy says.

"I don't," I tell him. "Nothing has ever been clearer."

The Professor's voice: "What in Merlin's name are you doing?"

Percy tells me, "Perhaps you should read something a bit more… innocuous." Pats me on the head.

The Professor takes hold of his arm and guides him back into the kitchen. They talk in low tones,

Percy laughs and I go back to the book. Nothing innocuous in this house.

I realise Percy's left his glass.

"Percy?" I say, and bring it into the kitchen.

They're not there.

A bottle of wine sits empty on the countertop. Beside it another, half drank, and one glass. Drop of purple-red in the bottom.

I refill Percy's glass.

The back door sticks. I jiggle the handle and open it a crack.

Their voices from the garden.

"Though I don't understand why, when it's clear the boy is enamoured of you," The Professor is saying.

"Come now, you're overreacting," Percy responds. "He's just a boy. I would never."

"I know a bit about what you would and would not do, Percy Weasley," The Professor tells him. "It's shocking on a number of levels."

Percy laughs. You can hear the drink in his voice. "How many levels, do you think? More than the usual?"

"Perhaps not for a Slytherin, but for a former Gryffindor Head Boy…"

"Too bad I'm not wearing my pin, we could play *detention*. That's your favourite, isn't it? Teach the naughty child his lesson… right, Professor? Potions master… Headmaster… Master of…"

I don't catch the last bit, and they go silent.

I step outside. Look for them with one hand on the doorknob. Wine glass in the other. Percy shouldn't be out in such a state. Talking gibberish and laughing at things that aren't funny.

A foot grinds against gravel, and I catch sight of them by a tree. Black figures in a sea of dim grey. Light flares, and Percy brings a cigarette to his mouth.

"When I met Audrey, I swore I wouldn't do this any more," he says. "I made a promise to myself."

"Filthy habit," The Professor tells him.

He snorts. "Not the cigarettes. *This*. You know what I'm saying."

"Considering your current state of inebriation, I probably know what you're saying before you manage to get it out. You do realise that we've had this conversation before, do you not?"

"I was ashamed. Well, not ashamed, but I… Some days it felt as though people could tell just looking at me…"

"They could tell looking at you now," The Professor says.

Percy laughs and twists behind the tree, so I can't see him. The Professor follows.

He murmurs something like, "I don't mind the curses."

Odd noises, and I grasp the knob tighter. It's cold against my skin.

Percy's laugh again, breathless, and he swings back into view. Light of the cigarette shifts as he raises his hand to his mouth.

"Stop playing coy," The Professor tells him. "We both know you're not."

He exhales. "You know, I didn't think you were serious when you propositioned me," he says.

"I didn't proposition you," The Professor says. "I told you to proposition *me*. And I *wasn't* serious. I hated the sight of you. Leave it to a Gryffindor to take every word literally. Have you ever been quite this intoxicated in my presence before?"

"I'm barely even drunk," Percy tells him.

He snorts.

"You like Gryffindors, don't you?" Percy asks. "They're your favourite. Little golden boys. Best to toy with. Best to corrupt. Best to-" he leans in, and I don't catch the word. His face close to The Professor's in the moonlight.

The Professor clears his throat. "I admit, they do have their… appeal…"

Percy laughs again, throws his head back. Stumbles toward the tree. Leans against it and takes another drag. My eyes are used to the night now, and I see the line of his jaw, the curve of his lips.

"No one else now. Don't you dare, Severus. Only me," he says.

The Professor shouldn't be touching him. Should take his nasty fingers off Percy's neck.

"I believe I've more than compensated for that temporary oversight," he says.

Too close to Percy. Head tilted, lips near his chin.

Percy murmurs, "Did you really think he'd be better? Let you do things to him I wouldn't? Hadn't even been with a man before…"

"Now Percy," he chides, as though to a small child, "you know it wasn't my head I was thinking with if, indeed, I was thinking at all. Revenge is too sweet."

"Ah, so it was about his father, then? Here and I thought it was because of his-"

"Have I not atoned?" The Professor cuts across him. "Passed him on to his rightful owner? Is Draco Malfoy not handing his estranged wife divorce papers as we speak?"

"Mmm," says Percy, and brings his hand to the Professor's cheek. Tilts his hips toward the man. "Really, should we? The boy is just inside, Severus. I told you, I'm not that drunk… or maybe I am…"

But I'm not inside. I'm *here*, watching. Invisible. Push him away, Percy. Make him stop.

He'll blackmail you.

But Percy doesn't. He laughs- always laughing with The Professor, *always*- and whispers something.

The Professor's hand slides across his chest. He murmurs, "You *would* ask for that."

Percy laughs.

The Professor drops to his knees.

I shouldn't look, it feels wrong in my stomach, but I can't stop. His arm reaching under Percy's robes. Percy spreading his legs and throwing the robes over The Professor's head. Laughing, laughing.

My jaw trembles.

Percy brings his cigarette to his lips. Takes a drag and rolls his head back against the tree trunk. Smoke seeps from his lips. His eyes close. Brow creases.

He gasps.

Obscene noises from under his robes. The Professor shifts, the horror of his form concealed

except his boots, which bite into the dirt. Bodiless nightmare, demon succubus.

"Oh, fuck," murmurs Percy. "Fuck fuck fuck-"

Stop, stop, please Percy, don't let him. Don't do this. Not you! *Please*-

Mouth wide, eyes squeezed shut, chest lifting. Cigarette held in the air, other hand on the head between his thighs.

"Higher, higher… push… harder, like you're going to-" he groans, "*oh, Merlin! Ah! AH!*"

I don't know how I get into the house. The door is shut behind me. The air still and quiet. The Professor's wine glass sits on the countertop.

The silence deafens. My footfalls resound like thunderclaps. My hand slides against the wood of the sitting room door like the grating of sandpaper. It closes behind me like an explosion.

Dorian Gray sits beside the chair, his portrait grown more hideous with his wrongs. I run my fingers over the type, indented from the old press. So gorgeous.

"How could you have?" I ask. It doesn't answer.

I throw it against a bookshelf.

It slides down in Omniocular slow motion, hits the ground with a dull thud. Upside-down, its spine broken. Pages twisted and bent in disarray.

How could you have? You were different. Special. I would have given anything. It's not right. Not fair. It's wrong, all *wrong*, and I can't do anything, it's all *shit* and it's not *fair*!

Signed by the author, first edition 1891, one of a kind, beautiful, and now look at it. Broken and beaten on the floor. Ruined!

I hate The Professor. HATE him. Want to kill him like that book, rip him limb from limb, tear him apart page by page. KILL HIM!

The room shakes, but it's not the room, it's me. I'm shaking, I can't take it. Not Percy. No. No, no, no, no no nononono-

All of it gone. All of it. I want it all gone, nothing left, and this ache will leave. No wand in my hand but something else that stings, and something burns inside me.

The room swims in red, and the book bursts into flame.

Pages crinkle and spark, Dorian's life going up in smoke, and the shelf behind it catches fire. The

old parchment ignites, and dozens of priceless manuscripts curl and blacken. So easy to destroy, these precious things. So easy to watch them smoke and spread the flame. The entire wall ablaze.

Window coverings catch, and I wish it would hurry. Want it all gone. Everything burnt, nothing but husks of beauty and knowledge.

But it's horrible.

I hate The Professor, but I hate this, too. My heart on fire like the books, and I'm trapped inside it. Tearing at the fabric of the curtain in my mind, fingers bloody. Percy on the other side, I can almost reach him. But The Professor's covered him with draperies, wrapped him up tight.

Percy moans in ecstasy.

I can't breathe. Can't see. The curtains smother me, smoke in my eyes. My sister's unmade cries ring in my ears. The room is a circle of fire, and I cough and cover my eyes.

Run for the Floo.

I hit the grate of the Burrow so hard, I tumble onto the floor. Everything as it always is: nothing clouding my mind. Silent, peaceful.

Wrong.

A noise from the sofa. Al sits up.

"Score?" he mutters. Wipes at his eyes. "What are you doing here? Is everything alright? Is your dad okay? They're not really breaking up, are they?"

I say nothing, and he stands. Lights a candle.

"Oh my *god*, what happened to you!" he cries. "You're bleeding!"

I look down and raise my hand. Blood oozes down my fingers and onto the carpet. I unclench my fist and find the remains of Percy's wine glass. Deep slices from the broken glass.

"Let me see it," he says. Hands warm against my skin. Blood spilling over his fingers. "Oh my *god*, what did you *do*?"

I try to say it, but my voice won't work. My head swims, and his face blurs.

"Score-"

I fall into him, bury my face in his robes, and I cry.

I cry for Percy, losing him forever, and Al because I couldn't bear to see him go. I cry for Mummy and Father, Grandmother and Grandfather, and my little baby sister whom I miss more than anything and will never get to know. I cry for her snuggling in my bed when she has nightmares, her first day of school and the boy she'd one day love who will now be forever without her. For myself, because I'm without her, too.

I cry because life is awful, and beautiful, and if I had to hold it in any longer, I'd burst.

Al strokes my hair and says it'll be okay. He says *shh* and *it's alright* when I tell him about it- about everything, gushing like a broken tap, and I can't make the words stop.

When I've said it all, I tell him I love him, say it over and over until I can't say it anymore, until someone else is there. Mrs Weasley, examining my wound. Her hand on my forehead, worry in her eyes.

The worry: I see it now. How she feels. *That* she feels.

And so do I.

I feel scared, and sad, and angry, and helpless. Lost and abandoned. I feel loved, and protected, and wanted. The curtain is gone, lying in tatters on the floor at my feet. I step over it.

"I think there's something wrong with me," I whisper.

"Shh," says Al. He cradles me against him. Strokes my cheek. "You'll be fine, I promise. You're just confused. It's hard. Life is hard. But we love you, and you're going to be fine."

"Father's divorcing her," I say. "Right now. He's divorcing my Mummy." Makes me want to cry again.

"But that's good! Right? Pretty soon, we'll be brothers," he tells me. Smiles angelically down at me.

Mr Weasley comes in and looks at my hand. Says I should go to St Mungo's.

"He's fine, Arthur, I'll brew something up for that scratch in no time," she says. "You just go back to bed, nothing to worry about. Now if I can just find that copy of *Healer's Helpmate*…"

Al holds me as she pulls a sliver of glass from my palm and slathers on the salve. Strokes his thumb against my neck. Rubs my shoulder.

"There, see? All better," he whispers.

"I'm tired," I tell him.

"Yeah, it's three in the morning," he says. "That's normal."

"I ache like I haven't slept in years," I say.

He sighs. Kisses my forehead.

Feels so good. Warm hands, soft lips, sinking into Al's feelings like bathwater. "Lips," I whisper, wanting to drown in him. "Lips next."

Dad chooses this moment to enter the house.

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Chapter: 18

Note: This chapter is borderline NC-17, but after much internal debate, I've decided it still qualifies as R. I'm assuming that if you've read this far, you're okay with that, but if semi-explicit boysex bothers you, consider yourself warned =).

CHAPTER 18

Dad looks like he wants to yell, but stops when he sees my face. His eyes widen. Jaw falls open, and he brings a hand to his forehead. Sighs.

"God, what a night," he says.

"Dad, what's going on?" Al asks. "Did you and Mr Malfoy make up? Why've you still got your work clothes on? Haven't you been to bed? Do you know what time it-"

"Scorpius," Dad tells me, "I understand if you're having a hard time with this. But would you like to explain to me why you tried to burn down Professor Snape's house?"

Mrs Weasley's throat makes a sound like a teakettle boiling over. "Harry, the boy is in shock! He needs some rest and a good meal, not- not accusations of-"

"Snape showed up at the office covered in soot and screaming at the top of his lungs that half of his library had been reduced to ashes. It was all Percy could do to stop him coming here himself," he tells her. Turns to me. "Did you do this, Scorpius?"

I nod.

Al makes a noise. "I'm sure he didn't mean it, Dad," he says. "It was an accident. These things

happen. He was upset. Right, Score? Tell him you didn't mean it."

"I didn't mean it," I say. "What I meant to do was burn down the *entire* house. And then crush The Professor's skull, spoon out his brains, and spit on them."

"Um," Al says.

Mrs Weasley's mouth hangs open like she's trying to catch things with it.

"Can I call you *Grandma* now?" I ask.

"Why don't you boys go upstairs," Dad says. "Wash off Scorpius's face, Al, and I'll be up in a few minutes. I need to talk with your Grandmother about a couple of things I probably should've mentioned a long time ago, and I think she'll want to be sitting down when she hears. Don't go too far though, I don't want to have to arrest anyone, alright?"

In his Uncle Ron's old room, faded Canons soaring across the walls, Al wipes a warm flannel over my cheeks. "You're all sooty. I thought it was from the Floo. Did you really set Professor Snape's house on fire? That's pretty ballsy."

I don't really feel like talking about it. It hurts. Those books were innocent. "He shouldn't touch Percy like that," I tell him.

He sighs. Brings the flannel to my chin. "So you know about the two of them now? I mean, I guess you do, because I can talk about it without my throat closing up."

I stare at him.

He pulls a face as though eating something sour. "Did he have his tongue down Uncle Percy's throat again? I caught them snogging once in the office when they thought no one else was there. Noses all smooshed up and Uncle Percy's glasses crooked, not very sexy. I'm sorry, Score, I know how you like him, and I wanted to tell you, but-"

"Did you bring him mouthwash?" I ask. Chest filled with strange emotion: panic?

Al sighs and wipes off my lipstick. "Calm down, okay? They've been on-again-off-again since before our dads, I'm sure he was used to the germs by then. Professor Snape's the reason he broke it off with his fiancée, Uncle Percy told me. Though why he didn't string her along a bit longer I couldn't say, considering he had Professor Snape put a curse on their relationship so you can only talk about it with someone who already knows."

"Why would Percy throw himself away like that?" I ask. The flannel tastes funny against my tongue.

"Yeah, he could've got double the action, you know? And maybe even a threesome, if he'd

played his cards right. Not very clever, if you ask me. I think Professor Snape's like, in love with him but can't admit it. 'Cause he's still stuck on Dad's mum, you know?" he continues. "It's hard to be better than dead people, they can't make mistakes. And they're amazing in bed."

"I hate dead people," I say. Though I hate The Professor more.

And it's true: I've discovered Hate.

"Scorpius." Dad's coming into the room. He locks the door behind him.

"It's not his fault!" Al insists.

"I'm not assigning any blame," he says. "Once upon a time, I would've been first in line to burn that man's house down, believe me. I've sent a couple of Aurors out to try to smooth things over, or at least keep Snape from casting any curses that are actually lethal."

"He makes linked curses," I tell him, "that's why no one can counteract them. And he blackmails Percy. And has horrific fashion sense. You should arrest him. And buy him teeth whitener."

"That's from all the tea," Al says. "After a while, it turns them yellow."

"Blue undertone lip colour would counteract that," I tell him. It's a very unsettling topic, and now that I'm capable of being unsettled, I really can't say more.

Dad sighs. "You sound like you're back to normal," he says. "Though *normal* probably isn't the word. Are you at least through with arson for the night? So that I can get an hour or two of sleep before I have to deal with this? Or do I need to call a squad in? Because if I'm still this exhausted and your father comes back without a signature, I'll be spending Christmas in Azkaban."

"He'll get her to sign the papers," I assure him. "Or emigrate to Bermuda. Do you think *Arson* is a pretty name?"

"Dad!" Al exclaims, leaps and throws his arms around him. "This is so perfect! Just imagine, Mr Malfoy can move in! We can eat breakfast together, and go to swanky hotels on holiday! And he can shag you stupid every night!"

"*Al*," he scolds, and peels him off.

Al grins. "Or do you shag *him* stupid? Is there a protocol for these things? My education is lacking. And do you think Professor Snape would take me as his apprentice now that Score set fire to his house? I bet he could teach me all *sorts* of illicit things about sex, so you won't have to!"

"This day will end," Dad says. "It only *seems* like the nightmare will last forever…"

Al snorts. "Wow, go to bed, Dad. You're delirious."

He sets up a ward on the door so that neither of us can leave, and no one but he can get in. He's going to sleep in the room next door, so just bang on the wall if we want him. Asks one more time if I'm sure I'm alright.

"Of course he's alright, he's with me," Al tells him. Rolls his eyes like it's the most obvious thing in the world.

Maybe it is.

Al sorts through the drawers for pyjamas for me, but can't find anything besides that ghastly shade of orange. "Whoever invented this colour should be drawn and quartered. Think I should take a chance with the Trace and charm them black? Or do you want to switch with me?" he asks.

I shrug and put them on despite the colour. Crawl into bed with him. I'm so tired, the pillow shifts like we're at sea.

"Was that really true?" he asks. "You had a sister?"

"Let's not talk about her right now," I tell him. It's too late, and I'm tired, and the memory feels raw like a fresh scrape.

Al smiles and strokes my hair. "Alright, we don't have to. You sure you're okay now, though?" he asks.

"No," I tell him. Wrap my arms around his waist. His clothing smells like sleep, and I bury my nose in the fabric.

He sighs. Runs his fingers through my hair. "Is there anything I can do to help? You're not going to crush my skull and spit on *my* brains, are you?" Fingernails against my scalp send chills down my spine.

"No," I say. "I like your brains. Get behind my ears. With your nails."

"You're like a cat," he mumbles, but does it.

"No, lower. By my neck, scratch there," I murmur. Feels so good, and I burrow my face against the side of his neck. Moist heat and boy smell, and I pull him in closer. Slide a knee between his thighs. Press my lips just below his earlobe.

"Um," he says, "you remember how I was telling you about being ridiculously horny? And like, wanking so often I can barely hold a quill?"

"Mmm," I reply through the muzzy warmth that's soaking into my body.

"Yeah, well, just ignore that thing pressing against your hip," he says. "It's nothing. Maybe I should talk to Dad about it, see a healer or something, because that can't be normal or even, like, healthy, you know? I mean, Uncle George was telling me about breeding Pygmy Puffs yesterday, how the males make these little squeaking noises, and I just about *creamed* my-"

"Your throat vibrates when you talk," I whisper.

He sighs and rubs his thumb across my cheek. "Just ignore it. Okay? It doesn't mean anything. You're my best mate. And practically my brother. I'm pushing for bunk beds."

If he hadn't mentioned it, I wouldn't have noticed. My wits are dulled, I'm so tired. But I shift my hips and feel it there, against my stomach. I think of it in Claire's panties, or rather *out* of Claire's panties, tip wet and slippery. Think of Pygmy Puffs mating and him fisting at himself in the loo, head thrown back and lips parted.

My own starts to throb, and I press it in against his thigh. So warm here against him, everything warm- my body, my mind, my heart.

"Um, Score?" he whispers.

I run my lips along the shell of his ear. Take the lobe between my teeth.

"*Score*," he hisses. "*Stop that*, or I'm going to-"

I like the sounds he makes. Little whimpers, and he rubs against me, wedges my leg further between his thighs. The sound catches in his throat when I snake my tongue into his ear.

"*Score*," he breathes. "*Please*-"

His hand twists into my hair, pulls my mouth away. Wet trail across his cheek with my tongue, and he brings my lips to his.

"I want this," he whispers against me. "Please… want you so bad, Score… *please*…"

I run my tongue across his bottom lip, and his hips jerk. He breathes in gasps, murmuring *please, please*. I swallow, my head swimming, and ask, "Then why are you still talking?"

Kissing Al isn't smooth and petal soft like kissing Rose. It's hard, loud and sharp, and makes me feel like I'm losing my mind. His tongue filling my mouth and teeth nipping my lips. His hands gripping my shoulders and pulling me onto him. Grinding his hips against me.

His mouth slips from mine and covers my chin, sloppy, and shuddering moans fill my ears.

They're mine, those moans.

Al whispers, "Oh god, oh god…" against my neck and fumbles at the waistband of my pyjamas.

Nothing tentative or questioning as his fingers wrap around me. Sure and strong, and I squeeze my eyes shut. It's never felt like this before, this rush of heat, this closeness, wanting nothing but Al inside and out.

But then, I realise as the waves wash over me, blissful tide of release in his palm: nothing has felt like much of anything for a very long time.

Al pants under me and runs sticky fingers through my hair. "Oh my *god*," he manages. "You're even better than I dreamed… and I dreamed a *lot*, Score, always you… only you…"

"Are you smearing semen in my hair?" I ask.

He laughs, breathless. "Yeah, I am! Isn't it perfect?"

"It is," I agree, and can't help but laugh with him, the sound light and innocent.

Happy. I'm happy.

When I can move again, I roll off him. He squirms in next to me and throws a leg over my hip. Strokes my arm when I wrap it around him. "I didn't think you liked me that way," he murmurs.

"I like you in all ways," I tell him. "You know that."

He snorts. Kisses my nose. "Well, I didn't realise *all ways* meant with my hand around your cock."

"Neither did I," I tell him, and kiss his nose. "But I should have. What about your cousin?"

He touches his lips to mine. "Rose? What about her? She had her chance, now you're *my* boyfriend. She can piss off."

"No, the Veela with sharp elbows. Victoire. Didn't you used to think of her?" I ask. I tap my tongue against his lips.

He sticks out his tongue and flicks it against mine. Makes circles with the tip. Laughs. "It's more like I imagined *being* her, you know? With these amazing tits and arse and… looking so bleeding *gorgeous* that blokes wanked over me. And maybe *on* me. Do you think that makes me a slut? Like Dad?"

"I love you, Al," I tell him. "But I'm too tired to think about Dad right now."

"You're calling him Dad?" he asks. Shifts against me. "Really?"

"Yes," I say, "but only after I've slept."

He sighs. "Love you too, Score," he says, and tucks his lips in under my jaw. Blows a raspberry against my neck.

I smile and close my eyes. "Love you," I murmur. Only enough time to think, *And I finally know what that means, now* before I drift off.

He wakes me up three times to do it again.

The sky is growing light as the sun creeps toward the horizon, and birds chirp outside the window. We've lost our pyjama tops at some point that exhaustion has made impossible to recall. Sweat sticks his hair to his forehead and his pyjama bottoms to the curves of his arse. I skim my fingers across it.

He rubs himself off against my hip.

"You weren't joking about being horny, were you?" I ask.

He grunts and shoves into me. "Sorry," he grits out from between clenched teeth.

"It's fine," I tell him. "I like to watch."

"You," he pants, breath against my shoulder, "you *do*?"

I nod. "I do. I think you're beautiful. So beautiful, Al… I love you so much…"

He gasps. Grabs hold of my hand on his arse and shoves my fingers between his cheeks. Deep, cloth taut under my fingertips. His mouth opens and eyes go wide, the deepest green I've ever seen. His body shudders, and they squeeze shut.

"Sorry!" he gasps. Collapses onto me. His bliss seeps through the fabric to my skin.

"I really don't mind," I tell him. Stroke his damp fringe off his forehead.

He shifts, and a bead of sweat drips off the end of his nose onto my wrist. I bring it to my lips.

He lays his head beside mine, forehead to clammy forehead. Whispers, "I want you so much."

I bring his arm around my chest and tell him, "Seems like you have me."

His eyes crinkle like laughter, and he closes them, exhausted. The morning birds chirp a lullaby, and I drift back to sleep in his arms.

It is a shame we don't think to cover up before Dad and Father come in with the good news.

"You know, they say history repeats itself, but this seems like a bit of a rush job," Father announces. He eyes us with what I think is curiosity.

Al mumbles, "Make the morning *stop*…" and burrows under my armpit.

Poor Dad very nearly has a aneurism.

Aren't my new family wonderful?

* * AFTERWARD * *

Al's birthday is on a Hogsmeade weekend, and James treats us all to drinks at The Hog's Head. He passes butterbeers to Rose and Cordelia and slides glasses in front of Al and me. Blows off the dust and pours for us.

Al puts an arm around my shoulder. Thumb rubbing against my neck. His eyes are done up in smoky metallics. He's almost too perfect to be real.

"Oi, fill it all the way, you tosser," he orders. "It's my effing birthday!"

James grins and tops off the firewhiskey. Slides in next to Cordelia and pushes her hair behind her ear. Whispers something that makes her blush.

I take Al's hand in mine and press my lips to his knuckles. He pulls me in for a kiss.

"Oh, none of that yet, we haven't even made the toast!" Rose scolds.

Al snorts and pecks me on the cheek.

James raises his bottle. "To my brother," he says, "who I hope will be a lot less annoying now that he's sixteen."

Cordelia claps.

Rose sighs and shakes her head.

"Yeah, keep dreaming, James," Al says with a grin. "I've only just *begun* to annoy."

"It's nice you two are getting along so well now," I say.

Things were at their worst between them after Christmas. James panicked when he saw Father had bought Dad roses. Said he wasn't about to spend his holiday with a family of freaks. Al

nearly broke his nose. Declared that he was boycotting the Tournament, but ended up being recruited. I can still see his face as he stepped out of the pit, robes charred and scarf in green and silver tatters.

"What the *fuck*, James! *I'm* your most important person?" he shouts. "*Me?*"

James winces. Scratches the back of his neck. One of his eyebrows has been singed off. "Er… yeah?" he offers. "Who else is there?"

Al likes hating his brother, throwing insults like misaimed Quaffles. Beaning referees. But he likes being important much more.

I like alcohol I don't have to smuggle back in my pocket Transfigured into a bra.

Those clasps can be tricky.

"How about a *proper* toast?" Rose suggests.

Al laughs and bangs on the table. "Let's hear it, Rosie! Toast, toast, toast!"

Behind the bar, Aberforth looks annoyed.

Rose clears her throat. Raises her butterbeer.

"Good luck!" whispers Cordeila.

"To Albus," Rose says, "who is today sixteen and surrounded by his good friends, his loving brother and, um… boyfriend, who-"

"Who shags like a minx," Al interjects.

"-*whom he adores*," Rose corrects, looking cross. "May he have a happy birthday, and many more to follow. It is my-"

"And blowjobs," Al adds. "Many, many fantastic blowjobs."

"Or castles in Spain," I tell him. "With spiral staircases and jutting turrets, because that's the closest you'll get."

He groans.

It's the one thing I won't do. Rose says it may be Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. She's very supportive. I brought it up to my counsellor. He has thick glasses and thin lips and insists that I call him Ned. I'd rather call him an officious nincompoop, but Father says I've got to see him, or The Professor will press charges.

I'd like to press my knee firmly into The Professor's groin. But at least he's letting Uncle Percy redecorate.

You see? Silver lining.

"Really, Spanish castles? Are you interested in neoclassical architecture?" Cordelia asks.

"Huh?" says Al.

"I give up," Rose declares, throwing a hand into the air in defeat. "Forget it. Screw the toast! Let's just drink."

The liquor isn't bad, though a bit odd when paired with the goat smell.

You should never visit the bathrooms here. At least, not alone. Rose and Cordelia go together, whispering and looking over their shoulders at James. Cordelia's face is redder than his scarf.

Al wraps his carmine lips around Rose's butterbeer bottle and gulps it down. "I'm trying to teach her not to leave her drinks sitting around," he tells me. "It's not safe."

"I said nothing," I tell him.

"Your eyes speak volumes," he informs me.

"I wish they'd stop doing that," I say. They never did before. People know what I feel now. *That* I feel.

It's hard sometimes, having feelings. When you least expect, they burst in uninvited, like second cousins thrice removed at a family reunion. They bring casseroles of questionable edibility.

Once, I burst into uncontrollable laughter in Astronomy class. Uranus was just *funny*. Not funny when I realised about the Thestrals, though.

Why I can see them.

I cried so hard for her, they had to call Father.

Usually it's Al. I look at him when he's sleeping, or laughing, or up to his elbows in dirt transplanting Devil's Snare, and want him so badly, I ache with it. Want his green eyes filled with nothing but me. Fingernails digging into my shoulder blades, chest heaving. Heels pounding out a rhythm on my back.

Whispered *I love you* mixed with the aftershocks.

Of all the emotions I've discovered, that one's my favourite.

"She doesn't seem like your type, James," Al is saying. "Her tits are like lemons."

Takes me a moment to realise he's talking about Cordelia.

James clears his throat.

"Are you blushing?" I ask.

"No," he says, and blushes deeper. "She just- she's different, okay? I mean, I offered to… well, it's not like I *offered* just like *that*, you know, but I sort of hinted that maybe if she happened to be, I don't know, *interested*-"

"Wow, cut to the chase, James," Al says. Rolls his eyes, but his lips still smile.

He coughs and takes a drink. "She said… she wanted to *wait*. Until we got to know each other better. Met each others *parents*. How great is that? I mean, really classy, right? Waiting for sex?"

"You heteros are cracked," Al announces.

"Have you got blue balls by now?" I ask.

He winces. His freckles look quite repressed.

Al snorts. "Maybe you could rent farm animals. Don't they do that here?"

I kiss his cheek to distract him because he'll be upset if we get kicked out on his birthday.

He smiles and pulls me in closer.

I wish I could always feel this way. Grimmauld Place is so dark though, and cramped, and Winky sings off key when she's on the piss. Malfoy Manor will always be home to Father. The fountains and woods and mirrors and pink peonies against white marble.

There, I'm like a carpet with a nasty stain. Won't come clean even after you charm it a dozen times. Grandmother's moved back in, and she gives it foul looks and worries what visitors will think. But it's an heirloom, that carpet, been in the family forever, we can't get rid of it.

She covers it with a chaise lounge.

Grandfather won't sit on it. Perhaps he prefers Bavarian carpets?

Though I can't imagine the craftsmanship would be up to standards.

"Alright, who drank my butterbeer?" Rose demands when she and Cordelia return. "Albus!"

"Why do you automatically assume it was me?" he demands, looking hurt. "It's because I'm a Slytherin, isn't it? Everyone always accuses the Slytherin first! I mean, I *did* it, but that's still not fair! Stop *subjugating* me!"

"Albus Severus Potter!" Rose scolds. "That is an improper use of the word *subjugate*, and you know it!"

I raise my glass and sip. Rub at the fingerprints until I see my reflection. I smile at it.

The boy in the glass smiles back, carmine kiss mark on his cheek from Al's lips. Makeup-less and pale but happy. Comfortable in his own skin. So long since I've seen him, since he stood behind that curtain with his world being torn to shreds before his innocent eyes.

Whyever did I leave him there?

"I've missed you," I tell him.

He grins wider. Winks at me with his third eyelid.

Al grabs the glass from my hands, deposits it on the table and kisses me. Lips against lips, delicious closeness. Tastes like liquor. He runs a hand up my thigh. "Have you got any idea how I feel right now?" he asks, breath against my skin.

"As though you're toeing the line of *desperate* like a tightrope and rapidly losing your balance?" I offer.

He grins. Carmine marvellously smeared. "Wow, how'd you know?"

"It's the therapy," I confide, dipping in for another kiss. "It's doing wonders."

He laughs and pulls me onto his lap.

"Ugh, do *not* do that in public, you two!" James insists, voice pinched. "You're going to make me *spew*!"

We do anyway.

No one spews.

Being invisible can be nice, but sitting on your boyfriend's lap in a bar whilst he snogs you senseless seems so much nicer.

Don't you think?

FIN