

Where Your Loyalties Lie

by *Advanced Smut Making*

Torn between the ambitions of her father and her own desires, a seventh-year Slytherin student finds herself involved in situations well beyond her control, dragging her Head of House along with her. Set during G.O.F.

An Odd Place to Meet

Chapter 1 of 17

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Disclaimer: J.K. Rowling owns absolutely everything, except for Isolde and, of course, a little bookstore in the back alley of Hogsmeade. They belong to us; we use them to lure the Potions Master.

Chapter One An Odd Place to Meet

A furious wind whipped the tiny township of Hogsmeade, shrieking through alleyways, rattling windows and carrying a most unwelcome tumult of blinding snow. One or two people could be observed ducking from building to building in an attempt to go about their daily business, but most chose to curl up in their favourite pub or cafe, escaping the sharp talons of winter.

Isolde was well aware that her decision to boycott the toasty warmth of The Three Broomsticks, and subsequently the company of her friends, was an antisocial one. The seventh-year Slytherin could not help that she found welcome solace within the embrace of Zuranders second hand book shop. Few students knew of the place, but Isolde had been fortunate enough to stumble across it in her fourth year. Its dusty shelves enticed her, every one brimming with an eclectic mix of titles. Her favourite shelf contained shameless bodice rippers with titles like *Love Slave to the Warlock* and *In the Vampire's Bed*. The contents of the tiny shop also attracted a number of interesting clientele, and it was one of these individuals in particular that truly drew Isolde into the depths of its obscurity.

It was Snape who had led her there in the first place, in fact. Unbeknown to him, Isolde had followed his billowing dark robes to its doorstep and watched him survey its dusty shelves from the chilly observation point of a side window. She still remembered how ragged her breath had been after trying to keep up with his heavy tread in the snow, and the way her own breath, smearing the ice-cold window pane with wantonness, had obscured her already restricted view of her professor.

The shop every murky inch of it had been a natural enticement to Isolde. But what increased its pull tenfold was *him*. Her professor. Just the way his onyx eyes scanned the shelves, the way his silent strides through the aisles pronounced his authority, made Isolde bite her lip with exhilaration. She could not imagine a more fitting backdrop for the guarded figure she had known for years, and yet learnt very little of. Still, she felt a somewhat girlish sense of privilege that she alone had glimpsed him in his element...this *haven* to which he always ventured.

She had never dared to go inside...not when *he* was in there. No. Isolde would wait in the wintry confines of the side passage, taking mental notes of every detail, every footfall, every finger as it grazed a moth-eaten spine.

It was only once he had gathered his cloak and left that she would ever allow herself access to his retreat. There she would trace his steps, running her fingers over the

same books in the hope that they might still hold a vestige of his warmth. At times, she even imagined a hint of his scent still lingered in the air long after his departure. Peppermint and sandalwood was an intoxicating combination, and Severus Snape was an enigma wrapped in a dark, brooding and delicious shell...a mystery she longed to solve.

On this particularly bitter day, Isolde did not have the luxury of extended observation. It was not the weather that drove her away from her usual watching post, but rather the promise of her latest order. Through the murky glass of the shop doors, she could see the small package sitting on the edge of the counter, deceptively innocent in its skin of brown paper.

Instinctively, she allowed her eyes to wash over the landscape. The snow under her feet was pristine, tainted only by her own footfalls. The shop itself was empty, but for the ancient gangly wizard behind the counter, his flat nose buried in a dusty tome.

Snape was not there. She was safe.

A blanket of warmth engulfed her upon entering, exorcising the bitter fingers of cold from her shivering figure. The tinkling of the door bell caused the aged wizard to peer up from his book, but as was his custom, he did not utter a word. Their transaction was equally as silent, his only acknowledgement a curt nod as she handed over her coins.

Excitement coursed through her veins, imbuing her with a sense of recklessness only a new bodice ripper could bring. Slowly, tantalisingly, she removed the brown wrapping, her cheeks turning scarlet as her periwinkle gaze fell upon the title: *The Potions Master's Mistress* by Gabrielle Mercer.

It was shameless, it was horrific and yet it was another small delight that this hidden treasure, this Aladdin's cave of book shops, could provide.

Her eyes still transfixed on her sordid purchase, Isolde shuffled absentmindedly away from the dark wooden counter, allowing a squat, wrinkled witch to place her items on its surface, pulling the shop owner once more from his book. Though a low-pitched, guttural exchange ensued, Isolde could not draw herself away from the moving image on the front cover: a tall, dark-cloaked figure with his back facing her, fumes of concealed potions rising above his broad shoulders. The movement was so subtle that it could have been blamed on the dim lighting, but as Isolde narrowed her eyes, she indeed saw the clouds of vapour swirl nonchalantly around the black, bowed figure. Each curl of mist looked so authentic that, for one brief deceptive moment, she almost felt the heat of the steam on her fingertips as she caressed the hardback cover repeatedly.

She smiled. If she did not know any better, she would have thought the illustrated figure was a portrait of...

"Has it arrived yet, Brinkley?"

The familiar baritone jolted her fixations.

Isolde had been so immersed in the hauntingly real image that she had not heard the door bell's morbid tinkle; had not felt the soft winter air tease her ankles as the door opened; had not noticed that her very *own* Potions Master had crossed the threshold and was now standing just inside the shop's entrance. Out of the corner of her eye, his black boots stood resolutely on the threadbare mat.

"I'm afraid not, Professor Snape," the shop owner twittered apologetically. "It's a very rare edition, you know, hasn't been in publication for decades..." He trailed off.

His feeble fingers tapped the surface of the counter, and Isolde could feel her heartbeat match the same harried rhythm as she wrestled for a solution to her predicament.

Her back was partially turned towards the counter...perhaps he wouldn't recognise her within their cluttered and dim surroundings?

She wasn't afraid of being caught in the shop; it certainly had not been mentioned on the list of forbidden ones for students. In fact, it hadn't been mentioned at all. No...her only concern was the unquestionably distasteful book in her grasp. Merlin, she could feel her fingertips slide effortlessly across its surface, leaving fleeting imprints of sweat on the cover.

Remaining as stationary as possible, her back still turned, she began to gradually slip the book beneath her robes.

It was only once the three hundred and ninety-four pages of shameless smut were pressed against her heart, snug in the inner pocket of her sable robes, that Isolde's heartbeat returned to a healthy tremor. This was perhaps fortunate, for the silence of the shop was soon broken by the even click of his austere boots against polished floor boards. Soon his long, pale fingers were resting on the counter, his wool-clad arm just millimetres from her shoulder. The masculine scent filled her nostrils, bewitching her mind and ensnaring her senses to such a degree that her mind could barely function. She was furious with herself, incensed that he had such an effect on her. She was a Slytherin, for Merlin's sake! Such behaviour was indicative of a bumbling Hufflepuff fourth year.

"Can you give me an estimation on how long it will take, Brinkley?"

Brinkley appeared as flustered as Isolde, though clearly for a very different reason.

Snape kept his voice low; he usually did, but every syllable was wrought with meaning, every inflection demanded the sole attention of the recipient. The man oozed authority, and a mere word from his tongue could damage more than the Cruciatus Curse. Sometimes Isolde wondered if his voice should be made as unforgiveable as this curse, for at the sound of it, she felt all sanity leave her mind.

Once again she scolded herself for falling under his spell, for discarding her self-worth and pride.

"I'm sorry, Professor Snape, sir," Brinkley squeaked, sweat beading on his aged forehead. "It could be anything from a week to a month."

Isolde, though diverting her gaze from Snape the entire time, could almost imagine a thin, black eyebrow shooting up his forehead.

"I hope for your sake it is the former, Brinkley."

With a sharp turn of his heel, Snape uttered a curt, "Good day, Miss Hamilton," before swooping from the shop, onyx robes billowing in his wake.

Chapter Two - Ensnare the Senses

Chapter 2 of 17

Isolde finally gets chance to examine her new purchase

Chapter Two Ensnare the Senses

It was a long walk back to Hogwarts, especially whilst battling with the merciless winter wind, but, for once, Isolde was thankful for it. She needed to think, and she needed to think *alone*. Forward planning meant that her fellow Slytherins already knew she wasn't returning to the school with them; she had fully intended to flick shamelessly through her new purchase, teasing herself with glimpses of filth...of rough, ink stained hands running down tender skin.

But a less appetising topic took precedence in the forefront of her mind: he had *seen her*; he had known she was there all along. A part of her chastised herself for her naivety; she didn't know much of her professor, but she should have known by now that he did not miss a thing. *Nothing* got past him.

Her stomach lurched with uncertainties: how long had he been there before he had spoken? Had he seen what she had been reading from his towering vantage point? The more she tortured herself with possibilities, the more thankful she was for the extensive walk back to the castle. If he had gleaned even a speck of the smut which infected the pages of her book, she would need to compose an explanation...an alibi. And yet, if he had seen her, as her back was turned, slip the delicious prose into her cotton robes, there would be no point.

He was biding his time, no doubt.

Even when Isolde had reached the refuge of her dormitory...had slipped the damning evidence into her bedside table drawer...her heartbeat refused to compose itself.

Reaching down to its bewitching form, she pulled it out of the drawer again, simultaneously withdrawing her wand from her robes. The delectable image caught her gaze immediately as her wand tip shook with uncertainty.

Just say it, she scolded herself. *Incendio... incendio... inden...*

Isolde let out a frustrated cry at her own spinelessness before tossing the book back into the drawer and kicking it shut.

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The week flittered by in a churning mass of essays, foul weather, Quidditch related excitement and anticipation for the upcoming Christmas holiday. The passing days imbued Isolde with enough confidence that, by Friday, she was once again consumed by curiosity for what lay between the crisp white pages of the book. It had remained incarcerated in her sock drawer, hidden from view by a gaudy collection of knee highs. If she were to be logical about the situation, having smut in her possession was not forbidden at Hogwarts. In fact, if it cut down the number of forbidden encounters in disused classrooms and hidden corridors, smut was *encouraged*. Furthermore, Snape had shown no indication that he had seen anything when he had taken their NEWT Potions class on Thursday.

The coast, it seemed, was clear.

She had chosen Friday night for her initiation into the wonderful world of *The Potions Master's Mistress* because if she became addicted, and this was a severe possibility, she could sleep in. True enough, the following morning heralded the much anticipated showdown between Gryffindor and Slytherin on the Quidditch pitch, but Isolde had little time for the sport. Quidditch reminded her of unpleasant evenings with her father. He would obtain tickets from work, dragging Isolde along so that he appeared a 'family' man. Before every game, he and his 'friends' would visit The Mewling Quim, an incredibly seedy (albeit expensive) victualling house in Knockturn Alley, eventually arriving at the stadium so inebriated that everything remotely female became a target. Abuse would be shrieked at various players, and as Isolde grew into a fine young woman, her father's delightful friends started to get a little too close for comfort. True enough, Hogwarts Quidditch hardly incorporated the drinking element, but the house rivalry still seemed, to Isolde, to be a little counterproductive to the study atmosphere of the school.

Ignoring the excited chatter of her fellow students, Isolde sent a quick goodnight to her friends before bundling herself up in the squashy four poster she had loved since first year. Once again, she cradled the illicit tome in her fingers, running her thumb gently down one side of the two-dimensional Potions Master. It was uncanny; just how much it resembled *him*.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the book to page one:

The classroom was aflame with tangible apprehension, the air thick with vapours rising ominously from copper and pewter rims.

He was no stranger to them...it was not as if they had not seen him many times before...but each lesson with the Potions Master was a blindfolded meal, like dancing on glass. He kept them on their toes, never knowing what to expect from one minute to the next, and yet, they yearned for more. And yet, they feared him.

*One particular student stood in thrilled silence by her desk...on the front row, of course. She liked to be as dangerously close to him as possible. Most of all, she cherished every heavy footfall as he strode with disguised purpose from the back of the room; the very sound of the door crashing open sent exhilarated shivers down her spine...**knowing** that he was there, that he was approaching her at the front of the room where his desk stood.*

That desk: she had imagined it so many times. It featured in her waking dreams as her head lay on her pillow each night...a cold, welcoming surface for her bare back as her Potions Master pushed her slowly backwards against the wood-grain to explore her further, to pull her alabaster knees apart with his large, commanding hands...

Isolde felt her abdomen flutter as she lay safely inside her jade-coloured covers, the dark drapes concealing the beads of sweat which had unceremoniously crept out of her forehead during her moonlit read.

This was a *superb* purchase, she thought to herself, as she silently thanked Merlin for not setting it alight a week earlier. Only four paragraphs in, and she had been reduced to a heap of desires and perspiration.

And she could not ignore just how much the dark iniquity described inside the covers resembled her very own Potions Master *Professor Snape*.

Oh Lord. Just the whisper of his name in her mind did unspeakable things to her insides.

Isolde smiled softly at her own foolishness, and yet she could not help but wonder...as she often did...how many other girlish forms lay in their beds, at that very moment, imagining long taffeta robes grazing their bare thighs, black imposing eyes watching their nipples harden in the cool dungeon air.

Isolde had long resigned to the idea that she could not be the only one plagued with lascivious thoughts regarding the Potions Master. He epitomised tall, dark and mysterious. Encapsulated in their own little caves of emerald, scarlet, buttercup and periwinkle velvet, did the Potions Master's other admirers find themselves dreaming of his lips, which would surely taste of dark chocolate and Firewhisky, encompassing their own? Did long calloused fingers dance upon their tender skin, brushing against them with the dexterity and skill of a talented musician? Were they, like she, currently absorbed in the pages of *The Potions Master's Mistress* in a futile attempt to relieve themselves of this pent up desire for their teacher?

Isolde consumed every word, every sentence, every cliché until the enchanted candles that floated within the closed curtains of her four poster morphed into spluttering stubs. Tiredness clawed at her eyes, but she was too absorbed by Mercer's delicate prose to put the book down...

"Miss Spurr."

His voice danced within the howling of the bitter wind. Eleanor shifted on her feet, turning her head to face her pursuer. Caught by the wind's talons, his cloak flashed

angrily about him, snapping in the weather's onslaught. His usually immaculate obsidian hair was a wild mane around pale features. His long stride broke the distance between them, long fingers eventually capturing hers. Eleanor could not draw her gaze from the intensity of his dark orbs nor pull away when his soft lips brushed against hers...

Chapter Three - I Don't Remember Asking You to Show Off

Chapter 3 of 17

Isolde receives attention from her real Potions master

Chapter Three I Don't Remember Asking You to Show Off

Isolde felt herself waning in Transfiguration on Monday morning. Once again, she had foolishly stayed up for the majority of the night, virtually prying her eyelids open in a desperate attempt to absorb as much as she could from her new, sublime muse...the unyielding Potions Master, who now lay secreted between her two emerald pillows, eagerly awaiting her return that evening.

She could not quite recall exactly when her eyelids had finally relented to sleep, but her dreams had been pregnant with dark chocolate kisses, wind-ruffled hair and electric frost-bitten fingertips. Inwardly, she cursed herself for her weakness: how could she have allowed herself...no, *forced* herself...to stay awake so long into the night, knowing that she had Potions the following day? Time and vicarious scolding had taught her that alertness was paramount in Potions.

Isolde blew small zephyrs of her own breath onto her face...a pitiful attempt to rouse herself for her next class. She had already raised her white flag to transfiguring the ostrich feather quill which lay mockingly in front of her; had already received the disappointed glance and head shake from McGonagall as she strode by, murmuring, "That's not like you, Isolde."

Damn. She had to snap herself out of this state of drowsiness, knowing too well that Professor Snape's tongue would be laced with a much more acidic commentary. She could not let that happen. She could not disappoint him. *Would* not.

Making a swift exit out of the classroom, Isolde allowed herself a hurried detour to the girls' bathroom to splash her face with water, if not to wake herself up, then to bring herself down from her girlish levity...the delusional voice that told her she was different from the rest, that she *did* receive unseen glances of desire when her eyes focused on her bubbling cauldron.

Her heels clipped urgently against the damp stone passageway toward the Potions classroom. Isolde revelled in the temperature drop, allowing the ribbons of freezing air to wrap around her, eliciting a false sense of alertness. False or not, she would need all the concentration she could muster if she was going to survive the lesson.

A murmur of conversation met her ears as she drew closer to Snape's door. Her fellow N.E.W.T. students congregated before the barrier of oak, their whispered conversation an eclectic combination of academia and the upcoming Yule Ball.

Isolde inwardly groaned. Her weekend spent in the loving embrace of the fictional Potions Master had completely wiped all thought of the ball from her mind.

"Oi! Snake! Get into a fight with a hag?"

Isolde scowled at the all too familiar voice of Marius Spencer. A seventh-year Ravenclaw, the tall, dark-haired boy had been her best friend since first year. Terms of endearment were not exactly the Ravenclaw's forte. Nevertheless, his rather cruel outer shell hid a soft heart, and the steaming cup of black coffee he handed her was evidence enough of this.

"Best skull this before Snapey-kins arrives."

Isolde accepted the coffee with a derisive smirk. She was convinced that one day Snape would hear Marius's less than kind nickname and the Ravenclaw would end up in detention until the end of term.

The caffeine was just what she needed, and once the tar-like liquid was swallowed, Marius swiftly transfigured the mug into an ink pot, winking at his friend.

"So, care to tell me why you look like crap?"

Isolde groaned. "Stayed up late."

Marius cocked a dark eyebrow, his twinkling periwinkle eyes indicative of a certain headmaster. "Smutty romance novel late or sexy time with a certain Hufflepuff late?"

"Hufflepuff?"

"Rumour has it that a certain Cedric Diggory is going to ask you to the Yule Ball."

Isolde's features were twisting into an expression of horror when the oak door creaked open, dark eyes peering out from the domain within.

All thoughts of Cedric Diggory were brushed from her mind as a delectable baritone filled the air.

"Enter."

The irony was that one single word from *his* crooked lips roused Isolde more than the collective efforts of the icy cold water, the potent cup of coffee and the witty jibes of her closest friend. Saturated with images from *The Potions Master's Mistress*, Isolde had to make a resounding effort to put one foot in front of the other and enter the classroom, bowing her head beneath Snape's long, arched arm as it held the door ajar.

She had not anticipated the rogue edging on his sleeve to graze her arm as she shuffled past, and it took every measly scrap of resolve not to gasp from the pure intensity of its contact with her skin. Her arm tingled long after it retracted its teasing caress.

"Ah, home sweet home," Marius cooed sarcastically as he greeted his desk on the second row, mockingly stroking its discoloured surface. "My old friend..."

Isolde could not help but flash him a wry smile as she seated herself beside him, summoning her copper cauldron and careworn copy of *Advanced Potion Making* from her bag.

"Thank you, Mr Spencer, for delighting us with your heart-warming reunion," Snape remarked dryly as he strode down the central aisle towards the front. Isolde stole herself a drawn out blink, aching to feel the cool, enticing flutter of air against her bare legs as his robes billowed behind him. "I am surprised," he paused characteristically, locking eyes with Marius, "that it has forgiven you for your clumsy mistreatment of it last week. Let's try to keep the ingredients inside the cauldron today, shall we?"

"Sorry, Professor," Marcus replied with surprising genuineness; clearly, he had not expected Snape to have witnessed his sardonic display.

For the briefest of moments, Snape's eyes appeared to dance over Isolde as she meticulously arranged her equipment on her own desk's surface. Her stomach would have leapt if she had noticed.

Fumes engulfed the classroom: dancing clouds of toxic, poisonous colour laced with the corrupted smell of ill-brewed ingredients. It was a noxious concoction, seeping into the weave of their robes, latching onto hair follicles, absorbing into the skin. Shrieks permeated the air as cauldrons twisted into unrecognisable blobs of smoking metal.

Despite the uttermost chaos surrounding him, Severus Snape remained relatively calm as students stirred and prodded mixtures of varying thickness, none of which resembled the Arachnid Antidote. Its simple name often brought smirks to the faces of N.E.W.T. students; they would dive straight in, only briefly noting the exhaustive list of instructions. Such a rash approach was disastrous, and the potion was often the ruin of even his finest Potions students. He would set it without warning - a simple test to derive who was worthy of further note. As of yet, in his fourteen years as Potions Master, only six N.E.W.T. students had produced a tolerable antidote.

Several students shot Snape a fearful look as he purposefully swooped around the classroom, his curled lip hiding a far more analytical approach. He allowed himself a quick glance toward the second row, noting that Spencer's cauldron was on the verge of bubbling over. Hardly surprising; the boy may have been a Ravenclaw, but he lacked subtlety, an attribute necessary for serious potioners.

Miss Hamilton, on the other hand, was the only student in the room who had yet to add an ingredient to her cauldron. Its copper belly remained cold, lifeless, while the petite brunette stooped over her copy of *Advanced Potion Making* and scribbled manically upon a piece of parchment. Every so often, she would move from her notes to the preparation of her ingredients, which she would slice, crush or dice with precision, her silver knife dancing in the dull lantern light. Each morsel was weighed, each scrap of information quickly scratched down in her notes. Fascinated by the girl's meticulous preparations, Severus crept closer.

"One hour into the lesson and your cauldron remains untouched. Care to explain, Miss Hamilton?"

The physical reaction of the girl was almost as delightful as watching her careful movements. Despite the crackling, bubbling and shrieking that filled the dungeon, he heard her deep intake of breath. Grey eyes widened as she twisted her neck to look at him.

"ProfessorSnapesirlwas-!"

The words spilt from her mouth in a tirade of nervous syllables.

"Miss Hamilton, if you wish for me to understand you, I implore you to speak articulately."

Ah yes, he was being cruel. The girl's face hardened, eyes becoming cold. All nerves dissipated.

"It is a complicated potion, sir," she snapped. "I am simply analysing all of the ingredients, their purposes and their use within the antidote before starting to brew. If you would prefer that I blew up my cauldron like everyone else...?"

Severus made sure to hide his humour behind a cold veneer, his thin lips curling into a sneer. "Five points from Slytherin for your cheek, Miss Hamilton." As the girl paled, he continued. "However, you are quite correct. A potion such as this requires deliberation. Twenty points to Slytherin for your attention to detail. Should your potion be acceptable, I will reward you an additional twenty."

As Severus strode to the next row, Isolde heard yet another reckless bang from the back of the room; she couldn't help inwardly embracing herself for her thoughtful planning. Even though her professor had not even touched her, she felt electrified by his comments. Everyone knew Professor Snape did not deliver praise readily, and his promise of twenty more points filled Isolde with even more determination to succeed.

"You disgust me," said Marius as he haphazardly stirred what could only be described as thick gloop inside his cauldron. A simultaneous grin told her he was joking.

"And what do you mean by that?" Isolde challenged him as she compressed the heads of her foxgloves with the edge of her knife. The pale purple tint in each leaf darkened as the flower's natural fluids were forced to the surface. She feigned ignorance, but knew exactly what her friend was referring to.

"*Twenty points to Slytherin for your attention to detail*, he mimicked in a quiet whisper, purposefully punctuating every word in imitation of their professor. "Urgh, could you get any more sickening, Isolde? Give the rest of us a chance, will you?"

"And how is it my fault if the rest of you recklessly dive into a world of ineptness by not properly reading the instructions?"

She was jesting, of course; she and Marius had teased each other since first fear about their somewhat conflicting approaches to academia, but part of her could not help feeling rather smug. A promise of forty points from Snape in the same day was akin to any other teacher declaring their undivided love: high praise indeed, and Isolde was more driven than ever to receive her reward.

Her preliminaries complete, Isolde checked everything against the list of ingredients one more time before finally beginning her potion. Stealing a quick glance at the worm-eaten clock in the corner, she noted that she had just under an hour left.

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"You have five minutes remaining."

Snape's smooth baritone trickled over the strung-out class, bringing Isolde temporarily from her haze of concentration. The potion before her was still as glass, and equally as transparent, revealing the scratched bottom of her copper cauldron through its eerily calm depths. The solution did not bubble nor smell. If it were not for the gyrating swirls of lilac steam dancing across its surface, one could mistake it for water.

The silver stirring rod shook slightly in her hand, pressure biting at her nerves, her mind focused on the final set of instructions *Stir anti-clockwise three times. Stir clockwise once. Stir anti-clockwise seven times. Leave for three minutes.* The rod sizzled slightly as she submerged it in the liquid.

"One, two, three," she muttered under her breath, movements smooth despite her nerves. "One. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven." By this stage, she could almost feel the penetrating gaze of Snape on her form. Silence reigned. It was if the whole class, even those cradling the remnants of their trusty cauldrons, were watching her.

Three minutes until the results would be settled. Three minutes until she would know if she would be rewarded the additional twenty points. If she were to be honest, it was not necessarily the points she coveted, but rather *his* praise. She yearned to hear subtle compliments spilled from his usually caustic tongue, wrapped in the intoxicating tones of his velvet voice. With bated breath she watched the cauldron, admiring the subtle change from clear to opaque. The liquid bubbled quickly, before turning a vivid shade of turquoise. It was a peculiar sight...a mixture of chemistry and magic that both intrigued and terrified her, like the man who taught the subject. When Snape ordered them to cease working, the potion had reverted to its water-like state.

Snape made his way around the class, attacking some with his tongue, letting others leave with nothing but a disapproving glint in his eyes. His features remained passive upon sighting Isolde's clear brew. The silence was now so stifling, she was sure he could hear the unsteady thrum of her heart against her ribs.

"Twenty points to Slytherin, Miss Hamilton. Please remain behind."

Isolde gulped, taking little comfort from Marius's sympathetic tilt of the head. As her exhausted classmates rushed from the room, nerves were replaced by fear. Oh, she knew Snape would not punish her for a perfect potion. She was simply terrified at being in the same room with him...

Chapter Four - The Wrong Place at the Wrong Time

Chapter 4 of 17

Snape has a special request for Isolde

A/N: Well, we didn't want to be too cruel by making you wait too long before finding out what he wants with her...

Disclaimer: JKR owns it all apart from *A Slytherin Seduction*, which is an affectionate nod to a dear mutual friend of ours.

Chapter Four The Wrong Place at the Wrong Time

As the final cluster of students filtered from the classroom, the last remaining colour drained from Isolde's face. Her complexion resembled the pale, tranquil depths of her cauldron's contents, into which she now stared nervously as the closing 'click' of the door invaded the room. The surface of the liquid trembled.

"Most impressive, Miss Hamilton," came Snape's fluid baritone as he descended the dais and advanced towards her. Isolde felt her heart rate immediately decrease to a more regular pace as he began to make his intentions clearer. "Most impressive," he repeated as his long strides came to a halt, the desk forming a barrier between them.

Isolde felt her jaw break into a smile, but his change of tone stopped it in its tracks.

"However, if you think I have requested your continued presence so that I can fawn over your over-rehearsed potion, you are sadly mistaken." With a dramatic and yet graceful swish of his arm, Snape gestured towards the brimming cauldron before bringing his palm down to the desk's surface.

Over-rehearsed. Isolde repeated the slight to herself. Just minutes ago, he had praised her for her careful planning and preparation...and now she was being accused of doing it in excess? Clearly, in even the most faultless of potions, Snape could find a snag.

Isolde had been so immersed in her internal self-justifications that she did not notice Snape lean in towards her over the desk top, and her pupils widened at the realisation. His proximity was startling in itself, but nothing could have prepared her for the words which followed.

"There is a bookshop, Miss Hamilton, on the outskirts of Hogsmeade, tucked away from the bustle of the main street."

Even before Snape had finished his sentence, Isolde's mouth stood aghast; the mere mention of 'bookshop' sent her heartbeat soaring once more. She should have known he had seen more than a recognisable school robe on that pivotal, wind-berated day.

The two of them stood in overwrought silence. Was she meant to reply? His utterance had certainly been declarative, and yet he made no indication that he had any intention to continue. Was this his plan...to heat her slowly until she was reduced to a throbbing crucible of guilt, spattering confessions of carnality across the room?

Isolde refused to relent; she would not throb, would not spatter. There was no point in denying her knowledge of their shared retreat, though...he had *seen* her there, called her by *name* before re-entering the frost-bitten street.

She nodded silently, ambiguously...admitting nothing.

For a moment, she could have sworn that Snape's expression shifted to what, she wasn't sure. He was playing an exceptionally cruel game, and Isolde felt as though she was still blindly grappling for the rules.

Finally, he elaborated. "I need you to go there, now, on my behalf." As he paused, Isolde fought to hide her relief brought on by the apparent swing of circumstance. "An extremely rare and long-awaited book has, at last, arrived, but due to my demanding schedule today, I am not at liberty to collect it myself." Her professor delved into the dark folds of his robes and brought out a wax-sealed scroll of parchment. "Give this to the shopkeeper it will verify that I have sent you and bring the book to my office on your return. I trust you do not need directions to the shop?"

The bubble of tension that had been forming about Isolde suddenly popped, allowing a warm flood of anxious relief to spread throughout her. With slightly shaking fingers, she retrieved the parchment from Snape's light grasp, daring a final glance into his onyx orbs before departing. His only response was a sharp nod.

oOoOo

"So, little serpent, what did the bat want with you?"

Isolde shot her best friend a rather nasty glance, tucking the parchment safely into a voluminous pocket of her school robe. Upon leaving the labyrinthine lair of the dungeons, she had found herself presented with a coffee. How Marius always managed to obtain coffee remained a mystery to her.

"He wants me to do an errand for him."

Marius shot her a disbelieving look. "He wants you to *doan errand*?" A mischievous smirk warped his lips. "He had you in the dungeons for quite some time; just what kind of errand *was* this?"

A violent blush splashed across Isolde's face. "Marius! It was nothing like that!" Despite the joking tone in her friend's voice, Isolde could not control the burning in her cheeks. More than anything, she wished that Snape had asked *that* kind of errand of her. He was cruel and utterly terrifying, but when he had snared her within the intensity of his gaze, she was sure she would do absolutely *anything* to please him. With the mental images of what these acts might be dancing about in her mind, she continued.

"He just wants me to collect something from Hogsmeade."

"Collect something from Hogsmeade?" Marius's repetition of every word she said was starting to drive her mildly crazy, but she nodded anyway. Marius scoffed. "Lazy git."

Isolde ignored him, sipping the coffee. Unlike the strong brew she had consumed before Potions, this was much milder, laced with vanilla and a splash of cream. It was pure heaven.

"So Izzy, darling, shall we go down to the Quidditch pitch and laugh at the Gryffindor champs or head to the library for a bit of study before dinner?"

Isolde cocked an eyebrow. "You're really not a normal boy, are you, Marius?"

"Boy?" exclaimed the Ravenclaw, distorting his body in a parody of false offense. "I am a man, dear snake."

"Of course you are." Isolde smirked, before sighing. "Professor Snape wants me to do this as soon as possible, so I'd best head to Hogsmeade."

"Care for some company?"

"It is probably best if I do this alone."

oOoOoOo

Severus was pleased to note that Isolde had declined the company of her little Ravenclaw pet. As far as he knew, the slight brunette was the only student who ventured into his little haven, and he was determined that this would remain so. He did not exactly mean to spy on the conversation, emerging from his dungeon for an undoubtedly painful meeting with the headmaster, but the enticing aroma of vanilla coffee and the irritating laughter of her friend had snatched his attention. The more he was exposed to the dark haired lad, the more he was reminded of James Potter. Potter had the same disregard for authority, the same ability to dismiss all with a snap of humour.

Isolde Hamilton, however, was quiet, one could even say awkward. She had few close friends, a passion for study, and an addiction to coffee which was quite unhealthy. He did not exactly know how she had stumbled across *Zuranders* bookstore, but her affinity for this place, mixed with her skill at potions, made her an individual worthy of his note.

oOoOoOo

As Isolde made her way to the quaint little town, she felt strangely empowered for being given permission to leave the school grounds on a weekday. Privileged, almost.

But, above all else, she felt relieved.

She smiled to herself as she crossed a grassy knoll, recalling the palpitating fear she had experienced when her professor had first mentioned the bookshop. She had always hoped that, at least on a professional plane, Snape found her to be a mature and competent student. Inevitably, she had her moments of silliness, but she had taken great care to ensure that he never witnessed this side to her. Even with Marius, Isolde often tempered her usually witty or playfully offensive retorts when her professor was within hearing range, so keen was she to impress him.

The mere possibility of him knowing her secret had shaken her to the core. Surely, he would find the entire prospect juvenile. Clichéd. Repulsive. *Laughable*.

That was the worst scenario of all: for him to laugh at her.

For a fanciful moment, Isolde's thoughts entertained the idea of a fifth response: as her shoes clicked upon loose pebbles, she imagined herself standing in front of him as large, coarse hands ran through the pages of her sordid book.

A raised brow. A tiny snarl, perhaps.

And then hands on skin - a shower of hot, forceful kisses, punctuated by breathless sighs of urgency.

Pebbles blended into crisp snow as Isolde fast approached her destination, her body heat surprisingly high for the surrounding climate. As *Zuranders* came into view, Isolde shook her ridiculous thoughts from her mind and re-focused herself on her reason for being there.

The familiar tinkle of the door welcomed her back as she searched her robe pocket for the parchment. Clearing her throat to get his attention, Isolde handed Brinkley the scroll. "Professor Snape asked me to give this to you," she explained, still feeling a warm tinge of pride that he had entrusted her with such an important task.

Brinkley almost snatched the parchment from her outstretched hand, disgruntled that she had disturbed him from his reading, as always. As he read the enclosed message, Isolde stole herself a moment to glance around the musty, book-laced room. Her heart fluttered as she reminded herself that her professor not only frequented here, but he knew she also did - almost as if they shared a secret which she, for one, would never forfeit.

"Sign here," came Brinkley's guttural voice as he pointed to a dotted line on what looked like an order form. Taking the dishevelled quill, her eyes meandered further up the page, and her stomach gave a whimsical lurch when she spotted Snape's elegant penmanship. Her own signature looked mediocre in comparison.

"You be careful with that," Brinkley said, gesturing to the package now in Isolde's arm. "Took me an age to get hold of. Merlin knows what he wants it for," he cogitated, almost under his breath, as he returned to his own hardback.

Isolde knew that her presence was now a distant memory to the shopkeeper, as he re-immersed himself in *A Goblin's Home*.

She smiled to herself as she turned on her heel to leave, but before she even reached the rusty door handle, she felt the yearning...the sheer, unbridled curiosity for the shelves she knew so well. The aisle she had trodden on so many times lurked at the far end of the shop, and yet she could almost feel its merciless pull.

The longer she waited, the tighter the tentacles of temptation became. They tore at her self-control, wrapped around her sense of duty. Not even the intriguing weight of Snape's purchase in her pocket or the icy jab of the door handle in her palm could break her from temptation's fatal lock.

A single glance at her watch told her she had an hour and seventeen minutes until Snape expected her; surely that was plenty of time? It would not hurt to have one tiny little peek. Like a chocoholic venturing toward her stash or a smoker reaching for the packet, Isolde's mind filled with excuses, justifications, anything to make her quest into the heart of the shop *acceptable*.

The bookcase jammed with saucy novels was beautiful. To Isolde, this towering monolith of books held more treasure than all the underground vaults at Gringotts put together. Gently, she ran the pads of her fingers along the books' glistening spines, her eyes searching for the ideal title.

A smile curled her lips when she noticed it: *A Slytherin Seduction*. It was her favourite novel, or it had been before her latest purchase. *Seduction* was one of the mysteries of the bodice-ripping world. It had no identifiable author, its pages filled with everything delicious, corrupt and utterly forbidden. Slipping the thin wedge of papers from its home, Isolde made her way toward a nearby bay window, lined with a collection of heavily worn crimson pillows. Through the grime, she could see the snow tossing and turning through the sea of relentless wind.

Surely it was best to wait until the weather settled down?

Content in her bubble of half-baked justifications, Isolde opened to the very first page of her old friend, quickly glancing at her watch in the process.

Plenty of time.

oOoOoOo

Her back was thrust against the wall, robes snagging against the rough hue of ancient stone. She barely noticed; all she could concentrate upon was the vicious dominance of his lips, the forceful entrance of his tongue. Urgency spurned his every caress, the desperation in his actions indicative of her own. Long, calloused fingers bunched her skirts, revealing hot skin to bitter cold ribbons of dungeon air.

Whimpering, her own hands battled with the confines of his fly, trying to free his prominent bulge from imprisonment.

"Patience, Miss Hamilton," he hissed against her lips. "Tell me what you want."

She almost cried with exasperation. "Please sir, I want you."

"Excuse me, Miss Hamilton?"

"I want you!" Tears flooded her cheeks

"Miss Hamilton! That is *quite* inappropriate."

Storm grey eyes snapped open, widening at the visage of Snape leaning over her, the battered copy of *A Slytherin Seduction* dangling precariously from his fingers. Isolde felt herself melt into the crimson cushions, mortification rendering her utterly mute. Outside, grey had morphed to black, and the only light within the small bookshop came from a number of tiny candles flickering amongst the shelves. Snape looked livid, his dark eyes glistening furiously in this minimal light.

"Miss Hamilton, I find myself quite surprised." The disappointment lacing his smooth voice was palpable.

Her voice returned in a vomit of excuses. "Sorry, sir... Must have fallen asleep, sir. What time is it, sir... I am so sorry, sir!"

"I did not ask for your excuses, Miss Hamilton. I simply asked you to do a small task for me. A task, it seems, that held less interest to you than the pages of this-" he dropped the bodice ripper into her lap *"-filth."*

Ashamed, Isolde peered down at the once comforting cover of her favourite smut. Now it disgusted her. "I'm sorry, Professor."

"Enough! You have wasted enough of my time this evening, Miss Hamilton." He turned in a flurry of black wool, a wordless gesture for her to follow. Letting the tome fall onto the dusty cushions, Isolde followed the black-clad professor from the shop.

Not surprisingly, Brinkley noticed nothing.

Chapter Five - A Question of Concentration and Mind Power

Chapter 5 of 17

Snape gets more than he bargained for in Isolde's detention.

Well, here it is. A nice long one for you! Same disclaimers as before: we only own Isolde, and I'm sure she'd prefer to be owned by Sev.

Chapter Five A Question of Concentration and Mind Power

The walk back to Hogwarts was painstaking, Snape's disappointment almost a visible haze in the air between them. She simply could not look at him, unable to bear the twisting of his lips or the disparaging glint in his onyx orbs.

He did not speak until they had reached the entrance to the Slytherin common room, his voice nothing but a whisper in the cool, dark corridor.

"The forty points awarded for your potion will be deducted, Miss Hamilton, and you will serve detention with me tomorrow night at eight. I suggest this time you be prompt." For a second, his black gaze bore into her grey. "I presume you still have my purchase?"

Shaking, Isolde extracted the parcel from her robes and Snape took it wordlessly before swooping away. The young Slytherin watched as her professor was enveloped by the dungeon's perpetual gloom, her own company now a blanket of sheer misery.

She did not care about lost points or detention. These were mere flesh wounds - unimportant, petty. All she could think about was how she had disappointed Snape. Never before had she felt so ashamed.

oOoOoOo

Only a thin cocoon of candlelight surrounded Snape as he sat rigidly at his desk; the unearthly glow flickered timidly around his form as if the light itself could sense his growing aggravation.

Abruptly, his statuesque pose was broken as a hand dove into a misshapen tower of parchments, searching furiously for her distinctive script. Once located, the remaining sheets were cast haphazardly to the floor as he studied the one in his shaking hand. He didn't know what he was looking for - only that he needed something concrete on which to ground his tangled inferno of thoughts. His restless eyes scanned the page, drawing some comfort from the familiar handwriting, the graceful quill strokes he had known since her first year. They were not too dissimilar to his:

The three most integral ingredients of any Forgetfulness Potion are Lethe River Water, valerian sprigs and mistletoe berries, though the manner in which the valerian sprigs are prepared can have a profound impact on the potion's potency. If simply torn from their stem, the essence of the valerian is released at a much more gradual pace throughout the brewing process, which can...

Snape pursed his lips as the words swam round his head - words which, he thought, came from an extremely bright and, at times, charming young woman. Not a young woman who immersed herself in lurid, base fantasies housed in the farthest aisles of a back-alley bookshop. When he had first caught sight of her there that day, as he had roused Brinkley into a mass of garbled excuses, he had been impressed - proud, almost - that, unlike her peers, she had chosen a hearth of history, of knowledge and insight, instead of preferring the main street emporiums of shoddy gadgets and tooth-rotting sweets.

As his eyes scanned her essay once more, Snape still could not fathom who he was most exasperated with: Isolde for so shamelessly disregarding the weighted responsibility he had given her, or himself for - even for the briefest of moments - thinking any more of her than an asinine schoolgirl. Though it may have been veiled in a cloak of duty, he had meant it to be a reward - a sign of trust: he would not have furnished just any student - even a Slytherin - with the task of collecting his coveted book.

With a brash sigh, he let Isolde's faultless manuscript drop onto the floor with the rest.

oOoOoOo

The glossy pages shrieked in the furious embrace of the flames, shrivelling like ancient skin before morphing into little leaves of ash. The sight brought Isolde no respite, nor did the vicious destruction of the offensive material. Tears descended down her cheeks, dripping onto the now soaked front of her robes. Worms of pure shame squirmed relentlessly in her stomach, mingled with stabbings of sheer humiliation. His image was burnt into her memory: the disappointed glint in his obsidian eyes, his beautiful lips curled into a disgusted sneer.

It was useless. It did not matter if she burnt every bodice-ripper in her collection; the damage could not be undone. His respect for her had disintegrated like the little flaky ashes bursting from the overworked fireplace. She was entrapped in a cocoon of utter despair, unable to take comfort in the company of others. None of them knew. If she told them, would they understand? Ninety-nine percent of the student body were a disappointment to Snape. Marius would probably shrug, uttering a thoroughly unsympathetic "Join the club!" Had she not had his respect in the first place, she would not be suffering this sheer turmoil. No doubt, she would be comfortable sleeping in her four-poster, dreaming of Cedric Diggory like most of the girls in her year. Instead, she had been in possession of this amazing gift - the mild admiration of her snarky professor, and, like the fool she was, she had thrust it aside like a useless scrap of parchment.

The once beautiful form of *The Potions Master's Mistress* now stood in tatters, a torn mass of string, glue and ripped paper. With a final, pathetic sob, she thrust the cover into the flames. For the last time she watched the shimmering fumes of the painted cauldron.

For the last time, she admired the stern, dark figure of the Potions master.

oOoOoOo

Surviving on a mere three hours of broken sleep, Isolde found herself struggling through Tuesday's classes. Hours dragged on, every class a steep slope she needed to clamber over, every word said by her teachers a mere jumble of syllables she could hardly understand. She avoided the Great Hall, terrified at the prospect of *his* scrutiny. It did not help that the aroma of food made her stomach crawl, and already she had been forced to sprint to the bathroom to diverge her stomach of the little she had consumed.

Her final class, Herbology, ended with the distribution of assignments, but Isolde could not even react toward the bold "O" scratched in the corner of the parchment. She desperately wanted to escape, to dive into the warm confines of her bed and disappear into the realm of sleep.

After battling the freezing path between the greenhouses and the castle, entering the Great Hall was like plunging into a hot bath. Content to ignore her surroundings, she beelined for the dungeons, and barely noticed as she ran head first into a shriek of black cloak.

"I suggest you watch where you are walking, Miss Hamilton." His voice was laced with venom. Outside now seemed tropical compared to the freezer in which she was currently entrapped. Snape continued. "Unless your mind was so consumed with filth that you have now lost the ability to watch where you are going?" He drew the last four words out, each syllable a cruel verbal slap.

Her grey eyes focused on the hem of her robes. Long fingers took her chin, lifting her face so that her gaze met his.

"You will look at me when I am speaking to you, Miss Hamilton."

It was only now that Isolde realised they were alone in the dungeon corridor. Of course, that made sense; Snape would never cup her chin under the scrutiny of others.

"Do not forget your detention," he hissed, dropping his fingers and swooping past into the Great Hall.

Once safely out of his hearing range, Isolde scoffed at his reminder: how could she forget her detention? It was the only thing that had consumed her waking and sleeping thoughts for the last twenty-four hours. Part of her could not believe that only one day had passed since he had found her huddled cosily in the window seat of *Zuranders*, completely oblivious to the night which had crept around her as she devoured every word of *A Slytherin Seduction*. She winced at the memory as it haunted her for the umpteenth time that evening alone: the way he had snatched the book from her pulsating fingertips; the way he had spoken so disgustingly of its contents.

Filth, he had called it.

As Isolde made her way to her dormitory, through the common room and the cloud of smoke slithering from the tips of a group of wayward housemates' cigarettes, she imagined once again the dark eyes which had penetrated her guilty skull. She had been a breathless mound of desire when he had found her, and she hadn't needed a mirror to tell her how pathetic she had looked. His eyes had said it all.

And now she had to face them yet again - alone - in the territory of the dungeons where they were always at their most cruel.

In the once comforting confines of her dormitory, Isolde's mind swept through a blur of apprehensions: what would this detention actually entail? Her thoughts entertained the possibilities, ranging from the mundane to the surreal. If she would have to scrub unyielding dirt from the rims of cauldrons, at least she would have something to occupy her mind - if he gave her a pedestrian task like that, perhaps she would not feel so revolting as each labouring second ticked by. Yes - she could almost pretend that she had merely been clumsy during class, or forgotten her homework, perhaps. The very concept of being punished for acts of such negligence would have sickened her once, but she now longed for their tedium.

As the evening dragged on, Isolde became more and more restless, and she found herself looking incessantly at the time. With only half an hour to go, the most horrific possibility leapt brutally into her mind: what if he made her go and fetch the rest of her sordid stash of books? As she sat on the edge of her bed, her eyes nervously scanned the row of hardbacks lined neatly along her bedside, their true identities masked by a simple transfiguration spell: *Hogwarts: a History (The Warlock's Embrace* - the first one she'd ever purchased), *Advanced Potion Making (Cauldrons Aflame)*, *Tales of Beedle the Bard (Alchemist's Delight)* and *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi (Stirring Desires)*. Isolde's eyes scrutinized each distasteful title, imagining herself carrying them wretchedly through the dungeons to his outstretched, disapproving hand.

She could not bear it. In a frenzy of fear, Isolde's hands grasped their offending spines and tossed them haphazardly into the convivial flames of the hearth. Despite the recent humiliation they had brought her, she felt her insides still pine for every page as she watched them curl mutely in the heat. *It was not worth further humiliation*, she counselled herself inwardly as she held back the impulse to wretch. Her roommates may have been fooled by the deceitful covers for years, but *he* would see through them.

in an instant. It was not worth it.

If only Isolde's imagination had been more extensive - if only she had known how cruel he could be and how much he intended for her to endure - she would have spared her pathetic hoard of smut for another day and worried more for herself.

oOoOoOo

She had knocked twice already, and still had received no answer. Not even the icy "Enter" she had anticipated.

Battling with a desire to be punctual and a fear of expressing impatience, Isolde decided to enter the classroom without approval. The last thing she wanted was to be reprimanded further for being late.

The classroom was empty with the exception of a bulbous, pewter cauldron which lay empty on the desk where she usually sat. Guardedly, she inched closer to find an assorted spread of ingredients and tools laid beside it. In the minute's stillness she had been granted, Isolde scanned the herbs and potted liquids once again, trying to glean some semblance of meaning from them, but her overarching fear diluted her thoughts.

Abruptly, Snape's distinguishing black form swept into the room from the supplies cupboard behind his desk, bringing one final ingredient to join its comrades. As he laid it down in front of her, his dark, disparaging eyes met hers.

"Miss Hamilton," he announced emphatically, almost as if he were announcing her presence to an unseen spectator. A defined pause allowed him to fix her gaze unyieldingly before he continued. "As you are such a keen analyst of ingredients, perhaps you can identify these for me." A cloak-veiled arm swept pointedly across the desk's surface.

Isolde's eyes fell to the cluster of goods between them, and she compelled herself to focus: the first was a dozen pieces of wood, the size of acorns. She absentmindedly grazed one with a fingertip to confirm its texture. "This appears to be cedar wood, used primarily as a muscle relaxant or sedative..."

She dared to glance upwards for confirmation, but Snape's eyes remained still, disobliging.

"Er... and *these*," she continued awkwardly, pointing to a handful of crisp, yellowed petals, "are dried chamomile flowers, I think."

"You *think*?" Snape challenged immediately.

Isolde nodded. "Also a sedative, sometimes used to balance oestrogen levels..."

Under normal circumstances, he would have been rather impressed, but his mind was fixed solely on retribution. "And this?" he pressed onward, indicating a plant with pale violet flowers.

Isolde swallowed. "That is ashwagandha root, sir."

Snape nodded curtly. "The three core ingredients, Miss Hamilton, of the potion you will make for yourself this evening."

Though seemingly meaningless to a removed bystander, Snape's wording did not go unnoticed to Isolde. "*Formyself*, sir?"

"Indeed. For *your self*, *Miss Hamilton*" he repeated, pronouncing every syllable as he arched himself towards her over the desk.

Isolde knew he was clearly driving her towards some crushing conclusion, but her nerves, mangled with the intermittent recollections of yesterday's humiliation, prevented her from reaching it. Receiving no further aid from her professor, Isolde studied the ingredients once more: ashwagandha root, cedar wood, chamomile... the bottled substance looked distinctly like Horklump juice, which she knew was used as a base for numerous healing potions.

Surely not.

Isolde may have made the connection sooner, had she not ignorantly presumed that even Professor Snape would not be so cruel.

Her eyes brimmed with tears, which she fought back in an instant, before meeting her professor's eyes once more. "*Cupiditas Mortis*," she declared finally, her features crestfallen.

"Translation?" Snape pushed her, unmoved by her whisper of tears.

"Essentially *Death of Lust*, sir," Isolde replied, in as detached a tone as she could muster. He would *not* break her, though that was clearly his aim. "The strong mixture of various sedatives counteracts the aphrodisiac present in the ashwagandha, aiding the drinker in... controlling their desires, sir."

The awkward silence that polluted the dungeon provided Isolde with subsequent time in which to think. *Cupiditas Mortis*. Had Snape slapped her across the face and declared her a brazen whore in front of her housemates, Isolde doubted that the pain would have compared. More than anything, she wanted to loathe Snape for his cruelty. Life would have been much simpler had she shared her classmates' resentment of the reputed 'Dungeon Bat.'

What made this desire problematic was her inability to do so. A niggling voice at the back of her head kept reminding her that she *deserved* this punishment. She *deserved* to be humiliated for her behaviour in the bookshop, for her idiotic dreams of seducing the Potions master. This train of thought led her to a tirade of questions: how many hormonal students had Snape assigned this potion to? How many like-minded girls had shivered under his intense gaze or marvelled in his cruelty as they chopped the odd little assortment of herbs and flowers? Trying to exorcise these unpleasant realities from her mind, Isolde diverted her thoughts to the task at hand.

Cupiditas Mortis was a deceptively simple potion. Created in the twelfth century for use in the nunneries of Europe, its simple ingredients with their well known properties failed to arouse suspicion amongst the Muggles. Its simplicity was now a curse to Isolde, the simple steps too basic to draw her attention from her misdemeanours, her mortification. She could not even tamper with the potion to render it useless, for to do so would only convert the brew into a deadly toxin. Snape knew exactly what he was doing.

Within the space of thirty minutes, Isolde added the last of the chamomile blooms to the viscous potion. It bubbled erratically, turning a rather unpleasant shade of olive green. It required no further brewing, the sticky substance within ready to consume. Isolde shivered at the mere thought.

"I have finished, sir," she coughed awkwardly, daring a glance toward Snape's desk. He was perusing a pile of essays, the scowl on his face palpable. Within a few seconds, he looked up, cocking an eyebrow.

"Obviously."

Paling, Isolde retrieved a ladle and clean beaker from the supply cupboard, placing them gently upon her desk. Unfolding himself from the hard wooden cradle of his chair, Snape swooped toward her, eyes glittering.

"An acceptable attempt, Miss Hamilton. However" Snape paused, the dagger of silence causing Isolde's heart to whack against her chest, "...I do not remember telling you to retrieve a beaker." With a sharp flick of the wrist, Snape summoned a phial from the open supply cupboard. His movements were like a dance, the fluid motion of the ladle sweeping into the bubbling cauldron of goo. Without spilling a drop, he transferred the measurement to the phial, popped in the cork and vanished the rest of the cauldron's contents. The phial disappeared in the folds of his cloak.

"You will tidy your working area, and then you may leave, Miss Hamilton."

Isolde was unable to move, spindly roots of confusion keeping her locked in place. "Excuse me, sir; you said I needed to take the potion."

Snape's face contorted into a sneer. "I said no such thing, Miss Hamilton. I said the potion *was* for you, but I did not specify when you would *take it*." The sneer morphed into a cruel smile. He was so close now that she could almost feel the scraping of wool against her bare arms, and her senses were overrun by his intoxicating authority.

"I suspect that by now you have destroyed all evidence of your little *addiction*," he purred softly. "Pity. However, if I ever find you in a similar situation again, I will have no qualms in administering this potion to you myself. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well then. I suggest you get started," he replied frostily, nodding towards the remnants of foliage on her work surface. "You may have nothing better to do this evening, now that your stash of smut has been incinerated, but I *do*."

As Isolde dragged dry leaves across the desk into her scooped palm, the sheer degradation which had saturated the last forty minutes of her existence still sank into her consciousness, along with her professor's lofty reduction of her innermost desires and yearnings into one piteous word: *addiction*. The idiom had not even quitted his snarling lips before she felt herself wince involuntarily, grasping disgustedly at the sleeves of her own robes, knowing for certain that if she let go she would cry.

And that would be unforgivable.

Irretrievable.

And yet, despite her professor's close proximity, as he had towered expectantly over her, an unruly image had still inched its way into Isolde's vision: his strong, rough hand grasping her slender neck as he poured drops of Cupiditas Mortis between her lips; the unbridled pulse of her neck against his fingertips as she gulped it down; his warm, labouring breath on her cheek as he told her how pathetic she was. The insane paradox of the display did not evade her, but it was far from laughable.

"Miss Hamilton!"

His voice shook Isolde callously from her thoughts, and she looked at her professor in horror as their remnants scattered guiltily from view. Blinking with realisation, Isolde's eyes met his.

Snape's mouth was already poised for his next acrid remark, but it closed at the sight of Isolde's mortified gaze. The very same gaze she had greeted him with inside the shadowy confines of *Zuranders* the day before, when he had fiercely snatched the incriminating book from her hands. The very same gaze she bore when she had practically cried out those shocking words into the smut-caked pages.

"Please sir, I want you," she had pleaded, before his presence had registered in her mind.

"Please sir, I want you"

He had been so consumed with disappointment and anger, even on their caustically quiet walk back to the school, that her words had not manifested themselves until now, as she stood in front of him again with the same look of knotted horror and longing.

An elongated silence sprawled between them as their eyes remained fixed. Isolde's exhibiting every raw emotion she suffered, and Snape's revealing nothing but appraising everything.

"I will *not* repeat myself again," he spoke finally. "You are *dismissed*."

Too untrusting of her own voice to utter a reply, Isolde simply nodded and made a swift retreat from the room.

The door had not even snapped shut before Snape seized the still-hot phial from his robes, uncorked it, and swallowed its entire contents in one keen gulp.

Insert evil laugh

Bewitch the Mind

Chapter 6 of 17

Snape is forced to deal with the ramifications of his actions.

Chapter Six: Bewitch the Mind

The moment the foul substance slid down his throat, Snape felt instantaneously sickened by his actions. He knew full well the complexities of the potion, the ramifications of consuming a draught brewed by another. *Cupiditas Mortis* was a curious concoction. During the brewing stage, the potioneer subconsciously siphoned all of his or her lustful thoughts into the cauldron. Upon drinking, these wisps of memory would react with the ingredients, negating the effect of just a tricky sequence of events that required the potion to be consumed only by the brewer. Should another consume it, the effect would be like reading the brewer's mind or jumping into a Pensieve brimming with their thoughts. It was a breach of privacy, a clear violation of trust. To commit such an act upon a student was unforgivable.

This hidden turmoil of emotions was one of the reasons why Severus found himself, only three hours later, perched uncomfortably on an embroidered chignon couch within the cavernous sitting room of the Malfoy Manor. The tumbler of Firewhisky clenched between his fingers provided welcome respite.

Upon discovering that he, Severus Snape, was the object of Isolde's intense sexual fantasies, it was not exactly wise to seek out the companionship of Lucius Malfoy. The handsome blond had a lurid reputation, and Severus was aware that the wily millionaire had made his sordid way through many of those that occupied the female wing of the Slytherin dormitories. Disgusting though he found this, Severus had not intervened. Lucius was just the kind of man to encourage Severus to bed his little fan...

"Severus, my dear friend," he would drawl between languid puffs of his cigar. "I honestly don't know how you deal with it. An orchard of ripe young women at your

fingertips, don't you ever get the urge to...?"

"I will not sleep with my students."

Severus's answer remained identical every time the subject was breached. This had suited him well. For the past thirteen years, he had felt no desire to bed students. Had he not foolishly consumed Isolde's potion, he most likely would have been able to resist even her.

His mind was so consumed with thoughts of the girl that he almost tuned out of Lucius's waterfall of light conversation. It was only when a familiar name filled the air that he snapped back to attention.

"...ask a seventh-year called Irene Hamilton, or something."

"Isolde Hamilton?"

"Yes! That's the one. Barney's girl." Lucius's grey eyes glittered. "Apparently, Draco is quite enamoured by the little chit. Tell me, is she a looker?"

Severus's lips curled into a sneer. "Would your son be interested if she were not?"

"Ah, fair point," Lucius smirked. "I daresay; I am quite disappointed that Draco has snatched her up, she sounds like a morsel I may enjoy. I do miss your little orchard, Severus."

The blond failed to notice the storm clouds brewing over Snape's features. The Potions master seemed permanently shrouded in a cloud of dourness. Fury consumed him for dual reasons. Firstly, Lucius's insinuation that Severus was nurturing an orchard of girls for the millionaire's consumption was revolting. Secondly, the idea of the blond, despite being Severus's only "friend", touching Isolde Hamilton made his skin crawl.

"I was under the impression that Draco has yet to ask Miss Hamilton to escort him to the Yule Ball," he stated with a cock of his eyebrow. "As far as I am aware, she has not been *snatched up* by anyone."

"Draco is *my* son," shrugged Lucius. "He will succeed. Now, tell me Severus, what brings you to my humble abode at this hour?"

Severus almost snorted at Lucius's display of humbleness. "I came to drink, Lucius, not to discuss the frivolities of my students."

As his cutting words hung between them, Severus swallowed the stinging remnants of his Firewhisky in one fluid motion. Contrary to his verbal protest, though, his own thoughts lingered rebelliously on one enigmatic apple.

Since his reckless consumption of Isolde's potion earlier that evening, his mind had been infiltrated with bulging pockets of yearning, their buttons straining from oppressive scholastic decorum. Sometimes they would pounce in haphazard wisps of feeling just feeling which could not be pinned down or made sense of. At other inopportune moments, titillating snippets of fervent encounters de-robed themselves to him: some had clearly been meticulously woven by their mistress across the course of many restless nights and sleep-inducing classes, and Snape himself found he was surprised impressed, almost by their inventiveness. Half expecting to see clichéd scenes of parted legs atop a classroom desk, or prolonged gazes of longing across rows of seats, he had been unnerved by a more tempting spectrum of scenarios: earlier that very night, when reprimanding a stuttering Hufflepuff in a second-floor corridor, water-dipped willow branches swept through his mind; Isolde's pale, naked back against an obliging tree trunk; a southward tug on his hips as her legs clasped tightly around his middle. The curfew-evading second year had been left flummoxed as the characteristically headstrong Potions master departed mid-battle, seeking the quietness of his office.

Only minutes later, his quill poised across another disappointing essay, Isolde's flushed collarbone crept stealthily beneath his parched lips; ignorant chatter permeated a single obstructing doorway as his teeth caught hold of a gasping nipple. The familiar innards of his storeroom encircled his vision as Isolde rocked back and forth, all thoughts of discovery discarded.

Severus's own laboured breathing roused him from his thoughts and his eyes darted to Lucius; his acute fear moulded quickly into a mere grimace.

Lucius's eyes were already fixed on Severus, his leisurely stance complimenting the hint of amusement in his countenance. Still smiling, he turned his attention to his crystal tumbler, rolling it nonchalantly in his palm.

"Ah, yes, the drink..." he mulled with feigned innocence. "Often makes the fruit even riper, does it not?"

Severus clenched his teeth behind placid lips, knowing all too well that the alcohol, far from giving him a reprieve, had actually heightened the potion's effects, suspending them to another plane entirely, where he could only balance on the sidelines and wait for the strings to be cut.

"You work too hard, Severus," Lucius continued, his eyes beginning to opalize from the mixture of intoxication and smoke. He tilted the stout decanter above his companion's glass, filling it generously. "You deserve a little... *distraction*; I have no doubt that your unwavering poise and brooding psyche have those little minxes hissing and writhing beneath their green-clad sheets..."

"I am not going to repeat myself again, Lucius. I will not sleep with my..."

But even as his glass's base met the marble side-table before a splash of Firewhisky pricked the back of his hand Isolde's ivory breasts clambered into his view once more.

Gleaning far too much pleasure from his friend's inarticulacy, Lucius's lips curled into a wry smile, his eyes practically glistening in triumph.

"No," Severus shot at him, though Lucius's expression did not falter. "No. I have far more pertinent matters weighing my thoughts and so do you, no doubt."

The gesture had been minute, but Lucius's eyes swept to Severus's left arm and, behind his rosy, whisky-fuelled cheeks, his face turned ashen.

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Thumb and forefinger pinched the bridge of his aquiline nose, eyes closed in a meditative attempt to quell the furnace ignited by the caustic combination of Firewhisky and *Cupiditas Mortis*. This ferocious heat caused his body to break out in a sweat, the thin grey cotton of his night shirt twisting uncomfortably around his body with accumulated dampness. The sheer intoxication of arousal was unbearable, only strengthened by the collage of lascivious fantasies playing before his closed eyelids.

Cold showers did nothing, nor did consuming a fresh batch of *Cupiditas* he brewed himself. Wrapping his fingers around his stiff length did nothing to ease the pain, for it simply surfaced images of Miss Hamilton's nimble fingers brushing across sensitive skin, those plump lips wrapping around...

Snape growled, thrashing the emerald sheets from his bed. At various intervals throughout the night he had contemplated taking a leaf from Lucius's book, bedding the girl, thrusting her clear from his system. The chit was more than willing, she was of age, and she would not inform the headmaster.

I will not sleep with one of my students.

This cardinal rule boomed in his mind, dragging him once again from the cesspit of his thoughts. This one rule had eased him through thirteen years of teaching, and throughout this time, he had not had a shortage of offers. Slutty little seventh-years, their skirts too short, their eyelids fluttering in a foul show that might have attracted the likes of Malfoy-senior, but hardly roused the ardour of the Potions master.

Isolde Hamilton, though, seemed an enigma to the rule. Perhaps she would have slipped by his radar: subtle, intelligent, little make-up, a thankfully normal length skirt. How many Isolde's had there been? Modest girls, who, as Lucius had said, hissed and writhed within their beds at the thought of him?

The whole concept was utterly preposterous.

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By the time Isolde slunk into the Slytherin common room the following morning, she had all but given up on trying to make herself look human. Several nights of interrupted sleep had left her complexion the unpleasant shade of sour milk. Her eyes were rimmed with pits of black, giving her the appearance of a sickly panda. This did not necessarily concern her. It was a Saturday, after all, and perhaps looking foul would deter the irritating stream of juveniles that insisted on asking her to accompany them to the Yule Ball.

Sinking into a particularly squashy leather armchair, Isolde feebly greeted her roommate Kathy who looked irritatingly perky this morning.

"So Iz, are you going to actually say yes to someone today?"

Kathy's face split into a derisive grin, her blonde curls bouncing around her shoulders as she greeted her friend.

Isolde moaned. "No Yule Ball before breakfast, Kath."

"The Yule Ball provides suitable conversation for any time of the day," her friend replied pertly. "And besides, apparently the sexiest guy in Slytherin is going to ask you out today!"

Isolde cocked an unplucked eyebrow. "I hope you're not talking about Draco Malfoy," she sneered. "He's *fourteen*, and besides, I think he made a better ferret than dance partner."

As the words left her mouth, the common room was filled with the obnoxious tones of the aforementioned Malfoy.

"True enough she hasn't exactly looked good lately, but even scruffy and unwashed Hamilton is *hot*. Not to mention pure-blood."

Isolde's sneer deepened as she sank into the chair. Fortunately, mini Malfoy had failed to see her.

"Father was trying to teach me how to woo her, but personally I found it rather pathetic. The only woman he ever goes near is Mother, and he hardly needs to woo her. He probably has not even flirted with another woman since the sixties."

Isolde snorted with silent laughter, while Kathy turned a violent shade of pink. It seemed that Draco Malfoy was the only member of Slytherin unaware of his father's escapades amongst the residents of the girls' dormitories. Kathy, herself, in the throes of her sixth year had fallen under the spell of Malfoy senior.

"Needless to say, I hardly think I need to ask Hamilton if she'll come to the ball with me. I already know she'll say yes."

With the final clip of Draco's arrogant little tongue, Isolde sprung from her chair. "Draco Malfoy, you are right, you do not need to ask me to go to the ball with you. I would not waste your breath. I would rather go to the ball with one of Professor Snape's pickled critters than set foot on the dance floor with you."

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At the sound of his own name, Snape's pupils expanded like spilt ink, and he slowly edged closer to the periphery of the commotion. His rationale for entering the common room so early in the morning completely evaded his mind as soon as he registered the owner of the voice. The mounting cluster of students hovering keenly around the quarrel provided ample concealment for him to observe undetected.

"Wouldn't surprise me if you went with the great Black Bat himself if he would stoop low enough to ask you, Hamilton. I've heard from my father that you prefer the more *mature* variety." Draco's minions scoffed wolfishly at his sides as a triumphant sneer spread across the boy's colourless cheeks.

Snape's insides simmered at the juvenile suggestion, but to his own surprise he fought his natural impulse to grab Draco by the scruff of his neck, finding himself intrigued to hear Isolde's response. What did Draco mean by his insinuation? A slight twinge of jealousy murmured in his empty stomach as he pictured another man's puny lips on Isolde's milky white breast.

As he watched from the doorway behind her, he spotted a barely discernible twitch of the hand which clenched Isolde's wand. "And what do you mean by *that*, Malfoy?"

The malevolent crease tore through Draco's cheek as he gratifyingly observed her cheeks flush to an incensed crimson. "Just what *she* said, Hamilton. Father tells me you quite enjoy the sweaty clutches of older men..." He paused for breath visibly daring himself to continue: "...Ichabod Flank, for example?"

Snape did not have time to consider the half-familiar name before the huddle of students diffused in a flurry of gasps and mirthful cries; as his view became clearer, his first sight was that of Isolde grappling furiously at Draco on the common room floor, their black robes twisting in a mass of bedlam.

The throng of bewildered students, one by one, stifled their yelps and catcalls as they became aware of their Head of House and the fierce expression he wore as he strode towards the two wrestling forms.

"You *bastard!*" Isolde barked, in a voice so rasping that even Snape was taken aback.

Despite his clearly disadvantaged position, with Isolde's legs clamped firmly around his middle, Malfoy laughed sadistically. "Hit a weak spot, have I, Hamilton?"

Before Isolde's elevated fist could descend on his flushed face, Snape grasped it in his hand and hauled her upright, leaving Draco to scamper to his own feet and take refuge beside Crabbe and Goyle. Snape retained his fistful of Isolde's cloak as he spun her around to face him, her features a fusion of angry tears and pants.

The cacophonous roar of only seconds ago was blanketed with silence as the entire room stared expectantly at their professor.

At long last, his voice hissed through the stillness like a rogue snake.

"To my office, Miss Hamilton. *Immediately.*"

The Second Time You Have Spoken Out of Turn

Chapter 7 of 17

Isolde undergoes detention while her head of house tries to expel unsuitable thoughts.

Chapter Seven: The Second Time You Have Spoken Out of Turn

Isolde could barely recall how she had gotten there, but she now found herself standing restlessly in the empty office, its walls lined weightily with dust-encrusted tomes. Her vision blurred with a mixture of stale tears and mediocre candlelight, she sat herself heatedly in an inhospitably solid chair and stared at Snape's vacant seat.

All visions of desire she felt for her professor seemed darkly laughable as her mind dissected his typically biased treatment of her harassers *she* had been the one who had been dragged unceremoniously from their scuffle; *she* had been told to go to his office for further chastisement. Her anger bubbled further as she pictured Snape praising Draco for his expert jibes and cruelty, patting him paternally on the shoulder as they mocked her pitiful outburst.

How had Draco *known*? If he had mentioned any other one of her father's distasteful companions, she would have scoffed at him with blithe amusement, but a mere reference to Ichabod Flank made her retch in sickening remembrance. Though she knew he hadn't the nerve to join the Death Eaters' ranks, he had cited his association with Lucius Malfoy on numerous drink-fuelled occasions.

Had he bragged about his nauseating conquest to his friends? Had he, in smoke-filled rooms of bravado, recalled fondly the way his uninvited fingertips had clawed her skin in the illusory shelter of her bedroom; the way her dear, ignorant father invited him again and again to their house, unaware of the liberties his companion had taken behind his too-trusting back? Having spent several weeks in a smog of sleepless nights and paranoia, Isolde had finally broached the subject with her father. Expecting him to cast his companion out of their household for good, she had been horrified at the sight of Mr Hamilton's unaffected composure. The mere memory of his stilly brow, his indifferent snuffle as he distractedly blew his nose with a green handkerchief, infused her with rage; she had grown accustomed to falling second to his ambitions of grandeur and Slytherin camaraderie, but his self-interest had reached a new summit.

Isolde was almost glad when she heard the sound of approaching footsteps, driving her away from her thoughts. She had just enough time to remove a fresh, hot tear from her under-eye as the door shot open and Snape's cloaked form strode inside.

They did not need to make eye contact for Isolde to once again sense his resounding disappointment. A muted flutter signified that his cloak had been removed, no doubt draped neatly over a bench or stool. The clip of his slightly heeled boots was the only sound that resonated in the chilly office.

"Never before..." his voice trailed furiously, disappearing into a far more poignant silence as the Potions master perched on his worn leather desk chair. After what seemed a lifetime, the treacle-like textures of his voice once again poured over her. "*Look at me.*"

It was a simple enough request, yet her head felt like a lead weight as she tilted it upwards. Her steely grey eyes fell under the control of his obsidian ones, the intimacy of the exchanged glance causing her bottom lip to tremble once more. Those mesmerising orbs, usually devoid of emotion, at this moment spoke many things. There was the undeniable tint of disappointment, mingled with a flash of something else... could it be concern? Apart from the intensity of his gaze, Snape was otherwise pallid. His features were masked with sleep deprivation, the dark shadow beneath his eyes comparable to her own. Her curiosity, despite the dire nature of her situation, was momentarily peaked. What had kept her professor up all night? Bad dreams? Indigestion? A good book? The intoxicating company of a woman? The latter caused worms of jealousy to burrow their malicious way through her gut.

"I find myself astonished," he began slowly, his eyes never leaving hers, "that within the space of two days I have found one of my most promising students not only malingering while in the course of doing an errand for her professor, but also engaging in fisticuffs with a fourteen-year-old boy..."

"Malfoy..."

Isolde's reunion with her own voice was short lived as Snape lifted a thin hand, a simple movement requesting her silence.

"I have neither the time nor inclination to listen to your excuses, Miss Hamilton." Snape pinched the bridge of his nose. "Thirty points have been taken from Slytherin, and both you and Mr Malfoy will be serving detention."

The tone of his voice suddenly took on a different edge, the flash of something different in his eyes becoming more profound. "I suggest you show more caution in your dealings with Draco Malfoy, Miss Hamilton. I fear that neither he, nor his father, will give up because of the near exchange of blows."

"His father, sir?"

Snape's face became unreadable. It was clear he was about to divulge information that he was quite keen to keep to himself. "Lucius Malfoy has taken an interest in you as a potential partner for his son."

Isolde could not hide the mask of disgust that flittered over her features. "*Me and Draco Malfoy?*"

"You are pure-blood, and related to some of the most powerful families in the wizarding world, Miss Hamilton. Your connection to the Black family alone is reason enough for Lucius's interest." How exactly Snape knew so much about her family tree failed to register with Isolde at this moment; she was too overcome with revulsion.

Snape continued. "Lucius Malfoy has snakes in many dens, even your own."

"Flank."

Snape's lip curled at the name. "Indeed."

"Sir, I loathe Ich..."

Once again, Snape cut her short with a flick of his hand. "Ichabod Flank has a hunger for young flesh that rivals that of Lucius Malfoy. Unlike his friend, however, Flank rarely gets the consent of the girl in question. Though I doubt Flank's actions toward you were appreciated, it would be wise not to encourage Draco to spread further rumours on the matter."

Isolde's teeth dug into her lower lip. "Yes, sir."

"Your detention will take place tomorrow evening at seven. Meet me in the Entrance Hall. You are dismissed."

Snape's eyes snapped from her own, resting on the large pile of papers stacked neatly on the polished surface of his desk. Isolde left as quietly as she could.

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Despite the cascading apprehension regarding the nature of her own detention, Isolde could not help but smirk the following day when news of Draco's evening with Snape reached her ears. It appeared the Potions master required pulverised Flobberworms for an upcoming project - six barrel loads of the sickly paste, to be precise. It had taken the fourth-year six and a half hours to squash the plump worms to Snape's satisfaction. The thought cheered her. If Snape had her doing a similar task, it would never compare to the sheer humiliation of brewing *Cupiditas Mortis*.

Wrapping her dull black cloak tightly around her shoulders, Isolde traversed the familiar path to the Entrance Hall, heart throbbing painfully in her chest. It was ten to seven, and Snape had yet to appear. Only a handful of students remained in the cavernous hall, meeting friends before filtering off to their prospective common rooms. A couple of ghosts flittered through the aged stone wall, perhaps exchanging a word or two with a painting as they passed. Everything appeared so normal; it almost tricked Isolde into believing that her situation was not that bad.

This blanket of ill-conceived relief was immediately discarded upon *his* arrival.

His thin face was like marble, carved into a mask of sheer concentration. Students darted from his path like insects falling prey to a bat. The long flaps of his cloak flicked with his determined movements.

"Miss Hamilton, follow me."

Snape did not even slow down, and Isolde had to near jog to keep up with his pace. The chill of the evening air assaulted her, but Snape's footfalls did not falter. Their path was familiar, the footprints scarring the virgin snow leading straight toward the greenhouses.

The oddly comforting aromas of manure and greenery welcomed Isolde into the slightly warmer glass clad buildings.

"This evening we will be working in Greenhouse Six," Snape uttered finally, stopping before an opaque glass door.

Isolde quickly caught her breath. *Greenhouse Six?* She had never heard of it, and it was this unfamiliarity that left her with a sense of foreboding. Her eyes fell upon Snape's pockets as the Potions master extracted a small bronze key. Within seconds, the greenhouse door creaked open, revealing uniform rows of perfectly manicured plants. Upon entering, the young Slytherin recognised a few of the specimens: asphodel, liquorice root, lavender. All of them, innocuous or dangerous, were potion ingredients.

At the far end of the greenhouse, a small bench had been set out with many long pots, a small bowl of round seeds perched in the middle. Snape took this bowl between his fingers, showing the precious contents to Isolde.

"Please identify these for me, Miss Hamilton."

Her voice emerged croaky and unused, her intense eyes falling upon the little seeds. "I believe they are New Zealand Kowhai seeds, sir."

"Correct, Miss Hamilton. The properties of the Kowhai?"

"The Maori of New Zealand used the bark and sap of the Kowhai to ease external and internal pain. In the wizarding world, the sap is often added to headache potions."

Snape cocked a thin black eyebrow. "Very impressive. Most students do not even bother to learn the properties of their native plants, let alone those from across the world." Placing the bowl back down on the dirty wood, Snape handed her a scalpel. "Kowhais are particularly difficult to propagate out of their native habitat. The seeds must be prepared in the correct way to assure sprouting." Carefully, he dipped two long fingers into the shallow bowl, extracting a seed. Holding it almost to eye level, he sliced the tip of the seed with the scalpel, before thrusting the tiny ball into the moist earth of a nearby pot.

"There are seven hundred seeds, Miss Hamilton... work quickly."

It took Isolde a long moment to register his command; the sound of her professor's richly smooth voice even when talking about *seeds* coupled with the increasing humidity of her new surroundings, gave her a fleeting sense of giddiness. It was only when Snape began to delve into the empty window-box beside her that she exchanged her vacant expression for one of inquiry.

Locating the object of his search, his fingers ensnared a weathered piece of rope, which he pulled upwards to reveal the netted sack to which it was attached. Isolde's eyebrows inched further up her forehead, wordlessly seeking clarification. Her face was already feeling the clamminess characteristic of being overseas, but Snape's pale complexion appeared unaffected.

Always unaffected.

"I will return shortly, Miss Hamilton. I trust you can slice seeds without my supervision."

It was a statement, not a question. At least that was something.

Though she continued to look up at him expectantly, Isolde received none of the explanation she sought. After taking a momentary glance in her general direction, Snape strode magnificently towards the glass doors at the far side of the hut, leaves and vines quaking as he troubled the aged floorboards.

Even after his departure, Isolde struggled to stay on task. Despite him showing a hint of understanding sympathy, even in his office the previous day, she felt somewhat ruffled by the fact that she had received an equally tedious and time-consuming task to her adversary. It seemed the only thing he had spared her was the chance of getting covered in worm guts.

And now he had left her to it. Isolde wasn't sure whether to take it as a compliment that he trusted her to be alone inside his private greenhouse with his well-pruned and orderly rows of plants, or if she should feel slighted that, if rumour could be relied on, he had supervised Malfoy for the entire six and a half hours.

Had she disgusted him so much that he couldn't stay in the same room as her?

Half-formed recollections snaked traitorously through her mind: a hardback tossed distastefully into her quivering lap; her hand shamefully stirring a murky green potion; a pair of black, disenchanted eyes staring across a desk. Shaking them from remembrance, Isolde sliced into her forty-fifth seed, plunging it deeply into the damp soil.

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She wasn't certain how much time had passed, but as her tired fingertips dipped absentmindedly into the bowl and isolated the six-hundred-and-eighty-eighth seed from its remaining associates, Isolde noticed she and the greenhouse were shrouded by blackness. The blackness she longed for - the innate flourish of robes no one could even aspire to imitate - had still not returned. She was almost relieved, desperate as she was to avoid even further retribution, and she took only a brief respite to create some artificial light for herself before stooping back to tedium.

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His dark shadow preceded him as he made his way across the grass towards Greenhouse Six. The net sack he had departed with was now full to capacity and floated at his side.

As he neared the glass structure, illuminated by a sphere of light within, the sight reminded him oddly of a night-light he had owned in his youth. Stopping in his tracks, a patchy recollection shook itself from the clutches of a caged history: the sphere of light reaching out to a smaller pair of eyes in a darkened room, a woman's choked cry through paper-thin walls. Discharging it promptly, he strode onward.

Snape's now sallow eyes narrowed as he came within yards of his destination, the figure at the centre of the light becoming fully formed. His immediate thoughts were furrowed with irritation *why had the wretched girl not finished yet?* He had been in the Forest for over three hours: ample time for her to complete her task.

The longer his gaze fixed on her, however, his features softened, and had the darkness not masked it completely a slight smirk would have been visible on his thin lips. Despite being a great nuisance to him over the last week in more ways than he would readily admit the girl had supplied him much satisfaction as her deceptively slender limbs assaulted Malfoy's only son and heir at his feet.

His smirk wavered. Whether she realised the enormity of her actions yet or not, Isolde had made some powerful enemies for herself, and Snape knew he would have to keep his ear to the ground, for *both* of their sakes. He inwardly rebuked himself for his far from ignorant mention of Isolde at Malfoy Manor.

"Well, Miss Hamilton?"

His solid baritone preceded him as he re-entered the greenhouse, the sack of foliage nestling in the nearest corner in a weary heap. Isolde's eyes shot to the contents of the sack: Thorn Apple. Despite being acutely aware that she had been asked a question, she could not help considering for a moment how her professor had collected such a toxic plant and what for? Ironically nicknamed Angel's Trumpet, its leaves were used in some of the deadliest poisons in existence, and she half wished she had been able to witness him gathering them, demonstrating skills she knew he had but would never exhibit within a classroom.

Her eyes met his at the sound of his heavy sigh. "I had hoped you would be finished by now." His voice was laden with the usual streaks of displeasure, but it lacked its acidic bite. He looked weary, in fact.

"This is hardly the same as mashing up a heap of worms; a troll could do that, and it probably wouldn't have taken six and a half hours." Isolde smiled lightly as she recalled being told the tale of Malfoy's detention earlier that morning. "*This* requires precision and care," she added, slicing another seed from tip to tip.

Snape half-smirked in spite of himself, a flash image of Malfoy's perspiring, gut-spattered face tickling his mind. "How many left, Miss Hamilton?" A minute nod targeted the almost empty bowl.

Without looking into its concaved depths, Isolde replied instantly: "Two." The absence of 'sir' did not escape either of their notice, but both were too tired to acknowledge it.

Snape watched Isolde's hand reach into the bowl, pinching the penultimate germ between her fingers. Before he really knew what he was doing, his own hand gravitated towards the final russet-shelled speck as he withdrew a scalpel from beneath his robes.

Two separate fingers penetrated the same patch of damp soil.

"And now, Miss Hamilton *bed*."

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Bed.

One simple word. Three letters. One syllable. Bouncing off the tongue of most, the word held little connotation for the exhausted Slytherin. The sharp jab of sound was merely a description of something she, at this very moment in time, severely coveted. Wrapped in Snape's smooth baritone, the word took on an entirely new edge. Possibilities caressed her, unlikely situations boring into her skull like incurable parasites. So consumed by the mirage of fantasy clouding her mind, Isolde did not trust herself to utter a word. Unhindered by her usual barriers of self-control, her traitorous tongue would no doubt twist her words into something thoroughly unsuitable, like *yes please*.

Futilely attempting to obscure the red tint of her cheeks, Isolde fell into line behind the clearly agitated professor. From the rear, his visage was not broken by the paleness of his complexion or the flash of white at his collar. Hair met cloak met boots, as though he were a statue carved solely from obsidian. A spectacle of ebony ready to be immersed within the deep pool of pitch night outside.

It was almost worth the points, the tedium of three hours seed cutting, to spend this inkling of time with him, to follow in his wake like a sickeningly willing shadow. Her fingers still tingled from momentary contact with his, that fateful little second when they had plunged their seeds into the same pot. He had pulled away quickly. Was her touch so repulsive to him? Why did he retreat as though stung by one of Hagrid's Blast-Ended Skrewts?

These questions rung in her overactive mind as she followed him, lingering in the uncomfortable cocoon of silence that had grown with the utterance of one tiny word.

Bed.

oOoOoOo

Though he had been a tall lad, the teenage Severus Snape had been plagued with a perpetual scrawniness that did not seem to dissipate with onset of puberty. It did not matter how many calories he consumed or how much exercise he did, no muscle nor fat seemed to hold to his thin frame. In his fifth year he had experimented with a body building potion, with catastrophic results. Even nineteen years later, he shivered at the memory of his reflection, the lumbering form of rippling muscles, unnatural and utterly ridiculous. That day, he had refused to emerge from the haven of his four-poster, waiting for the potion to run its natural course. During his torturous teens, he had similarly attempted to combat his beak-like nose, pasty complexion and slick hair to little avail. The victim of relentless bullying, notably by James Potter and his cronies, Snape had resorted to hiding. By his seventh year he knew every secret corridor, foothold, den of shadow, underground passage and corner of the school.

As an adult, Snape used this extensive knowledge of the school's hiding places to corner unsuspecting teenagers. These same dens of shadow, hidden from the other teachers, were the favourite little sinkholes for hormone-ridden teenagers. Snape loathed them all, furious that they were using his old sanctuaries to partake in an activity that his teenage self had *longed* for.

Now, nineteen years later, Snape found his mind turning to these hidey holes for a different purpose. He knew how many there were between the greenhouses and the Entrance Hall doors. All it would take was a quick suggestive glance of his eyes, a gesture of the hand, to draw Isolde into one of these cracks. That lithe, feminine form, so violent in the assault against Malfoy, would mould against his own tall frame. He yearned for her soft lips to be crushed beneath his own, smooth legs wrapped around his waist as his long, calloused fingers trailed beneath the soft fabric of her school skirt.

It seemed amazing to him that the same form which ignited repulsion from the girls in his own year could elicit such passion from his student. The side effects of the potion still rankled him, the images of her moaning under the caresses of his own, long-fingered hands, was almost enough to crack his weak veneer of control.

His ardour rising, he could almost hear her sharp groans as his hips thrust to meet hers, the delectable contrast of cool air and her warmth engulfing him.

No one would ever know.

No one would ever need to know.

She would be willing, oh so willing. As Lucius so crudely stated, she would fall into his hand, a ripe fruit ready to be plucked. His mind flashed back to stories from his childhood, Bible stories that his father had hounded upon him in an attempt to quash the taint of magic from his son. Isolde was like the plump, perfect apple and he was Eve, beyond tempted to take what he wanted, despite the ramifications of his actions.

I will not sleep with one of my students.

This mantra, however, the nine words that had dragged him through his teaching career, seemed to grow weaker with every step, every moment spent in the company of the intoxicating young witch.

It was crystal clear.

Isolde Hamilton was going to be his downfall.

oOoOoOo

Unaware that her own lust was once again depriving her Potions master of another night's sleep, Isolde found herself plunged into unconsciousness. Wrapped in the cocoon of emerald cotton, sleep came easily, her body yearning for a return to normalcy. This sleep was not invaded by an army of dreams, battling forth to fill her mind with Snape's naked form, his skilled fingers, the gentle, yet passionate brush of his lips. Her sheets were now twisted around her figure as she flipped and moaned in restless slumber.

She emerged from this sea of wonderful deep sleep at nine thirty-seven the following morning, a sharp spike of sunlight jabbing through a gap in the velvet hangings of her four-poster. A smile curved her lips as she remembered the day: Saturday! Though her list of homework was almost as long as the essays she would have to write, Isolde could not help but enjoy the prospect of a weekend.

Her momentary jubilation deflated, however, the moment she stepped foot in the library. Several pairs of eyes followed her, replaced with several more as she slunk out of view. Muffled giggles permeated the air, joined by huffs of disgust. Self-consciously, she patted her hair and smoothed the front of her robes. Had she spilt something on herself over breakfast? Was there a lump of scrambled eggs in her hair?

Finding the secluded table where she and Marius usually partook in their weekend study, she found herself confronted with a disgusted look. Marius's features, usually creased in a smile, were instead downcast, his lips imitating one of Snape's trademark scowls to perfection.

"Is it true?"

His voice mirrored the aura of repulsion. Pale blue eyes bore into her grey.

"Is what true?"

Panic gripped her. Had he found out? Did he know of her delicious fantasies, doused in a healthy coating of Snape?

Marius seemed to be gearing up, forcing himself to utter the words. "I know you don't like Diggory, but honestly Isolde *Malfoy*?"

"Malfoy?" Isolde merely gaped.

"Rumour has it that you pretty much jumped him in the Slytherin common room. I know he's *rich*," Marius spat the word venomously, "but he's fourteen, for Merlin's sake!"

Fury slowly engulfed Isolde, her lower lip trembling. "*Jumped* him? Fuck, Marius, you know full well what I think of that disgusting little ferret. I am insulted that you are even giving this crap the time of day!" Lowering her voice a little, she continued. "For your information, I got into a fight with the little slime ball. When I get my hands on that foul little...!"

"*Ahem!*"

Both students spun around to locate the source of the noise. Scanning the mass of spines, Isolde's eyes fell upon a pair of scathing eyes, magnified by a pair of harshly cut spectacles.

"Sorry, Madam Pince," Marius murmured; though he was certain her intervention had been a response to Isolde's fetid language, he had apologised automatically, feeling a heavy layer of guilt mixed in with his hastily consumed breakfast. Turning back to face his friend, he could see just from her harried expression that she had been telling the truth. *Fucking Malfoy*. He wasn't sure who to feel more enraged with the rancid, fourth-year git for spreading such a callous lie, or himself for lapping it up so unquestioningly.

"I'm sorry, Iz," he said in almost a whisper as Madam Pince strode past his rear, her hands laden with misplaced books, and seated herself back at her desk around the corner.

Isolde angrily fingered her *Advanced Potion-Making* book, knowing that if she opened her mouth, another torrent of outrage would spill out. A sharp huff of breath swept across the table to Marius's own book, the pages thrashing up briefly at their corners.

"Everyone knows Malfoy is a complete *dick*," he continued, trying to undo the damage of his tactless tirade. The mere mention of the Slytherin's name made Isolde's shoulders bristle beneath her olive coloured sweater.

"*That's* the understatement of the year," she spoke finally, unable to let his comment disband without correction. "I swear," she continued, dipping her quill irritably into Marius's ink pot, "this Yule Ball is more trouble than it's worth."

He watched the tip of her quill scratch arduously across the top of her parchment, forming the name he knew so well. But it had not escaped his notice that Isolde had not been herself of late; clearly, something was troubling her - something intangible. Something six years of friendship couldn't help him put his finger on. He had always found her to be enigmatic even during their first year, when she had surprised him by stealing a steaming mouthful of his coffee *before* introducing herself as his brewing partner: "I saw you brewing a Sleeping Draught last week," she had explained. "It was... quite adequate," she had smiled, before filling the previously vacant space beside him. "I'm in no need of a brewing partner who copies my every move like a stunned pixie." Her manner of *approach* had made him somewhat stunned, not least because she was a Slytherin, and Slytherins kept to their own house didn't they? Isolde never failed to astonish him even now.

As he stared at her across the library desk, the corners of his lips curled in affectionate recollection. "Come on, Iz; you must be *shit* flattered that so many people have asked you already. And it's only November!"

Her quill paused over her eloquently penned title as her eyes shot up to his. "Yes, it is only *bloody* November. And it's a farce! Never have I seen such..."

"Why don't you go with me?"

His words hung in the air between them as Isolde stopped mid-sentence, a rogue drip of ink punctuating the silence and spoiling her neat craftsmanship. "Oh, *fofuck's*

sake," she cursed, whispering a cleansing spell beneath her breath. If the essay had not been for Professor Snape, she probably would have left it there, smudging it dry with her thumb. Marius watched the stain sink without trace into the parchment, wishing he could clear his own residue as competently, but the words still lingered across the cluttered desk.

"I meant just as friends, of course, to... get the others off your back. You know, as a favour?" As soon as his words left him, he braced himself for their impact.

"A favour?" Isolde spat, slamming her Potions book closed. She knew, even as she rose out of her chair, that she was overreacting *severely* overreacting - but she was pig sick of it all: the Ball...the *bloody* Ball, Malfoy and his overzealous, meddling father, and Snape. *Professor Snape*: the only person she had actually fantasised about going to the foolish function with, though she knew deep in her gut that he detested such frivolities. She had seen him on many occasions, hovering with heated displeasure in the far corners of the Hall, his black pupils seeking out overenthusiastic students to reprimand just to make the minutes go faster. She knew she was being ridiculous, and yet...

"Don't flatter yourself, Mr Spencer," oh, Merlin, she was even starting to sound like him "What makes you think going with you would be any more bearable than spending the evening with Malfoy?"

Marius blew out a strained laugh. "That's a bit below the belt, Iz."

It was. She *knew* it was, but she felt too inflamed with frustration to haul herself back. Clasping her books and parchment to her chest, Isolde shoved her chair under the table and stood behind it to face her bewildered friend. "Look, Marius, I'll see you later. I'm not in the mood for studying now."

"No *kidding*," he muttered, lowering his eyes to the empty desk space opposite him. "Maybe when you've calmed down..."

But his words fell on deaf ears as he looked up in time only to see Isolde's hair disappear behind a colossal shelf of books and out of sight.

I Know You Like to Feel... Involved

Chapter 8 of 17

The Yule Ball approaches as much as Isolde tries to ignore it. Unfortunately, even if the simple task of buying a dress is ruined by the meddling influence of the men in her life.



Chapter Eight: I Know You Like to Feel... Involved.

Even within the fiery green embers, Lucius' golden eyes flared with tenacity. "Surely with a spot of persuasion..."

"Lucius, I refuse to encumber myself with juvenile drivel. If the girl has said she will not go with him, there is little I can do to change that." In his mind, he corrected himself: there was little he *wanted* to do to change it. In fact, it gave him great satisfaction to see his friend's desperate glare peeking out of the cinders of his dust-embellished hearth. "I hear she put up quite a fight..."

"Don't toy with me, Severus. Draco informs me you were there to see the whole glorious show. As their Head of House, surely it is within your power to..."

"To what?" Snape scoffed from his high-backed chair, his fingers cradled within each other. "To force the union? I would have thought that defeated the object of *seduction*, Lucius, if I prompted the match on his behalf." His lips curled smugly, and he allowed his thoughts to drift fleetingly to a well-cosseted image from Isolde's potion, in which his mere breath made her groan with desire. "I have to confess," he continued, letting Isolde's ragged sigh trail through his consciousness, "that, having such a well-versed instructor as you, I thought Draco would be an adept seducer. It seems, in this case, the apple has indeed fallen far from the tree..."

"Are you saying you will not assist him at all?" Lucius spat through the already spewing flames.

"I am *saying* that it seems the matter is over and done with. Miss Hamilton has made it clear that she is not interested in your son."

Through the dazzling green flames, Lucius' face contorted with resentment before an unsettling smile settled in its place. "She has indeed made her bed, Severus. I just hope she can bear to lie in it..."

Severus knew the expression well, but it was laden with new-fangled meaning which troubled him. His face twitched with suspicion, but before his lips parted to reply,

Lucius' sneer dissolved into the flames.

oOoOoOo

As the twenty-fifth of December neared, Isolde felt her dread settle as permanently as the fallen snow. In an attempt to avoid the haze of sickening Yule Ball excitement, she incarcerated herself within the library, taking some comfort from the looming pinnacles of books. Every now and again an ill-placed volume would slide from a shelf, zipping across the room toward its correct home. To the ignorant eye, Hogwarts' grand library seemed a cacophony of activity, a cornucopia of intrigue. Surely, it would be impossible to study within such confines? Though mildly fascinated by interactions of the flying tomes, Isolde, like every student at Hogwarts, had soon learnt to ignore the imposing magic.

Though the library provided initial respite from the plague of Yule Ball chatter, as the month dragged on this incessant talk soon trickled under the doors, looped between the monolithic book shelves and punctured her personal space.

Isolde's mood was made equally sour by the arrival of her father's delivery. Extravagant as always, the parchment was sealed with the Hamilton crest. Isolde had given the crest momentary observation, the sneer on her face evident to all. The ornate "H", surrounded by vines and little serpents, was so indicative of the Malfoys. It was an ode to the power that Barnabus Hamilton so passionately coveted.

Ripping apart the seal, the small lump of paper unravelled, revealing a sackful of plump Galleons and a small note.

My most glorious daughter, Isolde,

With the Yule Ball upon us, I implore you to do the ancient family of Hamilton proud by looking your best. A suitable dress and emeralds are waiting for you at Minchin and Lark's at Hogsmeade. You will need to have it fitted. Within this sack are enough Galleons to pay for this and some beverages for you and your little friends.

Your ever loving father,

B. A. F. R. M. Hamilton

Isolde had almost giggled at her father's ridiculous attempt at snobbery. The letters were over crafted, each figure capped with a silly little loop or curl. The five consecutive initials brought a tint of red to her pale face, a clear reminder that her father had also inflicted such a foul long name on herself. Born during the height of You Know Who, her own title reflected her father's rather sickening adoration for the Dark Lord. It also sounded bloody ridiculous. Often, during rare moments of contemplation, she pondered what life may have been like if she had known her mother for longer. Would her father be a different man? More modest? Would he exist away from his ever present cloud of false snobbery; the lingering reek of cigars and Firewhisky?

Cosy within the library, Isolde fished the fat velvet pouch of Galleons from her school bag, taking another glance within. Her father was a wealthy man, no doubt about that, but he had never laid this wealth extravagantly upon her. Isolde would have been foolish had she believed he hid his wealth from her so that she could grow in modesty. The truth was, the dark haired millionaire preferred to spend his cash wiling his way up the social ladder, purchasing ridiculous house crests and nestling himself between the thighs of expensive concubines. Why, then, was he sending her money now?

There was only one way to find out. Shoving her homework back into her bag, Isolde began the search for Marius. If she was going to endure Hogsmeade torture, she might as well do it in the company of a friend, even if she had to apologise on bended knee.

oOoOoOo

Two large bundles of warm clothes bundled through the thick new-fallen snow, their laughter permeating the chilled air, trickling into the freezing confines of the clock tower. Hidden behind a thick shard of tinted glass, Snape felt his lip curl involuntarily at Spencer's closeness to the girl. The remnants of her potion trickled into his self-control, urging him to swoop upon them, snapping the boy's groping digits and taking Isolde into his own arms. The thought disgusted him. His forced reaction to the chit was entirely physical; the idea of actually partaking in a relationship with her, laughing with her as they neared the tiny wizarding village, filled him with utter dread. What did he care if Spencer took care of her emotional needs? The idiotic Ravenclaw was good for nothing else.

"Snape!"

The trademark growl of Alastor "Mad-Eye" Moody broke Snape's shield of contemplation, dragging him back to reality. Hogsmeade duty was pure torture. Hogsmeade duty with Moody was akin to the Cruciatu curse.

The grizzled Auror loped toward the glass, torn lips folding in disgust. "Perving on the students, eh Snape? Developing a taste for young flesh, eh? Wait 'til I tell the old man..."

Snape sighed lazily. "Dumbledore is unlikely to believe such utter garbage, Alastor. I suggest you focus your lopsided gaze elsewhere." Well aware that he had left his statement thoroughly ambiguous, Snape swooped from his position, descending the sharp staircase and emerging into the embrace of the courtyard. Moments later, the lumbering clunk of Moody's walking stick announced the presence of his thoroughly unwanted shadow.

Surrounded by a swirling mass of excitable school children, Snape forcefully combated his raging desire to visit *Zuranders*. The tiny shop would remain untouched by the Yule festivities, its bookshelves devoid of holly and mistletoe. There would be no Christmas carols, no garish colour schemes. The only red and green to adorn the store would be the faded leather of the various books.

Like a man wading through a dark ocean, Snape traversed the crowd of Christmas shopping, his superior height aiding him toward his destination. A flash of chocolate caught his eyes, thick luxurious curls jammed beneath a Slytherin beanie. Despite the comical company of her friend, the girl's back seemed hunched, eyes downcast. Snape soon saw why. The shop she was standing before was bursting at the seams with young girls, screeching shrilly about various gowns. Snape fought back the urge to deal out detention to a fifth-year from his own house, whose grasp of the English language seemed to be limited to "Oh my god! Oh my god! This is soooooo cute!".

Fighting back the urge to vomit, Snape watched the retreating back of Isolde Hamilton, wondering exactly why she was subjecting herself to such torture.

oOoOoOo

Lauren Parker's outburst was not lost upon Isolde or Marius, the latter bursting into an evil grin the moment the words brushed his ears.

"So, Izzy-kins. Why exactly are we in this place?"

Isolde rattled the pouch of Galleons. "Father's wish."

"And when have you ever done what your father wants?" Marius interjected, his eyebrows cocking at the sight of Pansy Parkinson, a fourth-year Slytherin, decked out like a sugar-coated pink cream puff.

"Draco is going to think I'm soooooo hot in this!" The pug-faced girl twirled on the spot, eliciting an exultation of cheers from her friends.

Isolde coughed unsubtly, her eyes rolling. "What is it with these people and the excessive use of the letter 'o'?"

"Didn't you know, Iz, it makes you sound soooooooo hoooooooot."

Despite herself, Isolde started to giggle manically, clutching her friend for support. The outburst drew the attention of the pink clad Pansy, whose face turned ashen.

"What are you laughing at, Hamilton?"

"Marius, old boy," Isolde smirked, "it appears that the cream puff can actually talk."

The Ravenclaw curled his hands into a makeshift telescope, looking through. "Astounding, old chap, a truly amazing discovery."

Pansy's cheeks were now the same colour as her repulsive dress. "Oh, and who are you going with then?" Her voice was a shrill shriek. "Draco tells me you've been spending a lot of time with the dungeon bat lately. Perhaps you'll go with him? Best wear something short; I hear Snape likes a good hard grope!"

Marius' hands shot toward Isolde's shoulders, forcing her out of the attack position. Smouldering, Isolde shot away. As they neared the part of the store reserved for more upmarket clientele, Isolde started to fume. "How dare she? How dare she?"

Marius, assuming that her reaction was a natural response to being accused of sleeping with a teacher, wrapped his arms around her. "No one believes Pansy, Iz. These rumours come and go all the time. Just yesterday, someone told me that Cedric Diggory and Professor Sprout were caught... er... repotting his mandrake."

Despite her anger, Isolde choked with a re-emergence of giggles. "I always wondered how that dunderhead managed to receive such good marks in Herbology."

Marius shivered, his response cut off by a dreamy voice from the shadows.

"I assume one of you is the offspring of Barnabus Hamilton?"

Isolde's eyebrow rose in an uncanny impression of Snape's. "That would be me. *The offspring?* Honestly... what was with these people?"

The owner of the dreamy voice stepped out, revealing a gaunt woman with scarlet locks, tied suffocatingly at the back of her head. Her thin frame was wrapped in a cloud of black velvet.

A thin, taloned hand grasped Isolde's wrist. "Come this way, little girl."

Little girl?

Isolde followed, waving goodbye to her friend. The private changing room was dead silent, not an iota of noise pollution from the main shop permeating its magically thickened walls. There was no furniture, just an ornate mirror perched beneath a large chandelier. Hanging from a small hook near the mirror was a gown.

Formed of the finest emerald velvet, the dress fell in exquisite waves from the hanger. Though it appeared plain from a distance, at closer quarters, the material shone with infinitesimal textures. Long sleeves flared, the dissension of the longest part reaching mid thigh.

The gaunt woman slunk away, allowing Isolde to remove her winter clothing and slip into the garment. Upon the hanger, the dress looked modest, but upon her curvaceous form the low neck accentuated her full breasts revealing more cleavage than she would have liked. Slits broke the velvet skirts, so that when she walked, flashes of skin all the way to her thigh could be seen. It was a gown to be worn by a woman bent on seduction, not a present from a father to his seventeen-year-old daughter.

"Excuse me Mrs..."

"Lark," crooned the enigmatic skeleton. "Yes, my dear?"

"I am not sure if this dress will be suitable for the ball. I was after something a little more..." *Modest? Teenage? Asexual?*

"Your father was very specific that you were to purchase the dress, Miss Hamilton." With a flick of the woman's wand, Isolde felt the comforting confines of her winter clothing replace the dress. The sheath of velvet was now beautifully folded in the woman's emancipated fingers.

Isolde opened her mouth to argue, but the woman once again interjected. "I have also been barred from selling you any other dress."

Confusion swamped Isolde. Her father was rich, yes, but surely he did not have enough power to dictate the functioning of a totally separate business. Reading her facial expressions, Mrs Lark smiled. "I am sorry, dear." Her harsh figure took on a softer edge. "If it were just your father, I would not have adhered to such a rule but..." The soft voice faded, a flash of fear dancing over gaunt cheekbones.

Hesitating with the Galleons, Isolde stood firm. "But what, Mrs Lark?"

"Your father has powerful friends, Miss Hamilton," the woman eventually replied, voice back to its initial tone. "I suggest you be careful."

Thin fingers snatched the Galleons from her palm, thrusting a bag into her hands.

Upon emerging to the company of her friend, she could do nothing but send Marius a very confused look.

oOoOoOo

"Is that her?"

Ms Minchin's more rounded form approached Mrs Lark's side as they watched Isolde's back disappear through the arch and into the main shop. A mere nod confirmed the assumption.

"She's a pretty little thing," Ms Minchin mused as her sister's gaunt fingers clutched the thick, glinting Galleons so tightly her knuckled whitened. "Seems almost a shame..."

"Keep out of it, Armeda; business is business," Mrs Lark cut in waspishly.

"I know, but... she hardly seems old enough to..."

"She's not old enough. Not at all." Turning to face her sister's stout frame, she shoved the tainted handful into a more willing pair of hands. "Still a mere schoolgirl, and yet..."

Both women bristled visibly. The counter was laden with unfinished sentences as they stood behind it, the shared guilt suspended between them. Deliberately, Mrs Lark turned to a curtained alcove and scrubbed her hands in the murky basin as her sister cranked the lever on the cash register, depositing the Galleons into its brass mouth.

"We are best to forget about it, Soph. Mr Malfoy made his *request* very clear, and the consequences if we did not comply. We can't have anyone finding out about the lease... not for the sake of a stranger, even if she is only a child..."

"I know." Sophia Lark busied herself, unfolding scarves only to fold them once more. "I know."

Therein Lies My Great Value

Chapter 9 of 17

Ripped bags and clandestine meetings. Isolde and Severus find themselves slipping further into a mess not of their making.

Chapter Nine: Therein Lies My Great Value

Isolde and Marius approached the exit of the overly adorned shop in taut silence; the twinkling lights, glittering so festively, made Isolde scowl as they walked through them and out into the snow-carpeted street. Marius watched her questioningly as she shot a sharp sigh into the air in front of her, her warm breath scattering in a cloud of retreating vapour.

"Thank Merlin *that's* out of the way," she declared, hoping that alone would explain her terseness. Her stomach stirred with apprehension; taunting snippets of conversation and her father's letter buzzed imperiously through her mind as she tried to piece them together, trying to make some semblance of meaning out of the concurrent events. Her lips ached to spill her concerns, but she knew Marius, despite his always good intentions, would be unable to help.

Marius had never met her father; during the six years they had been friends, Barnabus Hamilton had been a mere topic of conversation, an ignorant object of occasional scorn, and Isolde had always gone to great lengths for him to remain as such. Marius had visited Isolde in the holidays many times *always* when her father was away on business. And even then, she had received a number of jibes for the things she *couldn't* hide, namely her huge, ornate home, which her father had neurotically enhanced over the years. "Kept this under the carpet, didn't we?" Marius had teased as he'd entered the grand entrance hall. In her father's desperate pursuit for grandeur and recognition, not a single inch or crevice of their home had been left untouched. Isolde had fought zealously to keep her bedroom the way it had always been; for months, it had been the only whisper of their more modest, *happier* life, until she had returned for Christmas in her second year to find it re-decorated, her ragged childhood treasures replaced with hollow, glistening decadence. Even Marius had light-heartedly accused her of ungratefulness, but Isolde knew it had not been an act of love - merely another box ticked, another stepping stone to affluence.

No. There was no point in offloading her concerns to her friend. It would be akin to opening her heart to a Flobberworm, so ignorant was he of her father's ways. As they strode back beneath the town clock, Isolde could not dispel the newfangled unease now swirling in her stomach as she carried the thick paper bag by its mauve ribbon handles. The emerald material had felt surprisingly light when it had clung around her body in the changing room, but it now felt like a lead weight in her fingers. *Why* had he been so insistent on her buying that particular dress? And what did Mrs Lark mean in her warning about his 'powerful friends'? Clearly, she had known a great deal more than she had divulged, and her discernible nervousness told Isolde that she'd only disclosed that out of unbridled concern for her.

As the snow-capped roofs of Hogsmeade shrivelled into the landscape behind them, they continued in silence, their only accompaniment the clumsy thumps of boots in deep snow. Isolde was so absorbed in her own thoughts that she had not noticed Professor Snape walking just a few metres behind them.

He had not meant to tail her back to the castle. Since his earlier clandestine musings within the clock tower, Snape had managed to embrace half an hour of quiet solitude within the crumbling walls of *Zuranders*. Having already declared himself weak for not being able to shirk contemplations of one of his students, he had felt determined to prove that he had at least some resolve left by evading his walled refuge: *he could resist temptation*.

For an entire fourteen minutes he had managed to dodge the tempting clutches of moth-eaten books, of shelves which stirred his intellect beyond any tome the Hogwarts library could. His mind had been made up beforehand, of course, though he would always assure himself, in future moments of self-chastisement, that it had been the familiar clunk of Moody's stick which had finally driven him towards the coveted shop.

Now, even from his ample distance, he could observe that the ambiance had altered drastically since the pair's arrival to the town only two hours earlier. No longer did the flutter of carefree laughter pervade the air, and he distinctly observed, with a wry curl of his lips, that Marius' arm no longer held Isolde's coat-wrapped form, and instead hung limply by his side. In Isolde's own hand there hung a swaying bag. His curiosity made him squint through the light flurry of snowflakes to read the printed name on its side: *Minchin and Lark's*.

He could not help himself; could not prevent his thoughts from wandering to the possible contents of the paper carrier. Though his own mind gave precedence to more pressing matters than the imminent Yule Ball, the cacophony of girlish squeals outside the shop's window confirmed that it was the current distraction. And yet, although Isolde's form had been one of the jubilant crowd, she had seemed somewhat underwhelmed by the entire prospect, entering the depths of the shop almost reluctantly. Had her mood lifted once she had set her sights on the perfect dress? Had she, like the other girls in her year, emerged from the shop in a state of euphoria at the thought of making her grand entrance?

Seemingly not.

"Can I see it then?"

Marius' cheer-infused voice shook Isolde from her musings. She gave him a questioning look but did not alter her pace.

"Oh, come on. You make me stand in that frill infested shop for over half an hour and what? I don't get to see the almighty purchase?"

"You'll see it at the Ball," she returned icily.

Everyone would. The mere thought made her feel nauseous.

"Iz, what's the big deal? It's just a dress." In an attempt to lighten the mood, Marius playfully grappled with the ribbon handles of the bag, tugging on them with more force than he needed to, for he had not anticipated them to be hanging so freely from her fingers.

Two gasps sprang simultaneously into the air as both students watched the bag plummet into the snow, its emerald contents tumbling out like spilt ink.

As Snape strode onward through the increasingly deep layer of snow, his eyes penetrated the bag as he crafted his own mental image of what lay inside. His thoughts had traitorously spawned many smouldering images over the past few weeks: Isolde's pale legs wrapped rigidly around his waist; her soft, lissom shoulders and throat beneath his rough tongue. In a mere instant, he tweaked his visions to make room for dark velvet straps, which he rolled teasingly between his finger and thumb, before drawing them down over her otherwise bare shoulder. He caught fistfuls of skirt in his frantic hands, dragging them unceremoniously up her thighs, grazing her exposed skin with his fingernails...

"You absolute *idiot!*"

For a brief moment, Snape thought Isolde's sudden outburst had been targeted at him, so absorbed was he in his indecent thoughts. He deserved no less a response, he thought ruefully, as the scene now only paces in front of him pieced itself together.

"I'm sorry, Iz. It was an accident, I just wanted to see..."

Both students suspended their quarrel as they noticed their teacher's presence, though anger and embarrassment still bloomed across their cheeks. As he approached, Snape found himself unable to look directly into Isolde's eyes as he ground his tempting thoughts deep into the pits of his consciousness. Biding his time, he stooped forward as he reached them, drawing the emerald gown into his hand and out of the snow. Its satiny form fell to its full length as he stood upright once more. In spite of himself, his eyes swiftly drank in every lustrous inch of it, noticing the straps thinner than those he'd imagined and the long thigh-length slits cut within the now sodden skirt. Even in her presence, with her bumbling Ravenclaw friend by her side, he literally had to wrench out the recurring image of the dress scooped around Isolde's waist. In his attempt to seize some resolve, his expression morphed into one of self disgust.

Isolde watched in startled silence as her professor scrutinised her recent purchase. Even when it had clinched her body in the shop, she had felt and seen its hideous splendour, but as she saw it, in the cold light of day, as it hung obscenely in her professor's grasp and caked in trampled snow, she flinched with sheer loathing. As Snape tossed the green heap into her hands for the bag was soaked beyond repair she could have sworn his face wore a glimmer of disgust before he strode between them both in the direction of the castle.

Isolde clutched the damp garment to her chest for the remainder of the journey, only to hurl it into the depths of her dresser on her return.

oOoOoOo

She had waited, agonisingly, for a week, and now two letters sat open on her desk. She had read them both twice already, but the lingering twitch of unease in her stomach made her eyes cast over them once more:

Dear Miss Hamilton,

It is with deep regret that we inform you that we do not currently stock any ball gowns in the size and description you sent to us. As I am sure you understand, Christmas is a very busy time for us, and there is a great deal of demand for such items at present. We suggest you try Minchin and Lark's in Hogsmeade.

Yours sincerely,

Madam Malkin.

The second letter she had not been expecting, but the distinctive serpent-embellished crest left her in her no doubt as to who the sender was:

Isolde,

The additional money I sent you was for drinks only, and not for you to purchase another dress of your choosing. I have every confidence that the gown I reserved for you looks enchanting, and I hope that you have a very enjoyable evening.

Yours,

B.A.F.R.M. Hamilton.

The crumpled shards of parchment proved as distasteful as the dash of musty emerald velvet squashed into the depths of her dresser *I have every confidence the gown I reserved for you looks enchanting.* The words caused scarlet to flood Isolde's cheeks, sheer molten mortification to engulf her. She could not deny that the dress was beautifully made. It's very fabric oozed wealth, but an obscene cost did not always promise an enchanting garment. The thin slip of material her father called a 'gown' was designed for one purpose and one alone: seduction. The question was: whom did her father intend for her to seduce?

Draco Malfoy was out of the question. It was common knowledge that the heir to the Malfoy fortune was escorting puff-ball Parkinson to the ball. Pansy shrieked about it whenever she could, her mind evidently clouded with romantic fairytales. Malfoy, alternatively, intended to live up to his heritage and commandeer his date's innocence in the greenhouses after the dancing.

Placing the letters within the concealed draw of her writing desk, Isolde found herself once more contemplating her father's intentions. Slytherin house was a den of pureblood boys drenched in excessive wealth. Was one of them her father's target? Not that it really mattered. Going to the Yule Ball wearing *the gown* would make her a target for any red-blooded male.

Except, perhaps, the only red-blooded male she actually *wanted*.

Try as she might, Isolde could not extract the image of Snape's disgust from her mind. The pathetic excuse for a garment was hardly suitable for a school function, and her professor's curled lip was clear evidence that Snape did not approve. The force with which he had thrust it back into her hands, as though it were something he had extracted from the school sewers, caused her humiliation to treble.

The drawer containing the letters fluttered closed with a resolute click. The movement was soft and languid, quite unlike the mood of the young woman who closed it. Humiliation made way for fury. Rashness overpowered rational thinking as she forced herself from the desk chair, storming toward the elegant figure of her dresser. Upon opening the offending drawer, the musty stench assaulted her. Clearly thrusting a wet dress into an enclosed space was not the wisest of actions. It hardly mattered.

There was only one solution. Before hesitation could gain its unwanted footing, Isolde tore at the green velvet. The cacophony of seams popping, material shredding and her own unconscious growls of fury filled the common room. Magic stirred around the garment, clearly charmed against any magical affronts. It seemed as if her father and his companion had looked past the age old delight of physical attack.

Scooping up the shreds of her Yule Ball monstrosity, Isolde dropped them into the fire, revelling gleefully in the acrid scent of burning velvet.

oOoOoOo

After fourteen-years of comforting structure, Severus Snape found himself rather disconcerted by the forced divergence from his usual routine. Drinks with Lucius Malfoy could hardly be described as a pleasant occasion, though Severus did appreciate the indulgent weekly tipple of Ogden's finest. Usually, the blond spoke of his conquests, his son or his admonishment that Severus had yet to bed a ripe little student. These cascades of meaningless nothings were easy enough to drown out; two additional guests in the drawing room, however, were not.

"Severus, old boy!" Lucius drawled upon his appearance in the fire grate. "I trust you know Barnabus Hamilton and Ichabod Flank?" Before Severus could answer, the blond continued. "Barny here has invited us for drinks at his manor."

Barnabus Hamilton was a rake of a man, tall and thin with shortly cropped dark hair and a thin goatee. The only similarity he had with his sensual, curvy daughter was his piercing grey eyes, which were now observing Snape with great interest. "Lucius, my old friend, you flatter me. My humble abode is a mere hovel compared to *your* house. Hardly a manor, I daresay." After drowning Lucius in sickening flattery, Hamilton turned to Snape. "Ah, Severus! It has been quite some time. I haven't seen you since you were fourteen years old!" A tittering laugh left his thin lips. "My little Isolde speaks of you all the time. She's quite an enchanting thing, isn't she?"

Bombarded by Hamilton's slimy syllables, Severus found himself unable to vocalise, a cocking of a thin black eyebrow all he could muster. *My little Isolde speaks of you all the time.* Somehow he doubted it. Nevertheless, he nodded curtly. "Your daughter is certainly one of Slytherin's more promising students, Mr Hamilton. Her work in Potions has been nothing short of impressive."

"Barney, please," Hamilton chuckled, slapping Snape on the shoulder. "No need for formality between friends." He pointed a long finger toward the ornate pot of Floo powder on the mantle. "I hear you enjoy a glass of Ogden's now and then," the goateed man continued, taking a small handful of the sparkling substance. "Back at the manor I have several bottles of Ogden's 1942 vintage, very rare." Curling his lithe form into the grate, Hamilton dropped the powder. "Hamilton Manor."

Lucius followed suit, leaving Severus momentarily alone with the man known as Ichabod Flank. From the way Isolde had reacted to the man's name, Severus had half expected the boy he remembered from school to have morphed into a hideous sleaze bag, complete with thinning comb-over hair and sweaty palms. This was not the case. Sprung from the gene pools that spawned both Lucius Malfoy and Gilderoy Lockhart, Flank's looks had only improved with age. Thick blond hair fell to his shoulders, framing chiselled features and deep blue eyes.

Severus shot a final look at Flank before ducking into the fire. The idea of being Hamilton's guest nauseated him. The concept that he would have to spend time with the handsome blond with a penchant for rape rendered his mood even darker.

It was best just to get it over and done with.

oOoOoOo

There was not an ounce of Isolde in the manor.

Its hard lines and grand designs reflected only wealth. Malfoy Manor, while grand, still showed some of the personality of its owner. Lucius' pomposity could be seen in the albino peacocks fluttering about the front garden, his lascivious nature peeking through the spines of expensive pornographic tomes or the murals of nubile young women in his study. Hamilton, however, had none of this. His home was an empty cave, a den of expensive nothing.

What exactly did Isolde do here during the summer? Was her room a haven away from this expanse of wealth? Did she recline upon the loveseat and read her text books, waiting for her father to return?

His musings were cut short as Hamilton roared "Linny!" into the empty expanse of the drawing room. Within seconds, a tiny pop filled the room, accompanied by an equally tiny house-elf.

"Master has returned!" the elf squeaked. "Linny is sorry for not greeting Master at the fire. Linny is not knowing that Master is coming back."

"Stop your blabbering, elf," Hamilton sneered. "I want a bottle of Ogden's 1942, four glasses and my cigars."

"Linny is doing that now, Master."

The elf popped, returning mere seconds later with the required items. Severus could not help but notice the tattered state of the elf's pillow case, the paleness of her olive-green complexion and the way her bones were visible beneath the cracked shield of her skin. Not even Lucius' mistreated army of house-elves seemed as decrepit as this poor creature. Having always believed that common courtesy toward house-elves was the least the tiny beings deserved, Severus was appalled at the condition of Linny.

As the elf was dismissed, Hamilton poured out the whisky. The taste was fine, but having seen the nature of servitude within the house, Severus could hardly stomach it.

"Shall we cut to the chase, then?"

Lucius' voice cut through the silence like a knife through butter.

"The chase, Lucius?" Severus turned his onyx eyes toward the handsome blond, perched on a chair before the fire. "Am I to understand that there is a reason for my being here?"

"Of course, Sev," Hamilton interrupted. Severus' hands clenched around the glass, the intensity of his grip almost enough to shatter the ornate goblet. Sev. The nickname had long since ceased to be one of endearment, its one syllable now a clear reminder of all that he had lost. How dare that slimy little man call him by the same nickname as *her*? How dare he even...!

"You're going to be our little spy on the inside," Lucius interrupted, a smirk tilting his lips. "Tell me, Severus, have you seen Isolde Hamilton's latest purchase?"

"If you're talking about the non-existent scrap of velvet she intends to wear to the Yule Ball, I daresay I have."

Hamilton's eyes glittered at this. "So, my little Izzy has been flaunting the dress around the common room, has she? And here I was thinking her letter to Madam Malkin meant she did not like it!"

"As far as I know, your daughter is not one to flaunt," Severus said, his voice dark. "The only reason I saw the dress is because she accidentally dropped it in Hogsmeade. I retrieved it for her."

"She *dropped* it?" Hamilton's voice rose a little, his quick temper rather obvious. "Has she no idea how expensive it was?"

Severus did not reply. It all made sense. The Isolde *hethought* he knew would never willingly don a gown like that in public. Nevertheless, what kind of father wanted his daughter to parade herself in front of her fellows dressed as an expensive concubine?

"I'm sure there is no damage," Lucius dismissed. "What matters is that she wears it to the Yule Ball, and you, Severus, must see to that."

"I hardly think it is my job to tell my students what to wear, Lucius."

"In this case it is, Snape," an unfamiliar voice interjected. It seemed that Flank had found his tongue. "You see, I hardly wish to bed a girl. I chose that dress for a good reason. It will turn her into a woman."

"Are you telling me I should force one of my students to wear a gown simply so that you can bed her?" Severus' anger was starting to taint his baritone. He knew he would have to return to Hogwarts soon, so as to stop himself from dismembering the three men before him. "Besides, if your reputation is correct, you do not usually flinch at bedding girls." He swiftly unfolded himself from the loveseat. "If you will excuse me, I have no intention of listening to plans regarding one of my students. Good night."

Ignoring the protestations of Hamilton and Lucius, Severus disappeared into the Floo, his mind pounding with disgust.

oOoOoOo

By the time Severus had reached the third floor of the castle, his hands were still quivering with fury; even as his temple and palms met the cool stone of the unsightly gargoyle, his knuckles twitched of their own volition.

As soon as he had emerged from the fireplace in his office, his first impulse had been to inform the headmaster. He was sure that, in his haste, he had even left his office door ajar. But now, as he stood at the foot of the concealed stairwell, the ridiculous password merely loitered across his tongue behind his thin, pursed lips. Angry shards of

breath shot out of his nostrils as he willed himself to isolate his thoughts to settle on the best course of action.

What perplexed Severus more than anything was the sheer degree of fervour he now felt as a result of the evening's exchange. Certainly, he would have been sickened by their discussion of *any* of his students in such a context, and he had no doubt that he would have quitted their company in the very same manner. But he had to ask himself: would he be so embroiled with rage if it had not been Isolde they had been plotting about? Would he have flown so feverishly up four flights of stairs for the likes of Miss Parkinson? His stomach twisted as he digested the answer.

The concept he could *not* bring himself to dissect was *why* he was so enraged at all. Under ordinary circumstances with an *ordinary* student - Severus would have at least kept his cool, dealing with the matter in a prompt but impassive way. How much of his current mind-set, then, was inextricably latched on to his own attraction towards Isolde? How much of his disgust was a natural, professional aversion to his student being discussed by tongues of squalor? And how much was an irrepressible, knee-jerk response to the threat of her being seduced by someone other than himself? His stomach knotted tighter.

"Fizzing Whizbee."

Severus shot away from the marble statue as it suddenly jerked beneath his fingertips. He was almost certain he had not uttered the words himself.

"I know how you loathe my eccentric choice of passwords, Severus, but it's not like you to forget one."

Within milliseconds, Severus regained his composure and forced himself to meet the familiar and infuriatingly blue, twinkling eyes of Albus Dumbledore. The two men stood for a long moment in the murky corridor which was lit by a single torch of light fixed to the now visible stairwell. Though his own eyes now transcended the spherical steps, he could sense the headmaster's gaze still upon him.

"Shall we?" invited Dumbledore, his long, aged fingers warmly indicating their ascent.

"I no," Severus corrected himself. "It can wait." Even as the words left his mouth, part of him chastised himself for his rapid retreat. The girl was *in danger*. Why, then, was he suddenly so wary of expressing his concerns? He could feel two orbs of blue silently asking the same question.

Their eyes met once more. "Are you sure, Severus? You seem troubled." Snape considered how he must have looked to his colleague and friend his back vaulted in torment over the winged gargoyle and silently cursed himself once more for his emotional display.

"Nothing a well-brewed Sleeping Draught won't cure, Albus."

"I have no doubt that you stock nothing else." The headmaster smiled. Severus grimaced as he watched Dumbledore's jovial lips shift to a figure of compassion. "The door is always open, my boy." His half-moon spectacles glinted in the flickering candlelight, and Severus was relieved to find this veiled the old man's eyes as he opened his mouth and lied once again.

"I am fine, Albus. Goodnight."

Dumbledore knew better than to harass his colleague for an admission which he was not willing to give, but as he watched the obsidian cloak retreat around the corner, he recalled the only other time he had seen those shoulders so deeply bent in anguish.

oOoOoOo

It was well past four o'clock in the morning, and even though the solitary window of his office was immersed in the Black Lake, Severus could still detect meagre glimpses of sunlight penetrating its murky depths. He had not so much as entered his bed chamber, so consumed was he with thoughts of Isolde and the three vile individuals who were driven towards her ruin. It mystified him that one was her own father.

Three times he had stopped in his tracks on his way back to the dungeons. Three times he had almost turned on his heel and ventured back to the headmaster's office. He knew that Dumbledore would be equally appalled and would make no allowances in ensuring Isolde's safety, even if it meant prohibiting her from attending the Ball altogether. Severus considered pursuing such a route on his own, but something told him even that would not be enough; it would take more than a mere social embargo to keep Ichabod Flank at arms' length.

As he sat rigidly at his desk, Severus drew back his left sleeve in one graceful tug, and his eyes fixed guardedly on the unsightly Mark. He had not needed to say the words aloud; the fearful stare in Lucius' eyes had confirmed his suspicions. It was not just his Mark which had grown significantly darker over the past few weeks. No doubt Karkaroff's arm betrayed the same signs also; he had received enough foreboding stares along the staff table to confirm as much. Having betrayed a number of fellow Death Eaters shortly after the First Wizarding War, the goateed wizard certainly had more to fear than most, though Severus was by no means free from apprehension. It did not take a darkening Mark to predict Voldemort's rebirth; even fourteen years ago, on that cursed, unforgettable night, Dumbledore had told him as much: *the Dark Lord will return, and Harry Potter will be in terrible danger when he does.*

Harry Potter.

As if he didn't have enough to concern himself with, Severus had to watch the insufferable boy's every move, now that he had inexplicably been chosen by the Goblet of Fire despite him being underage. That in itself was too much of a coincidence, occurring around the same time his Mark had begun to *blossom*.

Severus covered the offending stain with a fluid jerk of his arm, simultaneously thanking his wits for not informing the headmaster about Isolde. If it was indeed the case that the Dark Lord was about to rise once more, it would not serve him well if he was mid-broil with Lucius. Though he was almost sure the Dark Lord would be pleased with his observation point within Hogwarts, he could not be seen to be openly defiant of his fellow Death Eaters in the meantime. Even though Barnabus and Ichabod were not yet part of the circle, Severus suspected that was their true desire, and it would not be long before they too would bear the same Mark.

It would be for the best, he reasoned, if it *appeared* that he was acquiescent to Hamilton's request.

Though his insides curdled at the prospect, Severus knew what he had to do.

Isolde would wear the dress, whether she liked it or not.

Fascinating Though Your Social Life Undoubtedly Is

Chapter 10 of 17

Isolde prepares herself for the horror that is the Yule Ball.

Chapter Ten: Fascinating Though Your Social Life Undoubtedly Is

The Yule Ball loomed like a disgusting slathering beast. Though its fangs had yet to pierce, Isolde found herself drenched in its foul rotting drool. With three days until Christmas, the dreaded ball seemed to be the only thing jiggling on people's tongues. Girls giggled, boys stammered last minute invites and those under fourteen looked hopefully upon older students in the hope that they might gain entrance to the coveted event. In the once safe domain of her dormitory, her roommates now modelled dresses, practiced their make-up and experimented with hair-styling charms. With the onset of holidays, it seemed as if everyone had abandoned their brains in the classrooms, awaiting the resumption of work in the New Year.

With the students' minds on frivolity, the library was subsequently left deserted.

Nestled within the dusty tomes, Isolde found a similar sense of solace that accompanied her visits to Zuranders. While her fellow students rambled about robes, she ploughed her way through most of her holiday assignments. As various dark deeds were planned, Isolde planned her latest Potions essay, allowing herself two luxurious days to scour books on advanced medical potions and take extensive notes. The excessive work drew her mind from the ball, Ichabod Flank, Draco Malfoy, even from that hideous lump of velvet sizzling away in the charred cavern of her hearth. With three days to go, though, Isolde found herself itching with worry.

The dress was destroyed, but she had no replacement.

She had no date.

She had lost the respect of Snape.

All in all, she was delving into the odorous quagmire that was the Yule Ball completely unprepared. It was thoroughly tempting just to boycott the dreaded event, but she knew Marius would break into the Slytherin common room and drag her out by her ears should she settle for this option. No, she would simply have to rustle up an acceptable outfit, brush on a fake smile and make an appearance.

As torturous as it would undoubtedly be.

Thrusting aside all thought of the ball, Isolde turned her attention back to the small collection of words on the page. The manuscript was more than nine-hundred years old, the handwritten script beginning to fade and smear. It smelt of mould and parchment, a delicate mixture that brought a smile to Isolde's tired features.

"IZZY! There you are!"

Marius' excessive tones broke her respite, bringing her back into the Ball-soaked present.

"Marius." Her sneer was almost indicative of Snape, but it did not wipe the smile from her friend's face.

"No need to look so sour, Izzy-poo. It's almost Christmas."

Isolde cocked an eyebrow, waving her hands without conviction. "Yay."

Once again, Marius seemed to ignore her. "I came to find you because I have a little present waiting for you up in Ravenclaw Tower."

Isolde could not help but smirk. "Marius, I love you and all, but I'm not sure if I want to see your *little present*."

"Har har hartitty har," drawled the Ravenclaw. "I can assure you, my slippery little serpentine friend, *that* present is anything *but* little."

"You do realise who you sound like right now?"

"If you say Draco Malfoy, I am going to tip this double shot macchiato all over that beautifully written essay of yours, Miss Hamilton." With a deft flick of his wand, Marius packed up her belongings, forcing them magically into her bag. Isolde frowned, but allowed her friend to drag her out of the library by her arm.

As they passed, neither of them noticed the figure lurking in the shadows of the Restricted Section.

Neither of them saw the dark, obsidian eyes, glazed with a mixture of fury, annoyance and *jealousy*...

oOoOoOo

Even amongst the glowing cinders, Lucius' eyes were dark, glancing at Severus as he sat irritably at his desk. Though he was becoming accustomed to Malfoy's impromptu visits to his office fireplace, he continued to receive them with displeasure. It was Christmas Eve, but anyone surveying Severus' quarters would not have been able to guess. While every square inch of the rest of Hogwarts seemed to be dressed with tinsel or some form of enchanted, twinkling ornament, his office remained as dark and modest as usual.

"Surely you have better things to do tonight, Lucius, than harass me? A quaint, family game of Wizards' Chess, perhaps?" Severus sneered as his hand absentmindedly tapped a tartan wrapped parcel he had received from McGonagall earlier that day - no doubt, the same saccharine shortbread she distributed, and he disposed of, every year.

"Come now, Severus. I thought we had made amends? Flank tells me he owed you yesterday to do just that."

Severus scoffed from his ornate, high-backed chair. "I hardly think that a letter of drivel and bottle of Ogden's is..."

"He means no harm, old boy."

"My concern is not for myself, and you know that." Severus paused, his stare lingering with significance. "Being a frustrated, middle-aged married man now, I know how you like to live vicariously through others, and the thought of Flank's wrinkled paws grappling at a young vixen's thighs enthralls you to the core, but I would have thought that, being a parent of a student in Miss Hamilton's year, you would understand the overarching issues this... *seduction* presents to me. It is my responsibility to..."

"Merlin, Severus, we're not asking you to seduce the girl youse/lf!" Lucius tittered at the thought, but Severus' features remained sharp and brooding. A momentary glimpse of a deeply sheltered fancy drifted inappropriately across his consciousness, and Severus had to stop himself from stamping on the hearth where Lucius' smug features lay. The fact that such a concept humoured him was maddening.

"That is not the point; you are asking me to disregard my duty as a teacher and protector of my students and permit this sickening foray to advance - and within the walls of the school, no less." Severus pursed his lips in frustration: how could he be expected to allow this? He was her Head of House!

And yet, even in the midst of his broil with Lucius, Severus could not help but wonder, as his stomach twisted in self disgust, how much he simply wanted to ravish Isolde himself. He wanted to be the one to slowly peel the emerald straps from her delicious shoulders, to graze his rough palms and fingers up her calf and thigh to gather the skirt fabric around her waist. Was he no better than Ichabod Flank? Was he worse, even? At least Flank was not masquerading as her guardian whilst he imagined her being plucked.

The sound of Lucius' infuriating laughter pulled him back to the present. "I hardly think that Flank is going to pillage her right under Dumbledore's nose, Severus. He's a Triwizard organiser, after all. Even Ichabod has some concept of decorum. No, he simply wants to whet his appetite, so to speak." Lucius grinned roguishly out of the sooty grate before assuming his more serious countenance once more. "That is why it is so important that she wears the dress, Severus. She has been quite the little minx trying to procure a more modest one..."

"And understandably so," scoffed Severus. "I've seen house-elves with more casing than that dress offers."

"Well, Barny is fully supportive of it, Severus, so let's not get in the way too much of what is meant to be." Lucius' tone was genial, but it was laced with a veil of warning only an old *friend* could detect.

"Meant to be? How *sentimental*," Severus drawled. His face remained blank despite more and more vivid visions of Ichabod and Isolde tormenting him. And Lucius' indifference was getting beyond tolerable. "Well, if it's the ridiculous dress you're worried about, I can confirm that she is planning on wearing it tomorrow evening."

"How can you be so sure?" challenged Lucius immediately. Surely he was not afraid of Ichabod Flank? Why did it matter so much to him?

Severus sighed sharply. "I do not have the time for this, Lucius. I have given you my word; you can take it or leave it. Goodnight." The truth was that he had heard Isolde and Kathy McKenzie gushing about the 'gorgeous dress' earlier that very day in the Slytherin common room, but he was not prepared to justify himself in that much detail for Lucius' peace of mind.

Lucius could read from his Snape's curtness that this was the end of the matter, and his expression became as dark as the embers it permeated. "Very well, Severus. I will leave it in your capable hands. I have said what I needed to say. Merry Christmas." The face vanished, but Lucius' smug grin and final words lingered mockingly in its wake.

As if on cue, the distant chime of the clock tower heralded the arrival of Christmas morning, and with one fluid motion, Severus plunged bottle, letter and shortbread into the bin beside his desk.

oOoOoOo

The day seemed to have soared by in a festive haze of parcels, chatter and giddiness. And although Isolde had spent the last few weeks evading such merriment, she could not help getting caught up in it now that the day had actually arrived. Especially now that she had a dress she felt comfortable with.

She had practically suffocated Marius with her embrace when his *little present* turned out to be a new ball gown, and the fact that he had sacrificed new dress robes for himself in order to buy it for her made Isolde surprisingly emotional.

"Bloody hell, you're not sniffing, are you? If you go all Moaning Myrtle on me, then I'm taking it straight back where it came from," was how Marius responded when her eyes had brimmed briefly with tears. "I don't do sap, Izzy-kins." But the broad grin smeared across his face betrayed how pleased he was with himself.

Isolde had snorted at her own sentimentality. "I'm sorry. I'm just so relieved that I don't have to wear that hideous dress my father picked out for me." That was another thing she had found so touching: she had not even told Marius she had destroyed its predecessor; he just knew she had detested it.

As she stood before the mirror in her dormitory and admired herself, Isolde was certain that she could not have picked a better dress herself. It still held glimpses of the original, with its rich emerald colour and fitted waistline, but the rest of it was refreshingly modest in style. The neckline simply skimmed her breastbone, revealing a mere shadow of her cleavage, and the skirt brushed not clung her behind, before broadening into a cascade of silk folds. The fabric was, of course, a more basic calibre, and Isolde adored it for that very reason. Following suit, she had scooped her thick dark hair into a loose bun, leaving some rogue tendrils to frame her face.

She had encouraged Kathy and her other roommates to go along to the Ball ahead of her, eager for a few moments of solitude after two hours of feverish hair curling and collective cooing. Left in a cloud of perfume, Isolde savoured the stillness.

"The Ball's over, everyone's coming to bed!" Marius' head popped unceremoniously around the door.

"Very funny; what if I was getting *dressed*?" Isolde scolded through a smirk as she finished applying her lipstick, not bothering to turn away from the looking glass. "Actually, don't answer that," she added, rolling her eyes as she spotted the reflection of Marius raising his eyebrows suggestively.

"What made you change your mind, then? Did the guy you were holding out for turn you down? Or did you just want to ensure where your next batch of machiattos was coming from?"

Pleased with her reflection, Isolde ushered Marius out the door before extinguishing the candles with her wand. "The latter," she quipped as they descended the spiral stairwell and entered the common room, which was uncharacteristically void of fellow Slytherins. "How did you get in here, anyway?"

"Kath let me in; caught me prowling the hallways like the Dungeon Bat himself. Took pity on me," he grinned, oblivious to the way his mention of Snape made Isolde's stomach jolt. "Am I going to score tonight then?" he teased.

"Don't push your luck."

You Will Now Divide Into Pairs

Chapter 11 of 17

It's the Yule Ball. All the pieces are in play. How will Severus and Isolde deal with the tasks they have been set?

Chapter Ten You Will Now Divide into Pairs

An ocean of students flooded the Entrance Hall. Their juvenile squeaks of excitement melded into a cacophonous roar that assaulted Snape's ears upon the moment of his ascension from the dungeons. Onyx eyes swept over the seething bass of brightly hued dress robes, glistening hair and clicking jewellery. A sneer twitched his lips as snippets of conversation became distinguished from the general hum of noise.

"Oh my God, Tiffany, those robes are HOT!"

"Sarah, how are you walking in those shoes? They've got to be five inches tall!"

"If you ask me, Brighton is easy pickings. That's why I asked Lawder; at least getting in her knickers will be a challenge."

"Oh great, the bat is here. I hope he's not going to be glaring at us the whole fucking time!"

Fighting back a smirk, Severus shot a dark glance toward the outspoken student. Michael Freeson paled, hiding behind the thick dark shield of his unkempt hair. The seventh-year Hufflepuff was clutching the plump fingers of Samantha Lannister. The shifty glint in their guilty eyes revealed their intention to depart the ball early, no doubt heading for the gaudy Christmas-themed rose garden established on the front lawn. If Lannister's reputation was anything to go by, there was probably nothing but bare shaven skin beneath those fluffy periwinkle skirts. The thought turned Severus' stomach.

Upon entering the Great Hall, the Potions master's lunch threatened to burst from this throat. Albus' usual Christmas decorations were foul enough, but the icicles draped from the ceiling, falling onto a winter wonderland of tables and lanterns, was enough to make Severus taste bile. He ducked under the low hanging sprig of mistletoe, the prickly green foliage combing through the upper layers of his obsidian hair as he did so.

"Severus, my boy, a smile would not hurt, you know!"

The eccentric figure of Albus Dumbledore floated across the room, his robes shimmering in the low light. Severus nodded in acknowledgement, unable to speak a word, having just noticed Ludo Bagman's skin-tight robes of bright purple blotted with yellow stars. Albus started to chuckle.

"I daresay Ludo's robes are brighter than my own this evening. Yours, on the other hand..."

The sneer on Severus' lips morphed into a scowl. *Only until the first dance*, he chanted to himself. *I can leave after the first dance*. It was then that he would be able to sneak from the hall into the quiet seclusion of the rose garden. He almost grinned with glee at the prospect of blasting apart bushes, revealing the copulating students within. Many points would be taken from houses this evening, hopefully most of them coming from Gryffindor.

The truth of the matter was, Severus hated balls. He hated them with such a passion that sometimes he felt as if the hatred was so congested as to create another seething organ within his tainted body. His hatred did not spurn from a petty belief that someone of his countenance ought to hate balls, but rather from past experience. As a student he had attended only one school ball at the closure of his seventh year. His thin lanky form had been clad in the first of his many frock coats and a pair of well-tailored trousers: a gift from Lucius Malfoy. He had taken a few turns around the dance floor, accepting the invites of several spotty, self-conscious girls. However, his eyes had only been for one: the red-haired goddess sweeping around the floor in the arms of handsome James Potter and his ridiculous flouncy hair. Later that evening, Potter and his brood of foul Marauders had cornered Severus in the shadows of the Great Hall. He could still smell the alcohol tainting Potter's breath as the Gryffindor leant closer.

"She's mine, Snivellus, keep your eyes to yourself."

She's mine. The pain of this declaration shot through Severus more so than any physical blow. This agony must have been evident in his eyes, for Potter had continued.

"*Mine*, in every way. Just now, in the rose gardens, she screamed my name as I licked her wet c-"

At this point, Severus had screamed, the shriek from his throat a useless attempt to block out Potter's words, the sniggering of his pathetic friends. Tears had threatened to spring from his eyes.

Even now, the memory of this confrontation lingered in his mind. It was a shift of thought he knew he must discard, especially now since Ichabod Flank had made his timely appearance.

With most of the school now seated at their designated tables, the Tournament official swept through the remaining clusters in robes of pale grey, his golden waves tied behind his head with a silver ribbon. His handsome visage drew the gaze of the female populace, even those who had experienced pain and pleasure at his long, elegant fingers. As Flank sauntered in his direction, Severus began to wish that Dumbledore had not flittered off to discuss the finer points of archery with Percy Weasley.

"Snape, old boy, splendid to see you."

Flank's pomposity seemed almost ludicrous emerging from a man with such timeless good looks. Lucius Malfoy may have been sickeningly handsome, but at least he had the common decency to look his age. Flank looked like a man in his mid-twenties.

"Flank."

Flank ignored the tone in Severus' voice, sending a sweeping glance around the Great Hall. "Caught sight of Barny's girl, yet?"

"Miss Hamilton has not yet arrived."

"No doubt still squeezing that tight little arse of hers into that dress." A hunger leer formed on Flank's face. "I'm getting hard just thinking about it."

So much for pompous class, Severus thought humourlessly. Without excusing himself, the Potions master swooped toward one of the teachers' tables, finding several carafes of wine and a flask of Ogden's untouched upon its circular surface. At least he had been granted respite from the Head Table this evening; having to digest his food in the close proximity of Potter and Granger was an experience he was thankful to have evaded. Snatching the glass next to the small inscription of his name, he poured himself a liberal tot of Ogden's, savouring the flaming sensation of the liquid against his throat. As crude as Flank was, Severus could not help but revel in the idea of Isolde in the foul slip of a dress.

"Merlin's ten-inch cock, what is that fucking potato sack she's wearing?"

Severus was drawn from the quagmire of his thoughts by the now whiney tone of his unwanted companion. Flank's perfect complexion had turned somewhat pasty, sheer blue eyes sending daggers in the direction of the smiling girl. The sight of her caused a jolt in his groin, a quickening of the breath.

She was sheer perfection.

"Are you listening to me, Severus?"

Snape reluctantly broke his gaze and threw black pupils onto a flustered Ichabod. All traces of poise and lecherous bravado were gone, leaving raw, abandoned fury. Two pairs of eyes tore through the chattering crowd of silk and taffeta to a single body encased in emerald: the rich blue pair was shrouded in a haze of red, whereas the darker duo emanated a glow of warm affection towards its subject. The irises, however, were encrusted with sheer lust; they crept their stealthy way along Isolde's form as it swayed in ignorance towards her lantern-lit table.

Despite fearing the serious repercussions of her actions, Snape could not resist savouring a fleeting pocket of satisfaction over Flank's beruffled plan. "Of course," he replied nonchalantly, having deliberately prolonged his confirmation to aggravate the already spewing flame. When it was finally uttered, it was punctuated with a deluge of impatient huffs from his companion's lips.

"Well, this is *ludicrous!* You were meant to you "

"What, Ichabod? Prepare your pig for slaughter?" Snape hissed through the crowd of festive chatter, withholding the urge to gesture testily in the direction of Isolde. "This may come as a shock to you, but I do have other matters to attend to here. Ripening virgins for your plucking is not my primary responsibility, despite what you may have heard from Lucius."

To Snape's surprise, Ichabod's eyes regained a flash of optimism and the left crease of his lip drew up into a toothy leer. "So she *is* still a virgin, then?" he posed repulsively. "Barny swore to me she was, but you never know what these nubile witches get up to in dark corners..."

His voice dissipated into the surrounding hum of chatter and giggles as his piercing blue eyes captured Isolde once again. The leer flickered briefly before contorting into a cold grimace. "Virgin or not, I'm not fucking her in that *sack!*"

Relishing Flank's outrage a little too much, Snape parted his lips, ready to prod the fire again, but before he could beckon another prick of sarcasm, Flank turned on his heel and strode towards the main entrance of the Great Hall. Even within the excited blur of tinselled student bodies, Snape could hear Flank's retreating mutter: "...father can't keep tabs on one wily minx. The useless *wretch*... should have fucked her when..."

As his eyes pursued Flank to the exit, an uncharacteristically broad smirk carved its way across Snape's features, but it lasted only until his gaze fell upon Isolde once more. Irises buckled under heated lids as he absorbed the displeasing sight: the surrounding circles of light illuminated Marius's arm snaked around her beautifully moulded waist as if they were taunting him deliberately, callously drawing his attention to that which he could not have. His eyes remained fixed in a practice of self torture as Marius's lips drew close to Isolde's earlobe, uttering words only she could hear, and she giggled. Or was it a shiver from his proximity? Knuckles clenched as his palm took more of her against him, the icy light highlighting her swollen, rouge lips as she replied inaudibly.

Snape didn't need to look at the rich and sickly list of foods on his table menu to know that he was no longer hungry. He needed some air.

With the mass of students now seated and ready for the grand procession, Snape's departure was more conspicuous than he had hoped, and though his retreating form received a number of fleeting glances, only one pair of eyes at the Head Table held him until he was out of sight.

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Severus had no notion of how long he had spent there. The garden, though transient, seemed to possess a time of its own in the stillness. In his youthful ignorance, he would have been fascinated by the animated orbs encased sporadically within each nearby shrub, reaching out his hand just to confirm the life within each light.

His sharp arrival had irked the visiting light-bearers, scattering them briefly in an angry radiance until he had seated himself on an ornate bench. The nearby trickling of water emanated from an unsightly representation of a carol singer, but its sound soothed him nonetheless.

All had settled again, bar his thoughts.

As the frivolity mumbled through the open doors of the castle, Severus made himself acknowledge that a great deal of his anger stemmed from his own damned spinelessness *since when did he care two Blast-Ended Skrewts about the dating preferences of a student? What did it matter whose awkward fingers grasped her waist or inched feverishly across her skin?*

Over the past few weeks, Isolde Hamilton had crawled her way into ventricles he didn't know he had, and no amount of distraction seemed to expel her from him.

Eyes narrowed, his gaze penetrated the rose bush he now faced. The longer he stared into the brightest orb, his eyes almost watered with intensity, and though the sprightly owner was veiled in her own light, he pictured a returned gaze, meeting it with unbridled challenge.

As if snuffed with a daring pinch, all light was extinguished as a dark silhouette blocked Snape's gaze. Blinking until the lingering glow diminished, his eyes eventually readjusted.

Fairies erupted in retreat as Snape shot to his feet, making an almost imperceptible shift towards the open doors. "Igor, now *is* not the time."

"It never *is*, Severus."

oOoOoO

Ruthlessly blasting apart another rose bush, Snape found his first ounce of relief as he met the horrified and flushed expressions of two half-clad Ravenclaws.

"Get *out*," he hissed, paradoxically holding a stubborn branch to aid their departure.

The two students shuffled their way out of the dishevelled bush as they hastily rearranged garments and mumbled a clumsy mishmash of *Sorry, Sirs* and *Please don't tell my mums*. Even the satisfaction of his stealthy find was not enough to lift his spirits, however, and he let the guilty pair disappear behind a mossy statue without so much as a warning.

Half-heartedly, he strode across the snow besmeared lawn to the next suspicious shrub, idly aiming his wand at its centre. For an agonising moment, he thought he had stumbled upon the same offending sight he had deliberately evaded in the Great Hall, when his savage eyes met those of Marius Spencer. As his pupils followed the crooked line of his silk-sleeved arm, however, the student's hands groped a distinctly different shade of green. Praying it wasn't a mere trick of the light, Snape took another step towards the now parted branches to see the girl's flustered expression, free of all shadows: Kathy McKenzie.

Overwhelming relief swept through him, but true to form Snape concealed it well as he began his reprimand.

"Mr *Spencer*," he drawled as each syllable oiled itself over his tongue. "I didn't have you down as a natural Casanova, but perhaps I was quick to judge..."

"We were just getting some fresh air," Kathy retorted pathetically, knowing too well that the confines of their heated fumbling had made the air in the undergrowth thick with humidity.

"Oh, of *course*," Snape blithely humoured them as they slank past him and onto the gravelled path. "And where have you left your first flame? Crying in the girls' bathroom?" Perhaps he had misinterpreted his intimacy with Isolde earlier...? His pupils remained rigid with feigned disgust as he furtively held his breath for Marius' reply.

"Still inside, I think," Marius shrugged.

The boy's nonchalance flicked a fuse how could he not be more concerned for Isolde's whereabouts? Surely she had given him a full account of Flank's sordid pursuit of her?

"You *think*?"

Marius's eyes flickered with budding concern. "Yeah I left her in the Hall.*Sir*. She said that guy had left already.*Flint*, he's called, I think..."

Snape's eyes rolled with impatience. "You seem to *bethinking* a great deal of things, Mr Spencer. It might help you *toknow* once in a while perhaps *then* you would produce a half-decent potion in my class one of these days."

"She said she would be fine!" Marius called after him as Snape made his way swiftly back to the Great Hall.

It was not as he had left it.

With several steps still to take, Snape could already hear a deafening hum of collective thuds intermingled with inelegantly sung lyrics which sounded like *Do the Hippogriff*. "Infantile *drive!*" Snape spat to no one but himself as he approached the great oak doors.

As the doors swung open, the sound rose tenfold, and Snape found himself consumed by an unrecognisable mass of bodies jumping up and down, presumably in time with a beat he could not decipher. Arms flailed; voices hollered; the Hall was a gyrating maze of lunacy and even Snape knew that his indisputable authority could not bring it to a halt.

Gritting his teeth together, he swept through the crowd. Though his mind was occupied with nothing but finding Isolde, he dimly noted that the students were all facing a group of musicians on the enchanted stage where the staff table usually lay. The men were robed from head to foot in black tatters and played a cornucopia of instruments which, to Snape's ears, made fierce competition for newly uprooted mandrakes.

Having made his best attempt to circle the Hall twice, still with no sight of Isolde, Snape's nerves were beyond salvage. By his first unsuccessful inspection, he had tried to mollify himself with rational possibilities perhaps she was tired and had gone to bed? Maybe she was dancing at the very core of the tightening crowd he had not been able to penetrate? but he could not stop his mind wandering to darker conclusions.

Had Flank actually *left* the castle?

Snape cursed himself for not checking at the time he had been so embroiled in his own stupid satisfaction and smugness that the thought had not even occurred to him until now.

Storming towards the oak doors once more, he glanced sideways in the coddled hope of spotting Isolde in the more obliging light of the candlelit hallway. He slammed the door shut against the raucousness inside, and paused to collect his thoughts. He knew for a fact that he would not settle until he knew where she was.

Deliberation took him first to the Slytherin common room, which was eerily vacant. Against his better judgement, he considered checking Isolde's dormitory. If she was in there, he would be faced with having to concoct a rather awkward and fabricated excuse but he needed to know where she was, one way or another. Tearing all pride and decorum to one side, he climbed the rickety stairwell, two steps at a time.

Just before reaching the hilt, an equally harried form crashed into him, causing Snape to steady himself on the girl's arm.

Both pairs of eyes looked equally guilty for a moment, but Snape corrected his gaze when he realised the face he looked at was *not hers*...

"Miss *Parkinson* and why are you not downstairs with the other dunderheads, dancing your cares away?" he accused, choosing to shift all need for blame onto his companion.

The two of them stood awkwardly on the stairwell as Pansy invented her own excuse. The extended pause was unmistakable.

"I, er..." She looked down at her own figure for inspiration, "forgot to wear the corsage Draco gave me. Left it in my room earlier, in all the excitement..."

"How careless of you," Snape drawled unsympathetically. "What a shame you will have to spend the rest of your evenings this week cleaning filthy cauldrons."

Pansy's eyebrows rose derisively. "Well, then, so should Isolde Hamilton! She was here just a minute ago *too!*"

Snape's grip tightened involuntarily on Pansy's upper arm. "Was she alone?" he asked, his tone more anxious than he meant to betray.

Pansy eyed him with vague suspicion. "No, actually... I don't know who she was with. I've seen him around, though... during the Tournament. A blond man... long hair..." Her description trailed off as she noticed the growing intensity of her professor's glare.

"And you didn't think to *tell* anyone about this? Do you *realise* how serious..."

"Sir, she literally left with him just this minute. He was pulling on her arm..."

"Where did they go?!" Snape demanded, his panic giving his anger free reign as both hands gripped urgently at Pansy's shoulders.

Her eyes widened in worry and confusion as she considered her reply. She had never heard Professor Snape raise his voice before, not even at a near-death potion disaster.

"I... He said something about taking her somewhere they couldn't be disturbed. She didn't seem very happy about it..."

Without acknowledging her further, Snape turned on the narrow stairwell and descended hurriedly down the steps into the common room.

"Sir? I'm sorry, I didn't think!" called Pansy in the direction of the empty doorway at the stairs' base.

"You never *do*," Snape retorted under his breath, exiting the common room in a billow of black fury.

Every ounce of him prayed that she had not been taken where Flank's words had insinuated.

No Thought for the Consequences

Chapter 12 of 17

The night of the Yule Ball arrives.

Chapter Twelve: No Thought for the Consequences

Hours seemed to have passed and still every brick remained fixed rigidly in place. Each coarse stone taunted him as he reckoned with their maddening riddle.

He had tried everything already, even resorting to basic first-year teachings *Alohomora*, *Bombarda Maxima*, *Defodio*, *Expulso* but not one of them moved so much as a

pebble from the impenetrable wall. Even the more advanced *Partis Temporus* and *Specialis Revelio* brought him no relief.

He had not paced this particular corridor for many years he had no need of it anymore but he still knew the moves of it. As a soothing lair from prying Marauder eyes, Snape had come to use the room frequently in his youth, learning only too harshly the perils of not making his requests specific enough. After that humiliating episode, he had been much more particular about the *invitation list* always making an exception for one particular name.

She never sought him there, if at all.

Still ignorant of the hour, Snape felt as though he had worn the floors down with his futile pacing, having tread the perimeter more times in one night than all prior occasions combined. With each heavy stride, with every fruitless incantation, he felt himself become more encumbered with guilt.

Why had he let her out his sight, for the sake of his own foolish envy?

On behalf of his own sanity, he had forbidden himself to linger on the possibilities unfolding just meters from his grasp, behind those wretched walls, but his resolve was crumbling. Leaning his brow against the cool, mocking stone, intricacies of sordid fumbling and wheezing beat at his consciousness, and Snape felt his hands clutch at the barricade as Flank's repulsive leer became fully manifested.

"Please..." he whispered hoarsely to the deaf brick as he vaguely felt a new rawness around his knuckles.

How long he had been there, on the otherwise deserted seventh floor, he knew not. Also far from his comprehension was the motive behind his uncharacteristic desperation: had he *truly* come to care for the girl, or was this mere covetousness? Was he scraping his knuckles against stone for the sake of an itch that was yet to be scratched? Was this simply *guilt*? The more Snape tried to extract his thoughts, the more amalgamated they became, but always *always* came the hideous trickle of Flank's fingertips on her thigh, in her tousled hair...

For an arcane moment, Snape thought his sheer idiocy had been the key as he felt the wall dissolve from his blood-stained knuckles and watched in bafflement as Isolde was deposited directly in front of him.

In sheer relief, he drank her in until his mind began to register the idiosyncrasies: her hair, which had left him in a neat chignon, was now tangled and free from its confines; her dress had a noticeable tear up her left thigh; her eyes more unsettling than any other detail were fixed on him in rage.

Flouting the urge to embrace her, Snape stepped back to allow her full access into the hallway. Studying her gaze further, he could make out angry wisps of tear-smudged mascara around her eyes, but this did not dilute their intensity as she advanced on him.

"Oh, *there* you are! I guess you knew about this little arrangement all along, did you? Came to see if it all went to plan?" Isolde's face creased with a mixture of anger and despair as she waited for his reply.

"What did he do to you?"

"Oh, you want all the nasty little details, too?"

"That's not what I meant," Snape replied coldly, but his hands betrayed him as they reached for her shoulders.

"Get *off* me!" Isolde barked, her seething eyes meeting his so infernally that he withdrew without question.

A heated pause stretched between them as Snape deliberated how to continue.

"Show me how to get back in," he said finally, stepping past her to face the wall again.

"He's already gone," Isolde replied, her tone softening to one of defeat as she fought with her parted seams to regain some modesty.

"What do you mean, gone? You can't..."

"You can if you know what to ask for," she retorted bitterly. Clearly, this was not the first time Isolde had used the Room of Requirement either. "I'm going to bed."

"Miss Hamilton..."

Isolde turned back to face him, but her face was strewn with disinterest. In spite of her cold welcome, Snape stepped closer.

"Just tell me: did he...?" His voice ebbed away as he found himself unable to voice the repulsive probability.

Isolde simply shook her head, exhausted. As she looked down wearily, her eyes caught sight of her professor's injured knuckles, each one soiled with dry blood and debris. Had he been that anxious to reach her?

Holding back her impulse to gnaw at his question, her voice and face softened. "No," she confirmed, and she felt him relax, even with the distance between them. "Not for want of trying, though."

To Snape's surprise, a flicker of a smile drew across her face. He raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"If there's one thing my mother taught me before she died, it was how to protect myself from my father's *friends*," she explained simply, before turning to leave.

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Snape was entirely unsure as to how long he remained in that position; his dark eyes trained on the shadow-doused corner around which Isolde vanished. In the emotional turmoil that had been his youth, he may have followed her, begging for some kind of recompense. But where would that get him now? Those vicious storm grey eyes would focus on his with the same disappointment as the glimmering pair of emerald ones many years before. Rosebud lips would press into a scowl as she dismissed him.

Instead, he remained stock still in the frozen corridor, the only warmth emulating from the mocking flames of a nearby pitch lamp. Her final words seemed to linger in his mind, festering into something far worse than their original intention.

My father's friends.

Lucius Malfoy, Ichabod Flank and, by the lingering shard of doubt in her gaze, *him*.

The more he remained stationary, the greater his fury became. Strangely enough, he felt nothing toward Lucius and Flank. The former was merely born a manipulator, incapable of changing his ways as Severus was incapable of changing his. Flank was a pathetic fool willing to do anything to appease more powerful friends. Slowly but surely, his loathing and resentment poured forth toward the foul creature known as Barnabus Hamilton. That disgusting snivelling man did not deserve Isolde as a daughter. He did not even deserve her as an aspect of his life. Tobias Snape had been worthy of loathing, too, but Severus had always felt he deserved his father's mistreatment. Isolde, very simply, did not.

Yet resentment, Severus had learnt, was a cold and bitter thing. Few reacted well to it. His resentment toward James Potter and his gang of Marauding idiots had earned

him the hatred of his beloved Lily. His resentment of Hogwarts, Dumbledore and Harry Potter had earned him the mistrust of the wizarding world.

Perhaps he deserved to be placed within the same category as Malfoy, Flank and Hamilton? The thought, Severus conceded, was absolutely horrific.

The lantern still flickering away within its bracket, Severus found his feet following the same path as hers. He could still hear the faint echo of heel slapping brick, but was that reality or a cruel reoccurring memory? Was that a flick of emerald silk darting behind a corner, or a velvet curtain flapping in the wind?

Barely registering where he was going, the Potions master felt the icy fingers of dungeon air claw away at his shielding layer of cotton and wool. Down here, the lanterns lacked the jubilant glow of their brothers' upstairs. Instead, they shone a dull green, as though advertising the Slytherin nature of their domain.

They also reflected rather strikingly against the emerald of her gown.

"I know you are following me."

Her voice no longer carried the hardened edge of before. Her powerful eyes were green in the cold light.

Severus was unsure what incited him to speak, but felt pathetic the moment the words left his lips. "I am not like your father's friends, Isolde."

An eyebrow cocked. "I did not insinuate that you were, sir."

"On the contrary, that is exactly what you did." Rubbing a fingertip across the stinging remains of his knuckles, Snape continued. "I feel you deserve an explanation."

"Sir..."

"Miss Hamilton," Snape murmured, his baritone resounding against the blackened stone of the damp wall. "Please listen to me. I had no intention of allowing Ichabod Flank to touch you tonight, though that is what your father desired."

The girl looked downcast, white teeth peeking as she bit her lower lip. "I know this now."

Click, click, click.

Shoes hit stone, and it was only at the last minute that Snape realised she was drawing closer. The ridiculous heel of the stilettos brought her nose to the height of his chin. On tiptoes she was just able to...

He knew he should stop her, brush her away, but as soft lips brushed against his own, he could do nothing but reciprocate. The gesture itself was so soft as to be innocent, but the repercussions were anything but.

Before reason could take hold, his body led hers to the nearby wall, trapping her in a haven of hard body and voluminous black wool. Delicate rosebud lips fought dangerously with his as small long-fingered hands sought the refuge of his own, potion-stained and calloused. One such hand reached to stroke the ivory softness of her thigh, so willingly revealed as she hoisted a leg around his waist.

Their embrace, destined to go further, fell unceremoniously short when the delicate pantings of their own excursions were joined by the loud, uncouth vomiting dialogue of a port-soaked Draco Malfoy.

It was as though both were hit by a violent *Repulso* curse. The pale thigh ducked back into the comforting protective veil of her skirt as her fingers tackled with what remained of her once elegant hairstyle. By the time Malfoy-junior stumbled around the corner, there was little evidence of their previous embrace.

"Mr Malfoy, would you care to tell me why you are *stumbling* through the corridors at this hour?"

Malfoy smirked, wrapping his velvet clad arms tighter around the pretty blonde waif he had snatched away from the ball. Severus tackled with his memory, eventually recognising her as Elizabeth Swighton, a sixth-year Ravenclaw. Though she too reeked of port, it appeared Elizabeth could hold her liquor better than her consort. Hardly surprising, given the alcoholic nature of most of her House.

"'Tis not midnight," the heir to the Malfoy fortune smirked. "I can do whatever the fuck I like."

"Except consume copious amounts of port and use foul language in front of a teacher. Furthermore, you are fourteen, Mr Malfoy, and while your father has a reputation, I would advise you that any drunken encounter you may have with Miss Swighton tonight is going to be unpleasant for both of you. Fifty points from Slytherin and a week's detention."

"But Uncle Severus!"

"I am your godfather, Mr Malfoy, not your uncle. An additional twenty points from Slytherin. Miss Swighton, I suggest you depart for Ravenclaw tower before Mr Malfoy proceeds to expunge his dinner upon your clearly expensive gown."

The periwinkle eyes of the girl in question widened, and she disappeared, clearly relieved that she had avoided losing points for her House. If there was anything that Ravenclaws hated, it was losing House points.

As Malfoy stumbled back to the common room, Severus turned swiftly back to Isolde who had remained motionless throughout the confrontation.

"Miss Hamilton. What just happened cannot happen again."

Her lip twitched. "Sir..."

"I am your teacher, Isolde. If we were caught..."

A slightly devilish smirk tilted her lips, a vast contrast to the clear exhaustion and cold that wracked the rest of her body. "Well, sir, we shall have to make sure *wedn't* get caught."

I Thought We'd Keep This Private

Chapter Thirteen: I Thought We'd Keep This Private

Every gurgling vessel of potion was like a Remembrall, each one emanating enough heat and haze to recapture their encounter a dozen times over. As Severus wound himself through the warren of stirring students and whisperings, even an unrelenting trail of waspish criticisms could not distract him from the remembrance of that night.

Of course, lessons with his N.E.W.T. class were the most taxing; having the subject of his clandestine musings etched cruelly in front of him amongst the mist of burning crucibles was torture. Each lock of stray hair she absentmindedly hinged behind her ear betrayed hints of her rogue tresses the way they had fallen upon his bare chest, each teasing tendril scraping away scales of unsettled longing. Each time she released an agitated breath between her plump lips as she sliced her herbs, Severus was forced to recall the rhythmical pants of pleasure she had recited in his ears as she climaxed for the second time that evening.

He had not let go of her wrist until he had her on the other side of his office door; had not spoken another word in reply until he had commanded her to disrobe him.

And he had not touched her since.

At that moment, as Severus reached to dip his quill tip in a serpent-woven ink pot, Isolde's hands let go of the irksome belladonna seed and gravitated towards the top of her thighs; as she artlessly wiped her purple-stained fingertips across her skirt, his eyes grappled at the measly centimetres of bare flesh this allowed him, indifferent to whether her gesture was deliberate or not.

Despite the ceaseless orchestra of chopping and scraping, all eyes darted to their professor as pot and ink crashed to the floor in front of his desk.

As grey eyes met black for the first time in days, the swollen bubble of fancies and titillating recollections swam questioningly between them for the briefest of moments, before bursting and smearing across the stone tiles for no one to see but him.

One scathing look in the general direction of the room was enough to make the entire class refocus their attention to their work, allowing Severus to scrutinise the blackened, sticky puddle daubed into the floor at his feet. Realisation stared boldly up at him from every discoloured shard and speck.

It had not happened.

Not any of it.

Along with the sickening taste of actuality came the realisation that Isolde was now staring boldly at him also. Amongst the timid mass of bowed heads, her grey eyes penetrated his from the security of her desk. True to form, they gave away little and yet hinted at a multitude of conflicting sentiments: fear, amusement... pity, even? As Severus held her gaze for a moment longer than intended, he thought he caught a meagre glimpse of unsatisfied longing, though hers was securely veiled behind a now lowered pair of lashes rather than on the cold stone floor for all to see.

"*Evanesco.*"

The word lingered in the air as Severus silently questioned why he had chosen to voice the spell. Watching the tar-like stain vanish into nothingness, he knew he had needed to hear it; needed to acknowledge that it had not happened. Even that very night as he entered his bedchamber alone, he had fought in vain to pry apart the truth from his own hunger, choosing instead to tiptoe devilishly on the fence between what had actually happened and what he had *wanted*.

He had slipped beneath his emerald sheets in a delectable haze, unable to even blame the befuddling warmth of liquor. He had hardly drunk a drop all evening. And in odd recollection, that had made it all the more delicious to be sound of mind, yet allow the lines to blur: where her hands on him ended, and his own hand wrapped around his erection began, he could not tell and did not care.

He could barely recall what he had said in reply to her impish proposal on the night of the Yule Ball, but he could not deny that he had regretted it several times since. The first time was just seconds after his rebuff, when, instead of retracting into a girlish heap of tears and stomps, she had smiled *smiled!* and coolly declared, "What a shame," before removing her high-heels and returning to the common room barefoot.

It was undeniable that there was something about Isolde which had beguiled him for some time, and this modest display of disappointment made Severus wonder if she really was worth the risk after all. *Who else in this classroom (the school, even) would have responded in such a mature and tasteful manner?* he thought to himself as he began to wander around the hushed benches again.

After deliberately boycotting Isolde's desk four times during his rounds, Severus returned to his dais to announce the end of the lesson, inviting students to bring their completed potions to the front for inspection.

Isolde was always a careful handler of her ingredients and equipment, but it was clear that she was taking longer than usual; when only a few clumsy stragglers remained, Isolde was still decanting her potion into a vial marked with her name.

Severus fumbled in feigned occupation as he watched her out of the corner of his eye, half contemplating going to his storeroom until she had gone. Dipping his quill in replenished ink, he inwardly cursed his juvenile notion.

"Professor?"

Chatter and haze no longer between them, he and Isolde were alone for the first time since his regretted dismissal. Since their encounter. Since...

Involuntarily, his eyes crept towards her lips, which now hovered millimetres apart from each other, resembling two strawberry halves. His groin stirred; surely she was about to ask him to reconsider? Where he would usually sneer and demoralize, Severus was uncharacteristically ready to admit his error, crush her lips with his again.

Lowering his quill onto its rest, Severus looked across his desk at her, raising his brow questioningly.

"You haven't told him, have you?"

For a moment, Severus was stunned. Pupils expanded into oblivion. "Excuse me?"

"Professor Dumbledore; you haven't told him yet, have you?"

Quelling his disenchantment, Severus mustered a silent shake of his head.

Isolde's shoulders relaxed visibly as she reached into her robe, her hands fumbling with some unidentifiable parchment. "Thank Merlin. You *mustn't* tell him because..."

"Miss Hamilton," Severus cut in, recovering by the second. "I am not accustomed to receiving demands from students."

Unfazed, Isolde handed him the folded parchment; the seal had already been broken and inside laid just one line:

*Emeric takes a hand in what is done in haste**

Severus read the words three more times before looking back at Isolde.

"It's from my father. It arrived the day after the Ball." She silently read the upturned words to herself before continuing. "It's his crafty way of sending me a threat without actually saying a word of his own. Emeric is..."

"I know who Emeric is, Miss Hamilton. As hard as it may be to believe, I took the same classes as you did when I was a student."

When I was a student, Severus reminded himself. Yes, he had made the right decision.

"So, your father doesn't want you to act in haste by what? Informing the headmaster of an attempted rape, on the school grounds, no less?"

Isolde simply nodded.

Severus passed the parchment back in disgust. "I am sorry, Miss Hamilton, but I am not making any promises of the kind. Professor Dumbledore has a right to know. The only reason I have not said anything until now..."

"Please, Professor." Her eyes reeked with momentary desperation until she laughed bitterly. "My father is like a spoilt child, sir, and, like many pure-bloods, he is a sore loser. Just after my mother died, and my father's *friends* inhabited our home freely, he made it quite clear what would happen if I should refuse one of their advances again." If Isolde's eyes threatened tears, she hid them well, and though her voice sounded almost unrecognisable, it did not falter.

Severus' eyes narrowed questioningly. "He made *what* quite clear?"

The bitter laugh again.

"As sickeningly quaint as it sounds, this place is quite a haven for me." She gestured in the general direction of the classroom walls and the school beyond. "My father knows that all too well and will not think twice about taking me home for good, before the school year is over. I doubt Flank will care about his *whore* having impressive N.E.W.T. results, either."

Though the word crawled from her lips like a vile insect, Severus still felt the jealous twang in his abdomen, followed by an even stronger boulder of resentment for not having actively prevented Flank's latest attempt.

"All in all," Isolde concluded nonchalantly, "it might be best for both of us if you don't try to assist me again."

Severus' eyes widened for the most fleeting of moments. "Miss Hamilton, I would strive to protect any one of the students in my care if they came to some harm. It is my..."

"Duty, yes," Isolde finished boldly. "But what if one has conflicting duties?"

Silence arched between them until she spoke again.

"I think it may be best if you remain *friends* with my father and Mr Flank for the time being, at least."

Question upon question rose like a floodgate, but Severus found himself making a peculiar choice:

"How can you speak of him so respectfully?"

"I find titles help me to keep my distance," she smiled, absentmindedly taking his black quill from the desk's surface, ruffling the reluctant barb with an index finger. "It's not out of respect, I assure you."

Indeed. Severus knew all about that and was already regretting calling her anything but 'Miss Hamilton'. He eyed her with increasing prudence as she shifted from one foot to the other, firmly securing the menacing parchment within her robes once more.

"You know much more than you are revealing, Miss Hamilton."

The following moments ensued in a haze of distortion; both of them tore their gaze from one another in unison *that*, he could recall with utter clarity and, for the briefest of moments, he could have sworn that Isolde's eyes flickered towards the dark wool of his left sleeve, but as the footsteps got heavier, all attention was drawn to the figure which had just entered the classroom.

oOoOoOo

Had Severus not already met the figure clenched in shadow, he would have been able to discern his identity from Isolde's reaction. While tense before, the seventh-year's discomfort was now palpable. Pale features were rendered so pallid as to give her the constitution of a ghost. Grey eyes widened, pupils dilating so as to almost hide the grey from view. The quill, once lazily poised between her long fingers, was now shattered in a vice-like grip. One emotion poured from her: anger. It was clear from the quaking of her lower lip, the defensive stance of her taut young body.

"Father."

Barnabus Hamilton smiled in what he no doubt considered to be an indulgent manner. Unfortunately, wrought on thin lips, the expression manifested itself in the visage of manipulative cruelty. It appeared to be one of the few expressions in his repertoire, the other being the slimy smile he threw at his friends. Severus' anger toward the man boiled into a crescendo of blind hatred. He had not loathed a creature so much since James Potter had blessed the ancient halls of Hogwarts.

As was his nature, however, the Potions master did not allow his stance to portray even an ounce of this venom.

Hamilton tapped his cane on the stone flagstones, eyes still focused on Isolde. "Izzy, be a good girl and let the grown-ups speak in private, would you?"

Isolde let the shattered remains of his quill fall to the floor, crossing the small distance between desk and door in an instant. Severus was almost disappointed that she did not kick up a fuss, demand her father's respect, throw the quill in his face. On the other hand, her silent dignity only strengthened the unquenchable affections he had for her. Once the heavy oak plank slid shut in her wake, the intruder turned upon *him*.

"Severus, old boy, how splendid it is to see you again."

Old boy? Since when had he and Hamilton ever been *on old boy terms*? He barely tolerated Lucius addressing him in such an inane way.

"Mr Hamilton." His nod was curt, unwelcoming. "To what do I owe the *pleasure* of your company?"

"Well, you see, Severus. It has come to my attention that you failed quite spectacularly in the little job that Ichy and I gave to you." Once again, Hamilton's thin features wrenched into a sneer. "I do not appreciate failure, especially when it involves the welfare of my little girl."

Severus raised an eyebrow. What did this man know of *welfare*? Furthermore, what did Barnabus Hamilton think he was doing threatening him? Raised with a silver spoon

in his mouth, Hamilton had never placed much precedence upon learning. Why would he need too? He would inherit the family fortune whether he received 'Outstandings' or 'Trolls.' If he were to challenge Severus to some kind of magical duel, the mewling rich boy would find himself shipped back to his daughter in a potions vial.

Not that Severus would want to place Isolde through such turmoil, if turmoil she would feel.

"You see, Severus," Hamilton continued, gently rubbing his thumb along his lower lip. "You assured me that my daughter was going to wear the dress, but Ichy tells me she wore a cheap bag purchased by a *Ravenclaw*."

Severus felt the knot in his stomach tighten. As much as he disliked the presence of Marcus Spencer in Isolde's life, the idea of Hamilton and Flank getting their hands on him... The foolish Ravenclaw clearly had no idea how treacherous his path now was.

In response, the Potions master curled his lip into a vicious sneer. "I believe I made my stance on the matter quite clear, Mr Hamilton. I am a teacher, not a babysitter. If you wish for your daughter to expose herself like a prostitute at a school function, I suggest you sort it out yourself."

Hamilton hissed, the facade of civility fading into oblivion. "You are walking on very thin ice, Snape."

"You are correct," Severus replied, clearly catching Hamilton off-side. Something about Isolde's warning chilled him at this moment *I think it may be best if you remain friends with my father and Mr Flank*. As much as he loathed taking advice from an eighteen-year-old girl, her point was valid. He simply could not allow his anger to consume him. "You will have to excuse me, Mr Hamilton...*Barnabus*. I am simply *annoyed* that I was unable to fulfil my duties that evening."

At least he was not lying, nor was he adulating like the filthy creature before him. *He had* failed his duties. Had he been more keyed to the situation, his Isolde would never have found herself enduring the unwanted gropes of Ichabod Flank. Let Hamilton believe what he wished.

The facade started to reform over Hamilton's face: that sickening little smile quirking his lips. "No matter, no matter, all is forgiven among friends. We shall forget all about it, for there are much more important things for us to concern ourselves with."

What was the incessant fool prattling on about now?

"More *important* things?"

"Of course! You see, if things are meant to be, they will be, Severus. My daughter will be married to dear Ichy, during her Easter break."

Married? Once again, the writhing serpent of Snape's anger roiled within him. *She was only a child!* Keeping his face passive, Severus cocked an eyebrow. "Exulted though you must be, Barnabus, I fail to see how this concerns me."

"Oh, why of *course* it concerns you, old boy! You have to make sure that my little girl floats down the aisle a virgin."

Severus paled. Yet another impossible task. How was he supposed to protect the girl from her own *fiancé*? Better yet, how was he to protect her from *himself*? As Hamilton slipped from his office, Severus made a decision, one that Isolde would hate him for. One that he wished he did not have to make.

He would speak to Dumbledore.

Authors' Note: Many thanks to Lindsey, our magnificent beta! For those of you who may not have read the books for a while, students are taught that Emeric the Evil once owned the Elder Wand and behaved very rashly, terrorising thousands of people with it before getting slaughtered in a duel. Professor Binns gets him mixed up with Uric the Oddball in *History of Magic*. The proverb is our own magical twist on a Turkish proverb, and the assumption is that most Wizarding families will have passed it down through generations.

A Habit of Turning Up in Unexpected Places

Chapter 14 of 17

Severus has a very eventful evening.

Author's Note: Thank you so much, Lindsey, for motivating us to post more chapters and being a most wonderful beta.

Chapter Fourteen: A Habit of Turning Up in Unexpected Places

No sooner had Severus made up his mind to inform the headmaster than he was striding towards the classroom door. Would Isolde still be waiting outside, or had 'Barny' sent her away to her dormitory?

Worse still, had he hauled her away with him to relay the delightful news, no doubt peppered with threats of domestic isolation and permitted rape?

That would have to wait he told himself inwardly. He had to see the headmaster before he lost his nerve.

"Er... we weren't sure what to do, sir. You told us last week to wait here in silence, but, but..."

Held at his own threshold, Severus was met by a faultless line of anxious first-years, the green and blue emblems stitched upon their robes a sporadic murmur of colour along the otherwise dank corridor.

Damn.

Concealed behind his well-practised mask of disinterest came the realisation that he still had one more lesson to teach. Severus felt his resoluteness turn in on itself as he crossly eyed the boy who had dared to speak. Round and toothy, he had an air of Longbottom about him that Severus found almost nostalgic.

"And yet," Severus began, feeling his robes almost inflate with authority as he recovered his train of thought, "you have still managed to flout that, Mr Burnett. How forgetful of you." His dark eyes flickered just enough to catch the trickle of fear filter through the class. If it was possible, the air fell even colder as every breath was held for his finale. "Perhaps an evening of de-tailing salamanders will help you with your memory. Eight o'clock tonight, Mr Burnett. Don't be late."

"Yes, Professor," the boy whimpered, his quivering cheeks betraying a promise of tears.

"Enter."

It was only when Severus set the class to work that he realised they had been waiting outside his classroom for over ten minutes; this did not make the lesson progress any more speedily, however. The sheer simplicity of the Boil-Cure Potion failed to distract Severus from the less-than-desirable dialogue he knew he would have to exchange with Dumbledore in just over half an hour's time.

Between verbal lashings and clumsy stirrings, he found himself repeating internal incentives to himself, for fear of going back on the decision he had made.

It must be done. For her own safety, it must be done...

"As much as it would amuse us all to see you covered from head to foot in self-renewing pus, Miss Robbins, I suggest you think twice about stirring your potion anti-clockwise again."

It must be done. It's gone on for too long. Albus will know what to do...

"Congratulations are in order, Mr Burnett." Severus smirked darkly over the boy's boil-encrusted face. "Having already proven yourself to be utterly useless, it appears that you have indeed surpassed yourself. Get your belongings and go to the hospital wing quickly, I suggest, if you don't want to be seen by the rest of the school as they leave their classes."

The afternoon seemed to amble infuriatingly slowly, but Severus finally found himself at the all-too-familiar gateway. Rolling his eyes, he scoffed the words, "Cockroach Cluster" and stepped heavily onto the unveiled stairwell as it began to ascend.

Before the stairs even came to a halt, a cheerful voice called from within, "No need to knock, Severus."

He would never admit it, but the habitual whirring and tinkling of the silver apparatus in the headmaster's office was an intangible comfort to Severus, but it provided no respite as he drew closer to a now outstretched bowl of sherbet lemons.

"No," Severus shot anxiously. "No, thank you."

Dumbledore smiled softly as he brought the half empty bowl down to rest beside a swinging pendulum. One of many of the headmaster's own inventions, its use had once been explained to Severus, but in the midst of his troubled thoughts, its function evaded him.

"Well then, Severus, to what do I owe the delight?"

As he deliberated how to begin, he felt the edge of the chair press invitingly against his calves, but his agitation made the concept of sitting unthinkable. The familiar pair of blue eyes arched noncommittally over the cluttered desk, so before he had to suffer their infuriating twinkle, he began:

"It has come to my attention, Headmaster, that Mr Flank..."

"The Triwizard Advisor?"

"Yes the very same," Severus confirmed, biting the inside of his cheek heatedly. "It has become apparent that Mr Flank has begun to take certain liberties in his role which have begun to forfeit the safety of our students."

Dumbledore's expression remained unchanged, but something behind his half-moon spectacles darkened. "You are referring, I presume, to Miss Hamilton, and more specifically the night of the Yule Ball?"

As the headmaster rested one aged hand over the other, the younger wizard's face visibly blanched, his defined brows creasing into perplexity. "You... already know?"

The headmaster simply nodded.

"Why?" Severus spat towards the unmoved face. "Why did you wait until now to tell me you already knew about this?"

"I might ask you the same question, Severus." Again, the face and tone remained unchanged, but the eyes were full of challenge.

Snape opened his mouth to retort, but sank into the chair defeated. For several seconds, both men sat resolutely, the metal devices practically urging a quarrel.

Curiosity broke through the silence.

"How did you know? It took me almost an hour to locate Miss Hamilton, and it was clear that no one else had attempted an intervention..." Severus trailed off bitterly as he recalled his own failed attempt at heroism.

Seemingly ignorant to his employee's accusation, Dumbledore delayed his explanation to feed himself a sherbet lemon. "Sometimes," he paused, his tongue exploring the explosion of tanginess, "there are enough loose threads to make one substantial yarn. It was Miss Parkinson, actually, who first alerted me to something being amiss. In the Entrance Hall, on my way to the lavatory, I heard her offload her qualms to Mr Malfoy about you reprimanding her in the common room; she said you were looking for Miss Hamilton, and that she had seen her being escorted away by Mr Flank..."

"Escorted?" Severus sneered, his broad palms gripping each knee beneath his robes. "You make this sound like a romantic stroll through the rose garden!"

"Which, ironically," interrupted Dumbledore once more, "is where I gathered my next loose thread."

Severus rolled his eyes less discreetly this time; *the old fool sounded like a celebratory child on a scavenger hunt. Did he even consider this a serious matter?*

"It was Hagrid, in fact. On his promenade with Madame Maxime, he had seen a very aggravated Mr Flank leave the castle through a door I never even knew existed! Right into the school grounds, no less!"

Unable to palate any more of the headmaster's buoyancy, Severus rose to his feet again. "Forgive me, Headmaster, but this was nothing less than attempted rape. Surely we are not just going to stand aside and let..."

"Attempted, Severus yes." His tone had become noticeably grave. "And as it remains as such, I think we should let this run its course."

"Run its course?" Severus could not recall the last time he had raised his voice at the headmaster in such a manner, but images of Flank's sweaty palms on Isolde's reluctant skin clawed for his attention. "While I am usually quite content to play the puppet in the show only you seem to know the end to, I refuse to allow an innocent girl to be toyed with in such a flagrant manner. Do you know they intend for her to marry this lech?"

Dumbledore closed his eyes as he simultaneously exhaled and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I did not know that, Severus, but this is essentially a private matter, and it would be wise to treat it as such."

"Headmaster..."

"Hear me *plainly*, Severus." Dumbledore rose to his feet, his voice uncharacteristically strained with bridled anger. "You will *not* allow this girl to cloud your priorities."

"You mean *Potter*..." Severus spat the words with open animosity, his usually composed lip wavering with unspilt venom.

Blue eyes tore into black, and though the wind-berated hilltop was a sorry memory, the same look of disgust radiated from every crease in the old wizard's face, the same disapproving stare he had given another selfish request long ago. Fourteen years, in fact.

A number of unvoiced promises and long-fastened, fraying knots passed between them before either man spoke again. When one finally did, his tone was noticeably softer.

"Severus his name did not end up in the Goblet by accident *you know* my theories about this all being connected: Bertha, Frank... *your Mark*..." Dumbledore gestured pointedly with his brow towards Severus' left forearm. "We cannot allow one brush stroke to tarnish the larger picture; you know he will return, Severus. Do you think he will welcome you back with open arms?"

It was only at these words that Severus broke his gaze and looked down at his own arm, where he knew his Mark lay, blacker than his blackest robes an indelible token of the greatest error of his life. The greatest *loss* of his life.

Severus sensed Dumbledore walk around his desk to his side but he did *not could* not look at him. The hideous irony was that the most permanent mark the most stagnant hold over him lay not on his left arm, but in one word he had uttered himself: '*Anything*.' He may have often felt like Dumbledore's prancing puppet his jangling marionette but *he* had handed him the strings, told him to do as he pleased with them. Merlin knows, he had been all but ready to hoist them up for good.

"Severus..."

The aged fingers ghosting his shoulder jolted him to awareness.

"You cannot afford to risk your guise not when Voldemort is so near to resurrection. You're going to need all the *friends* you can get anyone to vouch for your continued alliance to him. Mollify them for now, Severus. I know you can."

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Hardly able to recall their parting words, Severus departed the encircling stairwell and returned to the dungeons in an almost Confused state. As he got closer to his chambers, his frustrations reawakened to a state only a bottle of Firewhisky could quench. Unable to decipher whether his anger was charged more towards the old man or his own spinelessness, Severus surrendered his endeavour to separate the two.

It was only when he passed by his office that he stifled his inner monologue, noticing a warm arch of colour creeping through the cracks around the doorframe. Glad to be offered an opportunity to throw a hex or two, Severus drew his wand from his robes before invading his own office.

As his eyes adjusted to the sudden onslaught of light, a familiar, bulbous eye rolled on its axis before him. Its owner stood guiltlessly challengingly, almost by his bottle-laden shelves.

"*Moody* would you care to tell me what you are doing in my office?"

Doused in the fickle glow of dying candles, the Auror appeared as though he had sprung from the darkened shadows of every child's nightmares. The mutilated gash in place of a mouth twisted in a foul parody of a grin, the magic-infused glass eye whizzing maniacally in its adopted socket. Moody did not answer audibly, rather tapping the polished leg of Severus' mahogany desk with his gnarled cane. A light jingle caused the Potions master to snatch his obsidian gaze away from Moody, observing instead the small collection amalgamated on his desk's smooth surface. He knew every bottle intimately, recognising the tint of the glass, the worn edges of each label. It had been many years since he had relied on the jagged words scrawled upon their surface.

It was in that instant that fury captured him, tortured him, squeezing his lungs and twitching his thin lips. Moody's presence in his office was offensive enough, but these came from his *personal* safe. He did not even dare store them within the private storeroom, knowing full well the students' propensity for pocketing such items.

"An interesting collection," Moody growled, the syllables slipping from the gash almost incomprehensible. Scarred fingers wrapped around a small, olive-hued bottle. "Venom of the Western Australian Three-Headed Viper Snap. A single microscopic drop to the skin proves instantly fatal."

"Thank you, Moody, for educating me on the contents of my personal stores." Sarcasm oozed from Severus' tongue, almost as venomous as contents of the vial pressed between Moody's fingers. "Now would you care to explain your presence here?"

Moody once again ignored the question. "I am sure Dumbledore would be fascinated to know what you keep in your office."

"As Dumbledore provided one of the three signatures necessary for me to obtain this venom, I seriously doubt he would be."

Moody huffed, popping the bottle carefully back on the desk. "Just doing my job, Snape."

"Last time I checked, nowhere in the regulations does it state that Defence Against the Dark Arts professors are required to search their colleagues' offices."

Moody's normal eye remained fixed on Severus, its magical brother dancing maniacally. To the trained observer it was easy to ascertain that the ex-Auror was drawing at short straws. Had the situation been less irritating, or serious, Severus may have found it a touch amusing.

"This afternoon you were seen in the company of a known You-Know-Who sympathiser, Barnabus Hamilton."

The name, especially spouted from Moody's lips, caused Severus to shudder inwardly. Nevertheless, he kept his face impassive. "Mr Hamilton is the father of one of my students; there is no reason why he should not visit me." Severus crossed the office in two long strides, his long fingers picking up Moody's little collection, placing them within a discarded box. "Was there any reason you thought to impede on my personal space?"

Moody was evidently furious, even more so by Severus' packing up of the ingredients. Had he not done so, the Potions master suspected that the ex-Auror would have pocketed them for himself. Sure enough, Moody had proven himself a warrior for the side of right, but his mind was nonetheless a bag of cats. Such emotional instability, mingled with a long-lasting thirst for revenge, meant that he was very much tipping on the line between light and dark.

With several loud clunks, Moody departed, slamming the door in his wake. It was only then that Severus noticed another object on his desk, a letter he had never before seen: a letter that had been *opened*.

Curious, he placed the last of the vials in its temporary home, snatching up the expensive parchment. The elegant script was that of Lucius Malfoy; the small numbers printed upon the top a clear indication that this correspondence had been sent by owl that morning. Swallowing back an unwelcome lump in his throat, Severus began to read.

To my dear friend Severus,

In light of recent events, it has become apparent to me that you are ignorant of the importance placed upon the union of Ichabod and Miss Hamilton. Your failure at the Yule Ball, while unexpected and unwelcome, has only delayed our plans. You are fortunate that both Barnabus and Ichabod have found it in their hearts to forgive your failure, and as such, request that you join us at The Mewling Quim to discuss your further involvement in the matter. Failing to attend would be very foolish indeed.

Ever your faithful servant,

Lucius Malfoy

Any hope that the evening might improve instantly slipped from Severus' mind. Rather, he felt like he had been knocked head first into a vat of snakes, lying amongst writhing bodies waiting for the first serpent to strike.

The letter was concerning enough, yet the scramble of honey-soaked words paled in comparison to the implications that rose from its presence.

Moody had read it.

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The Mewling Quim was a haven of lavish wealth and foul debauchery. Smoke of multiple hues rested in unsettling swathes above the congregation, like fetid storm clouds waiting to strike. It was not a place Severus visited often; in fact, if life had dealt him a different card, he would have been pleased to have remained ignorant of its very existence. A number of scantily dressed witches slipped about the room, supplying drinks and sexual favours to the foulest of patrons.

He located Lucius, Hamilton and Flank at the farthest corner of the victualling house. The centre of their table was dominated by a bottle of Ogden's finest, four crystal glasses placed like petals around a sinister flower. If the visage was not repulsive enough, Hamilton appeared to be entertaining one of the waiting staff, his thin fingers beneath the thin slip of lace at her groin. Flank joined in the frivolities, pouring a small amount of his expensive beverage onto the witch's breast, sucking an alcohol soaked nipple with mirth.

Severus seriously hoped the girl was a good actor.

"Severus, old boy, how nice of you to join us."

The Potions master kept his gaze firmly on Lucius, but the whore's sickening whimpers hammered his eardrums none the less. "You hardly provided me with an alternative, Lucius." As the words left his lips, Severus knew full well that it was not Lucius who had truly given him the ultimatum. That had been the work of Albus Dumbledore.

Acknowledging the presence of their guest, Hamilton dismissed the waitress with a sharp "Be gone". Despite her previous mewling, the girl did not seem overly displeased. Severus shuddered to contemplate how many lecherous men had slipped their fingers or more beneath her knickers that evening.

While Hamilton painted his face with his usual sly smile, Flank scowled like a small boy who had had his favourite toy broomstick confiscated.

"And here he is!" the blond snapped angrily. "King cock-blocker himself. Tell me, Snape, did you find my failure amusing? Did you and my future bride have a good old laugh as you shoved your cock in her tight little c...!"

"Ichabod, Ichabod," coughed Lucius indulgently. "We are all friends here. There is no evidence of Severus partaking in your woman. Jealousy is such a... repellent emotion."

Partaking in your woman? Severus scowled. "I assure you, Mr Flank, I have no intention of bedding one of my students, just as I had no intention to allow rape to take place on school grounds. You will soon be wed to the girl; perhaps it would be wise to control your ardour in preparation for the wedding night?" Even saying the words filled him with bile. "Besides, I have stated before that I simply cannot display the level of control over Miss Hamilton that you require of me. I am not her father." He looked poignantly at Hamilton, who was licking his fingers. "She is also of age."

"You are, of course, right, Severus," Lucius crooned, "but as Miss Hamilton is to be wed at Easter, we simply ask that you keep an eye on her. There have been rumours of a certain Ravenclaw...?"

"Mr Spencer is merely a friend of Miss Hamilton. They are in no way romantically involved, as far as I am aware."

Hamilton cocked a dark eyebrow. "You sound as if you are concerned for the boy."

"I am not," Severus lied. "I simply think it would be unwise to focus your attentions on a whelp like Spencer." His fingers brushed against his Mark. "With only hints of what is to come, killing innocents at this stage of the game is foolish to say the least."

Taking a welcome sip of his drink, Severus barely observed the reactions of his fellows. All he could think about was Albus-fucking-Dumbledore, perched on his throne in Hogwarts. Surely the headmaster would be pleased now. His puppet was doing exactly as he asked.

As though the unseen Monarch of Cruelty had tossed him a few Knuts to the ground in encouragement, Severus opened his mouth once more, the wily cigar fumes nipping and drying the back of his throat. "Besides, you must have more than enough matters to occupy yourself with at present, Ichabod. I must confess, I was almost *touched* when Barny informed me of your intent to actually *wed* the little shrew."

Stooping dutifully into role, Severus welcomed the way his irises began to shroud themselves in smoke yet another mask to add to his hoard. Knocking back the remains of his Firewhisky, he watched Flank's lip curl, wondering if he had even heard the hollow good wishes, so transfixed was he on the curved behind of a nubile witch as she leant over the adjacent table to clean its surface. "Some sacrifices will be more taxing than others, *clearly*," Severus continued suggestively as Flank's nearest hand gravitated towards the exposed skin, almost as if it moved of its own accord. As his fingers, clammy with spilt whisky, finally made contact, he hummed with visible craving.

"*Sacrifices?*" Lucius scoffed on Flank's behalf, his thumb stroking the textured glass as he eyed his own minx across the room. "We're married, *not dead*, Severus." His mouth still wide with amusement, his tilted glass dribbled some of the hot liquid down his cleanly-shaven chin and into the ends of his flaxen hair. Clearly a regular patron, Lucius merely snapped his fingers to beckon the buxom redhead to his side, tapping his chin as further instruction.

As Severus stared with a mix of repugnance and fascination, the whore bent down to suck the burning stickiness from his skin, the meagre traces of rouge lipstick only hinting at the number of clients her mouth had serviced that evening alone. "Indeed," he observed sullenly, half wishing he had the drive for such frivolities. Surely even the simple puppet deserved a temporary distraction from the farce he entertained daily?

As if on cue, a witch in a plum-coloured corset slunk beside him to fill his glass, the centralised crease of her undergarments granting a promising hint of a reckless night. Three sets of fingers twitched as she shifted her angle, feigning ignorance in every flick of her lashes. Snape's hands remained still, but as she leant further over the table, providing a temporary pastime for his companions, Severus caught a glimpse of her eyes. Shrouded more thickly than his own, her irises told nothing of her history, of days of mirth and innocence. Darkly, he wondered how long it would take Isolde to adopt the same vacant countenance once she had joined the house of Flank; how long it would be before she languished in concaved bitterness, rotting in her prime.

Though the answer would no doubt sicken him for days to come, he had to ask: "While we're on the subject of this heartfelt union, perhaps you could enlighten me with

your intentions? Shocking though it is, there appears to be more at stake here than the simple prospect of plucking a virgin."

For the first time since his witch-whore took his gaze, Flank looked wide-eyed at Severus as he jeered into his upturned tumbler. *Simple!* Have you *seen* what she left me with at the Yule Ball?" he challenged as his free hand gestured angrily at a substantial gash in his neck. Severus had not noticed it until Flank had turned his head to one side, but the scar was more than a mere graze and did not look like the work of magic. "Scratched me with her claws, she did the diabolic minx. You know how a bit of reluctance thrills me, but she put up a more than reasonable effort." Severus need not have fought to veil any signs of pride towards Isolde, for Flank's subsequent words quenched them in an instant. "We'll see how long *that* lasts!" he chortled darkly as he smacked Hamilton on his back and received mirrored amusement.

The unconstrained response stirred more revulsion in Severus than the neighbouring display of Lucius and his fickle whore his arduous tongue in her mouth as his index finger explored her rear. Was Isolde's father so enticed by assurances of grandeur and involvement that he would forfeit his only child to this libertine? As the two men chuckled extensively, urged by the alcohol swilling in their veins, Severus scrutinized Hamilton, scouring every laughter-line for hints of shame *something* to imply he had sentiment for the girl.

Severus cleared his throat, obliquely calling order to the table. "And what else could this union possibly offer you, Flank, when you have so many other...*willing*... victims to enjoy?" he enquired, briefly indicating the witches oozing around the foggy labyrinth of tables.

Ichabod opened his mouth to speak, but Lucius took the reins, extracting his finger to raise a hand and call attention to him. Unrestrainedly, he smacked his palm against the rounded behind of his rouge waitress; her well-rehearsed giggle rang through the air as she obediently moved out of listening distance to refill her decanter. Lucius followed her teasing saunter before returning his gaze to Severus, who fought hard to suppress an eye-roll. "It may have escaped your notice, my dear Severus, but we are not getting any younger..." His fingertips feigned a casual graze of the material veiling his Mark. "Something is clearly advancing, whether we are ready or not..." Severus swallowed the sudden onset of bile in his throat. "The Dark Lor..."

"Lucius!" Severus hissed in interjection. "Are you so topped with Firewhisky to care, or have the passing years caused you to discount stealth entirely?"

Silence consumed the table until an inebriated Hamilton spoke. "My Isolde already shows the capacity for brutality, and though she doesn't often display it, she has a sharp head on her shoulders."

Flank nodded in agreement, a rough fingertip stroking the line of his disfigurement. "Barny's right; with a bit of moulding, she could replace those we have lost along the way."

His inclusive pronoun half-amused Severus *did he consider himself a Death Eater already?* but the remaining words caused more unsettlement than anything else he had seen or heard that evening.

With a wry smirk, he mustered his blithest tone. "Surely you're not suggesting that my most talented Potions student offers the same...*mentality*... as the likes of Bellatrix Lestranger?"

Lucius chortled callously. "We all know Bella is two wings short of a Hippogriff, Severus. We're not claiming otherwise. But you must admit we are running a little short on... cavalry... at present. My Draco, of course, has the predisposition..."

"So *that's* why you were pushing for their union earlier this year," realised Severus, before a wry smile upturned his lip. "Quite an upgrade, isn't it? An inexperienced teen to a self-confessed satyr? I'm not sure who I feel happiest for."

"Draco has his own schooling to focus on," surmised Lucius. The gravity of his tone made it clear that he was not referring to his O.W.Ls or N.E.W.Ts. "On reflection, it would not be wise to put two novices in the same cauldron. No," he mused almost idly now, "they need proper tutelage, both of them. I hope you'll do your part for Draco, Severus."

"Of course, Lucius," Severus snarled as he downed another shot of Firewhisky. "As you know, I have so much free time on my hands now the school year has begun."

"You really need to lighten up a bit, Sev," drawled Flank, word stitching into word with increased intoxication. "Here," he comforted, beckoning over the plum-enveloped whore with the vacant eyes. "You need to *relax*..." Inching closer, her half-exposed upper thigh brushed deliberately against Severus' right sleeve. For a few seconds, he tolerated her hollow caresses until he glanced at Flank and saw him nod his head towards the girl, urging him to take a bite. Lucius, meanwhile, looked nothing short of smug as he sat back against his high-backed crimson perch. *Did they see themselves as debauched philanthropists, parting with their rotten fruit for him?*

Lucius' grin widened, pointing the end of his cane at the girl, the open-mouthed serpent ready to devour her far from blameless flesh. "Be honest, Severus, when did you last experience *la petite mort* at the hands of another?" The men on either side of him snickered into their glasses, their eyes daring their idol to continue, to part with more venom. "You must be simply *aching*..."

Severus rose sharply to his feet, knocking the plum harlot into their table, Ogden's spilling everywhere. Uttering her only sincere whimper of the evening, the witch murmured a multitude of apologies as she cleaned the tabletop and refilled each glass.

"As difficult as it may be for someone of your...*stature*... to believe, Lucius, I have not reached that level of thirst just yet." His black eyes bore resolutely into Malfoy's, though the latter's were so clouded with lust and intoxication, Severus doubted he would note the challenge in them. "Now, is there anything else I can assist you with at present, or am I permitted to return to my stack of fifth-year essays?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Turning on his heel, Severus swept through the lewd maze as swiftly as possible, hoping that would be the last time he'd set foot there, but knowing that was a blessing he did not deserve.

oOoOoOo

He did not Apparate to the school gates as he usually did.

Severus materialized in a deserted Hogsmeade alley, feeling an ardent need to rinse himself of the last few hours with the aid of a long walk. As the chilly air began to drag the lingering smoke from his head, his memory echoed the repulsive exchanges again and again. The final topic had enraged him the most; the rest he was used to, as disturbing as the news had been, but to be offered one of those whores as charity to have his sexual experience scrutinised in front of those two repulsive sycophants was almost too much for even his well-practised ruse. If he had been a novice spy, or had even been too liberal with the Firewhisky, he would have cradled the image of their shocked faces as he informed them that Isolde had freely offered herself to him only a fortnight ago. The remembrance of her whispered proposition her leg strewn around his thigh caused him to stir with longing as he passed the building he knew too well.

Glancing only briefly in the direction of the shop, Severus noticed something that caused him to stop mid-stride.

A flicker of candlelight shone in unceremonious blotches through the grubby windows, and as he squinted for better perception, he was sure the clumsy silhouette in the centre belonged to Brinkley. Brinkley reading a book.

Hardly aware of his own feet gravitating towards the door, Severus found himself reaching out to test the ornate handle. Giving to his force immediately, the door opened with a soft click, and Severus stepped inside.

People Will Think You're Up to Something

Chapter 15 of 17

Severus seeks respite after his visit to The Mewling Quim.

Author's Note: Whilst *A Slytherin Seduction* is named after the wonderful piece written by a fellow Muffliato member, it is not the same. Our version is tacky and nowhere near as awesome as the real thing. And many thanks to Lindsey for tagging and betaing!

Chapter Fifteen: People Will Think You're Up to Something...

Fitzwilliam Brinkley was a figure steeped in obscurity. Born and raised in the apartment above his bookshop, he had never felt particularly inclined to leave the sanctity of Hogsmeade. Why should he need to move his physical form when adventure could be found between the dusty pages of his books? Even as a student at Hogwarts, the magic of words had encapsulated him. He consumed his textbooks, excelled at his essays, but found very little inclination to practice physical spells.

He had not always manned the shop: that had been his father's responsibility. Instead, Brinkley had accepted a position as Assistant Librarian at Hogwarts. It was a job he adored. When he was not protecting his precious tomes from the rough grasp of students, he would find a secluded spot to read, to immerse himself in a world so very different to his own.

This segment of his life was idyllic, but it was doomed to fade. Two years after taking up his position at Hogwarts, Flourish and Blotts opened in Diagon Alley. Brinkley's father, Zachary, had assured his son that their vast clientele would not abandon them. Yet he had been wrong. Cheaper prices and ready access to their London based shop via Floo meant that within the space of a year Zuranders was all but abandoned.

Brinkley had attempted to aid his parents, sending home the majority of his pay packet. It was only a short time later he realised his money was being spent on cheap Firewhisky. His mother left, and his father took his own life two weeks later.

And so Brinkley had returned. Over the next few years he had reshaped his family's little bookshop. Removing all the texts available at Flourish and Blotts, he stocked his shelves with rare and beautiful volumes. At the same time, he made his keep selling filth to hormonal teenage girls. He did not ask questions; he did not want to interact with his customers. He just wanted to be left alone with his books.

Of course, Severus knew nothing of Brinkley's past, and he had little inclination to find out. Late though the hour was, Brinkley's attention did not waver from the dusty tome in which his upturned nose was buried. Swimming within a leather-bound ocean of knowledge, the aged bookseller barely noticed the tinkling bell, nor did it occur to him that he should have closed the shop hours before. What was the point?

To Severus, the sheer indifference of Brinkley only added to the appeal of the shop.

Sweeping the long ebony cloak from his shoulders, Severus placed it upon a tarnished hook jutting from the door frame. Had the Potions master been susceptible to sentimentality, he would have allowed a smile to grace his stern features. This tiny niche of a bookshop was so monumentally different to the lascivious den in which he had spent the last few hours. It was the equivalent of stepping into a hot shower after a day spent slicing particularly foul potions ingredients. In fact, comparing Hamilton and Flank to the nastiest contents of his storeroom brought Severus a momentary spark of joy.

Instinctually, he headed for the looming book case to the left of the door, eyes grazing the familiar spines *Moste Potente Potions*. *Potio Pallidus*. *The Art of Brewing* It always amused Severus that the students had such volumes within their reach, yet a fear of learning meant that they steered clear of the bookshop. Or, at least, most of them did.

It seemed like an age since he had first encountered Isolde Hamilton within these walls. In many ways he wished he had not. Life had never been particularly easy for Severus, but he had comfort, structure, routine. Like a hurricane, Isolde had swept into his sphere, uprooting everything in her path. The worst thing was: Severus could not even blame her for it! How could she help having a repulsive father? She could hardly be blamed that her family connections and fine looks had attracted the attention of that lecherous rat, Flank.

Annoyed that Isolde had infiltrated his thoughts once more, Severus found himself gravitating toward a previously unfamiliar nook of the shop. He had ventured there only once: the day he had found Isolde sprawled upon the bay window. It still amazed him that Brinkley had not been drawn from his reading by the girl's mewling, the moans roused by her apparently vivid dream. This particular memory proved unwelcome, and Severus was starting to wonder if he should have *indulged* in the morsel presented to him at the Mewling Quim. It had been a very long time since he had bedded a woman, maybe an unfeeling encounter of the flesh would distract him from Isolde?

The mere thought of such an action sickened him.

He would *not* become Ichabod Flank.

Snatching a glimpse at the bookshelf brimming with lascivious novels, Severus turned to the bay window. The cushions were haphazardly scattered over the worn crimson velvet, no doubt untouched since Isolde had lain upon it. Awkwardly, he perched upon the edge of the seat, reaching for a nearby cushion with long, calloused fingers. Though the material was worn, the softness of the furnishing was undeniable. No wonder Isolde had found herself so quickly ensconced by sleep.

It was only once he had moved the cushion that Severus noticed the harder object, thrown beneath the velvet puffs. A book *The* book. Placing aside his cushion, he took the tome into his hands. It was light, both in weight and content, the worn cover a clear indicator that it had been cradled by many sets of hands, read by hundreds of eyes, women young and old seduced by its lewd contents. *A Slytherin Seduction*.

Cocking an eyebrow, Severus turned to the title page. No author had acknowledged the work. Perhaps the writer did not wish to be associated with it? Or maybe, they believed it added an air of mystery. Not allowing himself to ponder on this, Severus opened to a random page, his eyes falling on a thick block of prose:

"You look beautiful tonight." His soft whisper caressed her ear. "It is almost as though you have dressed...", she could feel his smile, "... for me."

"Black and green and are my favourite colours." She moulded her tone into syllables of defiance, ignoring his intoxicating proximity, his delicious smell. "Why the hell would I dress for you?"

He ignored her, his hand reaching down to cup her arse through the thin fabric. As she reached to slap away his unwanted palm, he removed it, something clasped in his fingers. A flash of green lace. Her knickers.

"You bastard, give those back!" She lunged at the blond, but he merely smirked.

"I think not. Surely, I deserve a small keepsake?"

Swivelling on her heel, she grabbed at his hand, only to have him once again draw her close, continuing the farce of a dance.

"Surely, you have better things to do than attempt to seduce me?"

"I have no intention of seducing you, Belle. Fucking you, absolutely, but trust me, seduction is entirely unnecessary."

Severus snorted, but nevertheless flicked through several more pages.

Kneeling before her now, he dragged her legs over the armrests of the chair, pulling the nightdress to her hips. More than anything, she wanted to push him away, but as long fingers began to caress her through the thin silk of her emerald green knickers, protestations turned to groans.

"These are very nice," he purred, "but I am afraid they must go." Pressing his thumb through the thin material, he ripped it open, tearing the flimsy garment in half. Leaning in, he blew upon the tender, exposed flesh of her sex before sampling her. His hands firmly placed on her thighs, she could not wriggle from the position had she even wished to do so. The only rational course of action was to curl her fingers in his platinum locks, revelling in the expert ministrations of his tongue.

"Mmmmm, Tiberius." How easily his name poured from her lips, as though it were meant to. The two syllables caused him to smile against her clitoris, moving a hand away from her thighs to plunge double digits into her. Climax threatened, yet was cruelly snatched from her as he drew away. "You bastard," she snarled.

The longer he immersed himself within the text, the more Severus felt like he understood its most avid fan. Isolde was an intelligent young woman, surely aware that the fantasies portrayed within these pages would never be translated into reality. It was escapism then, pure and simple. An escape from her father, her housemates and probably, he conceded, *him*.

Severus leant back against the window, allowing the book to remain poised, open, in his fingers.

What was he going to do?

A Set of Suspicious Circumstances

Chapter 16 of 17

The next Hogsmeade weekend brings more trouble for Isolde.

Author's Note: Thank you so much, Lindsey, for your superb betaing and tagging!

Chapter Sixteen: A Set of Suspicious Circumstances

Snapping the book shut, Severus removed himself from the comforting folds of the bay window. A stolen glance at his watch told him it had long since passed midnight, yet, strangely enough, Brinkley had made no inclination toward closing the shop. The shrivelled wraith of a man barely even looked up when the Potions master placed the book on the counter.

"Mmmm, Professor Snape. A pleasant day, is it not?"

Severus' eyebrow shot into his hairline. "It is quarter-to-one in the morning, Brinkley."

At least the shopkeep had enough common decency to look perturbed by this. "Is it indeed? Who would have thought?" His wrinkled fingers slipped his own book shut, revealing the title: *101 Ways to Hypnotise a Troll* This title did little to lower the height of Severus' eyebrow.

Upon sighting the Potions master's purchase, Brinkley had his own moment of eyebrow cocking. *A Slytherin Seduction?* An ah interesting choice, Professor."

The dark glint in Severus' eyes was all the response required. The shopkeep emitted a pathetic squeak. After handing over his Sickles and demanding that the book be wrapped in brown paper, Severus turned once more to Brinkley. "You will tell no one of this purchase, do you understand me?"

"Of of course sir," stammered Brinkley. "I would not dream of it."

With a curt nod, the Potions master headed for the door, snatching his cloak. Placing his obscene purchase within a well-concealed inner pocket, he ventured once more out into the icy, winter air.

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Several days might have passed, so immersed was Brinkley in his latest tome; as it so happened, only a few small hours had tiptoed through the crooked side street, bringing with them a new layer of fresh snowfall.

Some days, the snow lay completely undisturbed in Scholars Lane, not one footfall contaminating its crisp shell. The name itself was enough to keep most Hogwarts students at wand's length, so keen were they to evade all things studious during their weekend visitations to Hogsmeade.

One student, however, stood mutely statuesque in one of the street's many shadows. Her boots, though encrusted with trodden snow, stood on the only visible cobbles; the buildings hunched towards each other above her head, their uppermost windows almost meeting in mutual drowsiness, barring all snowfall. The sight was uncanny, as though her mere presence had caused the whiteness to shrink outwards.

More unnerving was the sheer intensity with which she now stared at the bookshop's windows, as though she could see beyond the encasement of grime from decades past.

A sudden snap beneath her heel pulled her to alertness.

Stooping, she drew the now halved disk to her eye line; though the badge had now lost its enchanted shift from green to red, the familiar words still lingered mockingly: POTTER REALLY STINKS. With a wry smile, Isolde tossed it back onto the ground.

"Hey, snake, that was *mine!*"

Marius approached cheerily from the adjacent doorway of Caratacus Fleming's Ink Supplies, dipping to inspect the discarded badge. Its defect observed, it quickly rejoined the cobblestone, counterparts scattered. "Ah well, plenty more where that came from."

Isolde shook her head as they began to edge slowly back towards the main street. "Really, Marius, I don't know why you wrap yourself up in such hype. Neither of them deserves to win."

"You're just still bitter Digger-dy took dear Miss Chang to the ball instead of you," he quipped unthinkingly as he began to examine his new purchase. Before Isolde could muster protest, a bottle of ink was thrust into her palm. "Check *this* one out, Snakey-kins. Fresh on the shelf this week."

Pausing in spite of herself, Isolde squinted at the minute scrawling on the pot's label: *Vivacious Vocabulary Ink: astound your teachers, colleagues and heartthrob with a word-stock at your fingertips. Simply put quill to parchment and watch the eloquence pour forth...*

Even before Isolde had finished reading, her scepticism flew to her brow line. Marius snatched the ink back into its carrier. "I don't care what you think; Caratacus Fleming is a genius," he affirmed blithely. "I've got a lot to thank him for."

Isolde couldn't help herself. "Oh, definitely." She grinned, her longing for dusty, illicit books almost departed. "Like that time you bought his *Superior Spell-Checking Ink*. Yes, Professor Snape was very impressed with your essay on the many uses of ravens' *clause*, and that time you commended the benefits of the *mussel* relaxing potion..."

Unfazed, Marius slipped his arm through Isolde's. "Just checking to see if he actually reads them, dear snake!"

As they reached the far side of Zuranders, Marius routinely gravitated towards the all-too-familiar door. "Right, Iz, you've got ten minutes." He peered pointedly at his Quidditch-inspired watch. "When the Snitch reaches half-past, I'm gone, okay?"

As she stared at the ticking hand on his wrist, his words finally gained meaning. Blinking, she feigned a casual shrug. "Oh, I'm not fussed today. Still trawling through my last purchase," Isolde lied, the brief memory of its smouldering pages making her wince in misery. She gently tugged on his arm until they were greeted by the bedlam of the main street.

"Merlin's sweaty crotch, are you *feeling* okay? You're usually begging me for just five more minutes in that place..."

"Marius, just drop it."

As soon as the tone left her lips, she knew she was being excessive; how was he to know that her seemingly innocent fancy for 'romantic literature' was nothing short of neurotic, and that, in recent weeks, it had caused her the biggest humiliation of her life?

True to form, her retort fell like water from a newt's back. "Ooooh, are we in need of a caffeine fix?" he smirked, playfully batting his carrier bag against Isolde's leg. "Tell you what; we'll pull out all the stops today and give Puddifoot a visit. I know how you just luuurve the decor."

Isolde rolled her eyes but followed willingly through the bustling mass of robes. In all honesty, Isolde was simply aching for a strong cup of coffee. Until recently, Marius had always obtained her regular doses from an obliging house-elf, but his dealings were stopped short after receiving an impassioned lecture from Hermione Granger about elfish rights. Despite referring to her copious times since as a 'meddling bush-head,' Marius had been rather alarmed at the time, leaving the kitchens two Sickles poorer and in possession of an oversized S.P.E.W badge.

Smirking in recollection, Isolde barely realised they had stopped mid-stride and that she and her suddenly tongue-tied companion were now standing head-to-head with Kathy McKenzie. Had the vicinity not already been so chilly, the trio would have felt a sudden drop in temperature as they mutually grappled for a reliable opener.

"Er... Kathy, hi," Marius eventually managed. His bag, no longer swinging roguishly, now drooped heavily against his thigh. "You, er, here on your own?"

That confirmed it. Something had *definitely* happened at the Yule Ball. Sure, Marius' explanation that his blotchy neck had been the result of mosquitoes from the rose garden had been undoubtedly pathetic, but Isolde had never considered they had been the work of her own roommate. Lips twitching, she struggled to feign ignorance as the discomfort bloated.

"Umm, yeah... just, er, you know, browsing. Better than watching Quidditch practice." Kathy smiled wanly as they shared a strained chuckle.

An explosion of mirth tore between them as Isolde scoffed unreservedly. "You two are worse than pubescent first-years!" Both mouths gaped simultaneously in horror as she perched her hands on each of their shoulders. "Look, I need my coffee. You're welcome to join me and have a go at constructing some sentences inside, or I can meet you back out here when I've had my fix..."

Striding between them, Isolde tugged open the stubborn door to the tea shop, allowing a cascade of flavoured steam out into the frosty air. "You coming?"

Still somewhat mortified, Kathy gave in first, taking the offered door from Isolde's hold, and turned on the threshold towards Marius. "I told you she doesn't miss a trick."

"And that's *before* she's had her caffeine." Sighing, Marius lugged himself up the stone steps and into the hot tea room, its furnishings as saccharine as the tinkle upon the door's closure.

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Madam Puddifoot's was a notorious lodging of budding courtship no surprise, considering how closely each rounded table and chair was pressed beside its neighbour, how sultry the very air was within its cosy margins. With its aromatic steam infusing every crevice, the tea shop was not too unlike an opium den, its inhabitants bathing blithely in growing attraction. For years, rumours had lingered amongst the student populace that even some of the Hogwarts teachers had once trod their own nervous feet upon its floorboards. Marius had even joked that Snape himself had no doubt tried his hardest to secure affection within its walls. Isolde was certain that, even in his student days, Snape would have detested it. If he had ever been hauled beyond the threshold by his peers, he would have undoubtedly snarled at the profusion of paper doilies, the sickly clusters of pre-Raphaelite portraits voyeuristically following every graze of limb above or below the flowery tablecloths.

With passions out in the open, conversation swung happily to more routine topics.

"Uurgh, do you think someone should tell Diggory that you're meant to kiss on the *mouth*? I swear, she's not gonna have an ear left by the time he's finished!" Marius continued to steal glances at the pair over Isolde's shoulder as she sipped on her second cup of coffee. "Revoltin'... You sure you don't want to switch seats, Iz?"

Her face unchanging, Isolde absentmindedly smoothed out a crease in her froth-stained doily. "Marius, if the sight bothers you that much, you could always *just not look...*"

"Have you seen them at it, though? One can hardly do otherwise! Emma and Euan have already moved one table over to avoid the carnage..."

Kathy giggled into her cup before gasping and lowering it mid-sip. "Oh! Speaking of which, have you heard the latest on Mr Crouch?"

"Urgh, don't tell me *he's* been seen sucking on some poor witch's orifice too?"

The table fell to a hush, eyebrows raised in stunned mirth. Isolde rolled her eyes. "I meant her ear..."

"Anywayyyy," drew up Kathy, wafting her arm impatiently between them, "the talk is *hehasn't* been seen at all, not for weeks. Not since the World Cup."

Isolde snorted, scooping up another two sugar cubes with an ornate teaspoon. "Kath, if it was something serious, we'd have seen it in the *Prophet*..."

"Not likely," shot in Marius. "Dad says not to touch that publication with a broomstick completely manipulated by the Ministry, they are. If those guys want something hidden, it's not going to be on the front page of the *Prophet*, I can tell you that."

Isolde nodded gravely, knowing better than to question him on this point. His own grandfather had been promptly sacked after trying to publish news of murders during the First Wizarding War. Veiled with a guise of public concern, the *Prophet* had dropped him without so much as a warning, causing his family to be mistrustful of it ever since.

"Well, either way," continued Kathy, her hands engaged in a dance of outrage, "he was meant to be overseeing the proceedings of the Triwizard Tournament, but Bagman's been leading a one-man show up until now."

Isolde felt her fingertips tighten around her teacup. "Until now?"

Ignorant to her friend's emergent panic, Kath allowed herself a cruel pause to take a sip from her cup. "Mmmm," she began, her mouth still full of coffee, "they've brought in that other guy to help out a bit more. He's only been supervising the actual tasks so far, but they're now wanting him to keep an eye on things between tasks, too. They still reckon some cheating went on in the last one somehow knowing about the dragons before they were revealed and they don't want that happening again."

Isolde lowered her teacup to the table's surface, fearful that her fingers might pinch it to shards. "Who is it the man who's coming to help?"

Kathy's face brightened in an instant, a flush of giddiness replacing the scandal. "I can't remember his name, but he was at the ball. I swear, Iz we thought Malfoy senior was hot? This guy is off the scale!" Isolde's eyes remained downcast, but she knew Marius was looking directly at her. "Oh, Merlin! What's his name, Marius? You mentioned him to Snape when... Oh, Merlin is it Frank? *Flint*...?"

"Flank," Isolde spat out to the room, still processing Kathy's news. "Don't go near him, Kath. He's trouble. Worse than Malfoy."

"Oh, crikey!" Kathy declared excitedly. "What a shame I'm all hitched up now; I do love a good rake!" Playfully squeezing his thigh, she assured Marius she was teasing, but his face was solemn.

Turning away from Isolde, his usually mirthful eyes sobered. "She's serious, Kath. Keep your distance."

For a moment, Kathy's grin dissolved as her eyes darted between both friends. Sighing, she wiped the corners of her mouth with a rose napkin. "If you insist... Though, he can't be *that* bad if even the dungeon bat finds him tolerable." In response to their questioning brows, Kathy indicated silently behind them.

Isolde squinted, craning her neck to peer through the small sliver of window that wasn't misted with steam.

There, striding together through the dwindling crowd, was Ichabod Flank and Professor Snape. Though the view was restricted, they were clearly in deep conversation. As if this were not shocking enough to Isolde, Flank subsequently appeared to pat the professor on the shoulder before escorting him away from view.

"They look pretty pally to me," contended Kathy, clearly justifying to herself that the wizard she found so striking was indeed harmless.

Marius snorted, turning back to the dregs of his cup. "I'd hardly consider Professor Snape a sound measuring stick for assessing someone's decency. And anyway, Isolde can vouch..."

Instantly, the Ravenclaw buckled under Isolde's fierce gaze. Eyes like steel, she dared him to proceed. "I, um... I mean... her dad says he's a sleazeball," he recovered feebly. "You're best out of it, Kath."

Softening slightly, Isolde rose to her feet. "Well, I'm all caffeined out now, thanks." The other two shuffled for their belongings. "No, you two stay here. Really. I fancy a quiet walk back to the castle, let the coffee beans work their magic. I *might* even have the energy for that Charms essay due on Monday."

Kathy relaxed, but Marius remained watchful. "You sure, Iz? We can walk back with you..."

"No, really, it's fine. You can play footsie by yourself now." Marius raised a brow. "Oh come off it, you were accidentally brushing my leg for half the time. Now, at least, you'll know you've got the right pair."

Isolde forced one last smile before squeezing herself through the cluster of tables and out into the snow.

oOoOoOo

Having spent the last hour closeted in the balmy tea shop, the gnaw of chilled air would have usually come as a shock to Isolde, but her body was already numb. Scouring the near empty streets for the two figures, she fought frantically for an explanation.

Why, after all he had said to her, would Professor Snape be exchanging pleasantries with Ichabod Flank? What could he have said to cause the blond rogue to laugh heartily and pat him readily on the back? Why, more so, would Snape abide such a condescending gesture? Yes, she had pleaded with him not to incite trouble for her but to be *friends* with him? The thought was revolting.

As she continued further along the high street, peering fruitlessly down every side road, Isolde's thoughts soured. Was *hæmocking* her? He had distinctly affirmed that he was *not* like her father's friends, and yet... The more her memory uprooted past exchanges, the more misshapen they became in hindsight: when he had dismissed their encounter on the night of the ball, *had* it been for the sake of professionalism, or had he touched goods which were not for him? The man had always been a cloaked riddle, but for him to deliberately seek her out with assurances of sincerity, only to usurp them with malice, it was beyond fathomable.

As the main street emporiums began to fasten their locks, candles snuffed in all directions. All that remained was the heavily trodden snow, sporadically tinged with a bright sweet wrapper or discarded Knut.

As Isolde recalled again the infuriating encounter, she noted they had strode in the direction away from the castle. Perhaps, then, they were still in the village somewhere? With the mainstream stores now closed, only a few options remained.

Though she highly doubted her professor had taken Flank to peruse a collection of dusty books, her feet continued to edge back towards the familiar hearth of Scholars Lane. The vision of his neatly fastened blond head skimming the titles as he passed through each aisle, his wretched fingertips infecting the moth-eaten spines, infuriated her. The thought of him devouring her sanctuary riled her to the core.

Turning into the lane, she paused. Eyes tore through the lightly falling snow towards her haven.

Bricks all in place, a murky glow at the window, all seemed unscathed. Untainted.

Her lips parted in relief, Isolde had no chance to even squeal before a firm, cold hand snatched at her mouth. The sharp amalgamation of Floo powder and Firewhisky hit her tongue as she felt herself being hauled into a nearby alcove and into the shadows.

Tempt Me into My Old Ways

Chapter 17 of 17

Both Severus and Isolde find themselves battling with remnants from their past.

Author's Note: Thank you so much, Lindsey, for your very kind tagging and betaing. We would be so far behind without you!

Chapter Seventeen: Tempt Me into My Old Ways

Arms held firmly around her back, Isolde felt her captor's hands constricting hers, palms pressing knuckles into oblivion. Her face forced so close to the uneven stone, she sensed the unnatural imprint on her cheek; the shop's wall provided no solace as it smeared her skin's surface with grit and debris. Ugly rasps of breath laboured in her ear as she futilely tested her bonds, her attempts and failures sparking a derisive laugh.

As the man's breathing became more measured, the grasp on her wrists slackened enough for Isolde to part from the brick face, but a firm tug on her shoulder spun her around before she willed her own feet to move again.

Isolde always yearned to have inherited her mother's eyes so warm in their brown, they were almost golden, whereas her father's were a cold, steely grey. Almost vacuous.

Grey thawed into grey as the smell of Firewhisky intensified. A tumult of inebriated goodnight kisses crashed back to her, their lips' grin timelessly sickening. Palms met brick, encasing her head in a globe of pungency.

"So that's the scrawny wretch who bought you the dress, is it?" His head jerked in the direction of the main street, where, from these distant shadows, not even drunken ramblings could be heard.

His upper lip stooped in another toothy sneer, his stagnant breath closing his daughter's eyes in disgust.

"Don't you *dare* bring Marius into *any* of this. He was simply..."

A finger, tacky in texture, pressed her lips to a standstill.

"*That*, Isolde, will be entirely up to you. I suggest you pay closer attention to who you choose to spend your time with. Grisly Ravenclaws are undeserving, to say the least." His fingertip pinched her lip in thought. "It's terribly displeasing..."

Shaking her head, Isolde nudged her father's hand away, sensing a fleeting protest from his finger as its dry-liquored surface recoiled. "If you're referring to *Flank*, I already know he's at school. I really couldn't give a damn!" Barnabus' brows rose as she amplified. "I'm not going to alter my list of friends for either of you."

On this note of verve, Isolde began to push herself free from his arms' lock, but his hands met her shoulders with increased vigour, crushing her back to the wall again. His face so close now, their two pairs of eyes bled into one. "This is *not* just for *you*, Isolde. I've given you *everything!* Everything you ever wanted..."

Isolde scoffed, more at his desperation than his ignorance. "You're absolutely right. Where shall I start? *Thank you*, Father, for turning our home into a mirthless pit of opulence; I'm so *grateful* you made Mum absolutely miserable and where are *mymanners?* Thank you; I wouldn't have *coped* without you sitting on the front row and *clapping* whilst your friends took their share of me..."

Snatching at her cheeks, he pressed her mouth to distortion. "Listen, witch." The heavy breathing returned. "This is not about you." The shift in his gaze was mammoth but indescribable. "Things are shifting, *immense* things." Another pause bulged as Isolde watched her father's eyes glaze with awe, as though his Messiah stood between them, promising everything.

Malice replaced delight as she felt his fingertips reclaim her. "If you're not with us, you're *notwith* us... Do you understand, darling?"

As his implication sank in, her face contorted with aversion.

Shoving her father at arm's length, Isolde roughly tugged up his left sleeve. Her hand snatched at his forearm. "Stop *talking* like you're already one of them! You're not *you* don't *have* to..."

Her words stopped short as she felt a resounding smack, her head meeting the stone again. Whether the throbbing was a result of the initial blow, or her subsequent collision with the wall, she could not discern, but a sharp tug on her hair and cheek drew back her attention. "Don't you *dare* try to *save* me, Isolde." The word left his mouth like a piece of rotten meat. "I'm here to warn you." Tapping her throbbing cheek, he stepped closer. "You play nicely with Ichabod. Draw blood again, my love, and..."

A terse grin. "Well, just you try it..."

His touch and footsteps had withdrawn long before Isolde staggered back into the now empty side street. Like a transient spectre, her father had left no trace of his visitation, save for the still-throbbing case of her cheek and an even more resounding imprint on her mind.

As if it had deliberately crept along the cobbles to greet her, the broken POTTER REALLY STINKS badge was the first thing she noticed as she reclaimed her surroundings. The reminder of school day frivolities, of juvenile pettiness, felt a thousand miles from her feet. Aching close, it lay battered from passing footfall, and still Isolde yearned for its simplicity.

Kicking the mocking comfort beneath another layer of snow, Isolde drew further from the shadowy alcove and began her lonesome trek back to the castle.

Though the dim, familiar flicker of candle fought for her attention, she trudged towards the arterial road without glancing even once at the mouth of Zuranders.

oOoOoO

Severus Snape often contemplated the questionable value of his Hogwarts colleagues, most notably when they drew out an already tedious staff meeting by arguing over bygone Quidditch triumphs, but if there was one thing Severus had learned from Professor Flitwick, it was to bring his own glass to The Hog's Head.

Despite the loitering stench of unseen goat, the inn still offered more glamour than The Mewling Quim: its rough wooden tables carried years of wear, their surfaces engrained with indelible troughs and scrapings, and the candles, casting equal measures of light and shadow, bore no resemblance to their longer, tapered brothers in the Great Hall. Stacked high and wide with the remnants of their ancestors, the plump and uneven mounds of wax stood stubbornly on every other ledge or tabletop, dispatching all manner of distorted silhouettes on the unpainted walls.

And yet the shadows were what drew them: wizards, witches, Squibs, the occasional wayward house-elf. They all sought the same sultry blackness.

Save for the dull clamour of collected glasses and Sickles, the barman's presence was just that: a lolloping shadow, seemingly ignorant of his tavern's inner mischief.

Three hours had passed within its walls, each one more testing than its predecessor, but Severus still clutched his first serving of Firewhisky. Keen to remain alert, he had watched his foul companion top himself up to the point of inebriation, his increasingly potent breath making the smell of goat oddly preferable. Favouring the dark comfort of his own quarters, or even the Malfoy drawing room, Severus rarely ventured into The Hog's Head. In fact, as he recalled his last visitation, when he had spied a shifty Quirrell from a secreted booth, a familiar and prickling remorse turned his stomach.

If he had planned further ahead, rather than allowing himself to be distracted by Flank's idle prattling, he would not have seated himself so near to the closed door at the far end of the room certainly, he scolded, he would not have allowed himself to sit facing it.

Sighing inwardly, Severus distracted himself with an image of the pile of unmarked essays waiting for him at the castle. As his eyes shifted back to his burbling companion, he reminded himself why he had accompanied him to this hovel.

Never again, he had sworn to himself. Never again, if it was within his power, would he allow Flank to be alone with Isolde while she was under his care. For reasons he still could not fathom, he felt more than a dutiful accountability for the Slytherin girl, and the self chastisement he had endured for days after the Yule Ball had been far more painful than the elongated minutes of mindless blabber he had sat through that afternoon. As wretched and seemingly wasteful his day had been, he knew with utter certainty that Isolde had remained untouched.

As Flank took another mouthful, Severus allowed himself a swift glance at the tattered clock in the corner behind the bar. It was past seven. The students would be safely within the castle now. He would make his excuses and leave.

As if the faint gesture roused him from slumber, Flank sputtered and took in a sharp suck of fusty air. "Very good of you to come, Sev. Very good of you. A fine way to pass the time, is it not?"

Severus gazed incredulously at his drinking partner. Even in his drunken stupor, Flank was surely aware of his restlessness.

"Indeed."

Offering no elaboration, Severus stared down at the glass he had transfigured from a spare quill. Though its contents promised an evening of vague solace, it had barely been touched.

"Did I tell you the old man won't let me stay in the castle?"

"Only eight times since our arrival. Do tell me again," Severus muttered, squinting through the meagre smattering of cleanliness in the nearest lattice window: as the streetlamp at the inn's entrance lit with sudden vigour, Severus deduced that the passing shadow belonged to the town's porter.

Though the surprisingly reliable clock told him otherwise, the afternoon had seemed endless. With each refilling of Flank's tumbler, conversation had become increasingly cyclical, as if the two men were victims of a rogue Time-Turner, its sole intent to send one of them mad.

"The old fool says there's no room left in the castle, what with those foreigners visiting for the Tournament. Why can't those Durmstrang boys camp out near the forest? They must be used to the cold; I'm told it's always snowing in Russia."

Severus raised his eyebrows. "I was not aware that Norway was a part of Russia, but I salute your superior command of geography."

Long oblivious to mockery, Flank slammed down his glass, its insides spitting on the tabletop. "Surely my comfort should be a priority, not those haughty, fur-encrusted *champions*. Dumbledore's done this on purpose, I know it."

Welcoming a nudge in a new direction, Severus humoured him with more than his usual grunt. "In his defence, Flank, you could have chosen somewhere slightly more wholesome than The Hog's Head."

Wincing as he swallowed another mouthful of liquor, Flank shook his head. "Nope! Made the reservation for me, he did the moth-eaten busybody."

As this new information settled, Severus glanced over at the bar where Aberforth was wiping pint glasses with a grimy cloth. Seemingly oblivious to their very presence, he hummed an indistinct ditty behind his bearded lips. Fleeting, Severus recalled his earliest visitations to the inn the way the barman stood out of natural earshot, wiping the same dusty glasses as the older Slytherins smuggled him in and delivered their inductions. For a moment, a younger, smarmy Malfoy replaced the face of Flank, smirking assuredly beside his subordinates as he showed off his Mark. Grimacing, Severus recalled its rawness; even in the dim glow of the candlelight and accompanying filth of the place, the harsh crimson outline had stood provocatively from the tender flesh, crude and glorious. Even with his back turned, the barman must have felt its menacing pull, its voiceless subjects as they sat in awe.

The memory splintered as the older, stouter barman added a spontaneous whistle to his tune, tugging his waistband back up around his belly. Before retreating to the storeroom, Aberforth's pale blue eyes met Severus for the briefest of moments. His features unmoving, the man shifted his gaze to Flank before he turned away, carrying an empty crate into the darkness.

As he watched Flank stare keenly at his now empty glass, Severus wondered just how calculated this had been. Albus had hardly arranged Flank's accommodation here for the sake of his brother's income. So estranged from each other, the Dumbledore brothers only betrayed their connection with their twinkling eyes and obstinate beards, and as his surname was rarely disclosed, Aberforth's dishevelled, rounder appearance often severed the link altogether. As the residue of humming and clattering crept from the dim threshold, Severus considered how well informed the barman was. Had Albus asked him to keep an eye on Flank? Perhaps, like many new residents of Hogsmeade, Flank was ignorant of the barman's connection to the crowd that was once the Order.

Severus' gaze swung to the bar again as Aberforth emerged with another crate, setting it down on the counter. Dumbledore's response to Isolde's plight had been sickening, but perhaps he was making *some* form of compensation? If not for the sake of Isolde, then for the *greater good*.

Severus held back a snarl as the phrase swam through his mind. Adjusting his gaze back to his companion, he realised Flank was already speaking.

"... Probably for the best. If I see that seventh-year Slytherin waltzing the halls..." His eyes glazed over, a spot of whisky dripping down his chin. "No... I want her... *untouched*... for the wedding." Though he had chosen a relatively neutral word, it still sounded crass on his lips, and Severus had to gather all his resolve to appear

unmoved.

"As romantic as your original plan undoubtedly was, what has inspired this change of heart? Why is it so important that Isolde is..*untouched* when you wed her?" Even as the words departed his lips, Severus' stomach churned with guilt; when was the last night he had not dreamt, asleep or awake, of devouring her himself? *Was* he any better than the pitiful excuse for a man drooped before him?

Flank's hideous laugh shook the table. "Oh, Sev... has it been that long?" As Flank gazed glassy-eyed into the space above his companion's head, he did not witness Severus' wand hand twitch inside his cloak. "You must have experienced that delightful sensation of being the first to tread foot in clean, crisp snow. That first *crunch* through its slightly unrelenting exterior... it's simply exquisite..."

As Flank's face softened in remembrance, Severus' hardened in disgust. How many other naive patches of snow had he trampled before Isolde? How long, exactly, would she have to suffer his filthy touch? Would she (his stomach lunged at the mere notion) thaw beyond all recognition?

With no visible catalyst, Flank's tone sharpened. "Not to mention the fact that I don't want no half-blood Ravenclaw beating me to the Snitch!" He poured another glassful into his open, laughing mouth.

Flank's eyes suddenly hardened as his clammy hands grabbed at Severus' sleeves. "Seriously, Sev, she consumes me... I'm no longer in possession of my own loins... my own soul..."

Severus snorted. "That must be a nuisance."

With a callous shrug, he severed Flank's grip of him as he felt his eyes fix involuntarily on the far wall of the inn. Like a base craving, its crooked door had harassed him all afternoon, and Severus, an ageless addict of self-reproach, had allowed it to. Invited it, almost. Why else would he have instinctually seated himself to face it, the four-walled memento of his greatest error?

In the furthest depths of his remembrance, the door had only ever stood ajar once. This rarity alone had enticed him, even before he had heard the voices the male and female murmur of a routine dialogue. A keen accomplice, the stairwell had not betrayed a single footstep of his approach as he drew nearer to the lighted landing. For several minutes he had stood there, the inner voices now distinct and recognisable. Severus recalled how the woman's voice altered, became almost otherworldly as she rasped with definition; how he had smirked in the candlelight as he envisaged his master's cold, gratified hand on his shoulder as he relayed the news...

"I think you'll find her much more willing when the time comes. And Sev will help to break her in a bit for you, I'm sure."

At the mention of his name, Severus tore his eyes from the door to find a new face, equally disagreeable, searching his own expectantly. Penitent phantoms still churning his insides, he battled to look neutrally into the eyes of Barnabus Hamilton. Still wearing his outer cloak, he had clearly only just joined them, though Severus held no recollection of his arrival. Raising his eyebrows questioningly, he sought clarification.

Conjuring a tumbler from the bar's surface, Barnabus chortled. "Merlin, Sev. Just how much have you had to drink?"

"Far from enough." As his present surroundings made themselves known again, Severus' countenance hardened.

If Barnabus' inflamed cheeks were anything to go by, he had already quaffed an ample load of whisky before his arrival. "I was just saying to Ichabod... my Isolde is quite a feisty one. Merlin knows where she gets it from! I'm sure, with your expert levels of discipline, you can help to mould her in time for Easter, eh?"

An endless barrage of retorts whipped towards his inner lips, frantic to attack the lunacy seated before him. Instead, Severus stared resolutely at the object of his night's torture. Between his companions' stooped shoulders, he had an unmasked view of the offensive gateway. It could flake and crumble with the years, and yet he could not undo the footsteps he'd made over its threshold, could not unhear those colossal words...

He *could*, however, avoid stepping through it again.

Doggedly, Severus rose to his feet, his broad profile now effortlessly putting his companions in shadow. "As titillating as this discourse is, I have duties back at the castle. Do excuse me, Mr Hamilton." Severus slid himself fluidly from the space between bench and table, his well-versed composure masking his keenness to depart.

Barnabus stood clumsily in protest. "But we have much to discuss, old boy! The wedding plans *alone!* And Flank was going to tell us all about the new marital home he has purchased. Took quite a chunk out of his inheritance, he tells me!" Barnabus knocked Flank brashly on the back as the two of them chortled again.

An iceberg in the mirth, Severus stood unyieldingly. "A deprivation I will have to bear as stoically as I can. Goodnight." With a nod bore out of habit more than courtesy, Severus swept from the inn and into the sobering chill of the deserted street.

OOoOoOo

With its militia of sporadically lit windows, the castle stood courageously in the growing blackness. In Severus' early years, the school's twinkling splendour had crept its way from the animated pages of *Hogwarts: A History* and into the core of his daydreams. Years before his eleventh birthday, its magnitude and promises of refuge had entrenched his every thought and fancy.

If he squinted into the night, the glow of *her* old window regained its definition as he strode across the school grounds. Though he had vainly tried to unlearn its location, the light still shone more harshly than the rest, like Venus amongst its subordinates an undesirable keepsake.

It was perhaps a blessing the Slytherin dormitories squatted below the lake's surface.

Safe for the time being, Isolde was no doubt giggling blithely with her housemates completing a Charms essay, perhaps. Sipping a strong coffee to get her through the final piece of parchment.

Severus paused beside the lakeside, staring through its gloom to the dungeons beneath.

Marital home.

The phrase had pursued his every step as he strode from the school gates, and a giddiness he could not ascribe to his hurried Apparition lingered in the depths of his empty stomach.

oOoOoOo

"Goyle, get out of my light."

Isolde didn't even need to glance upwards from her parchment; only one Slytherin could cast that much shadow.

The bulky profile remained.

"Your swotty little friend's outside. You can tell him from me: if he comes down here again, I'll hex his knob off."

"Thanks, I will," Isolde replied in a surprisingly charming tone as she heaved herself from her green leather armchair. "Though I hardly think he needs to worry. Have you

mastered that first-year Levitation Spell yet?" Patting her messenger on the back, she dropped quill and parchment to the imprinted seat. "Don't worry. Keep at it."

Despite the morose mood her father had left her in, the sight of Marius' keen grin at the bottom of the dungeon stairs made her smile inwardly. "I'm surprised you don't have a face-rash after today's performance..."

"Nah! Kathy's got a pretty epic one, though," he beamed as Isolde reached him.

"What do you want?"

"I'm not here to copy your Charms essay." He looked almost proud.

"Wonders never cease! What is it then? I was hoping for an early one tonight..." Isolde raised her hand to stifle a yawn as a cluster of third-year girls traipsed past, whispering and giggling at Marius as they stepped into the common room.

Ensuring they were now alone, Marius indicated towards a nearby classroom. "Just quickly promise."

Isolde rolled her eyes, but followed, letting another yawn escape her lips.

Neither one of them uttered an Illumination Spell, so they enclosed themselves in near darkness as the door clicked behind them. The rows of benches seemed to almost float in the hub of the room, their kick-worn bases masked in the absence of candlelight. Seeking a prop to cloak the sudden awkwardness, Marius inched towards the nearest stool, perching himself only partially on its creaky seat. "I, er... wanted to apologise for earlier."

In the pause which followed, Isolde raised her eyebrows questioningly. Their carefree visit to Madam Puddfoot's felt like almost weeks ago. Whatever gripe or grudge her Ravenclaw friend thought she held against him, it was going to sound delightfully trivial now.

"About that dick, Flank. I didn't mean to give anything away, you know..."

"Marius, shut up. I don't want to discuss that, especially not here." Despite the onslaught of darkness surrounding them, his cheeks were perceptibly crimson.

"Anyway, I told Kath you left because you probably felt a bit awkward you know, a bit of a gooseberry. We both felt really bad, so we got you this..." Pausing, Marius fumbled with his cloak, reaching for his inside pocket.

Anticipating his usual supply of caffeine, Isolde curved her extended hand to accept the warm cup, but she was surprised when her fingers sensed an entirely different shape. "What's this?" Bringing the rectangular mystery closer to her face, she squinted in the darkness.

Isolde felt her entire body stiffen as the hauntingly familiar wisps of greyish vapour sprang in tiny gusts beneath her grip. As her fingertips clung to it grudgingly, she could almost feel its pulse from within the very pages as she recollected the first copy she had owned.

The Potion Master's Mistress

The emblazoned text, once so enthralling to her, now stood crudely in her grasp.

Clearly unable to see the full impact of his gift, Marius continued smugly. "We tried to get your favourite one... you know, the one you read 'til its spine bled, but the cashier said some bloke bought it the other day. Would you believe it? You must have been the only rampant teen to have read that in years, and then someone goes and buys it! Anyway, this is the next best one. Just been released this year, he said." Relaxing with his supposed success, Marius now stood free of his prop and stepped closer to Isolde. "Now, we bought you this as a peace offering, Iz. Not for you to slink into your dorm for days on end, fantasising about this dark, rugged Potions master, okay?" Grinning, he tapped the book's surface.

The illustrated fumes rose again as if reignited by his touch. As the dark figure's cloak fluttered beneath her thumb, Isolde dropped the book to the floor.

"Marius, I can't take this. Please take it back." As if horrified by its very presence, Isolde edged back further towards the classroom door.

Clearly affronted, Marius scooped the book from the floor. "Don't be ridiculous. Iz, take it," he insisted, thrusting it back towards Isolde.

"Marius, can't you get it into your thick skull? I don't *want* it!" Taking the book back momentarily, Isolde cast it into the depths of the deserted classroom, its pages splaying open against a distant stool leg.

For several seconds, both students stared into the open darkness before Marius turned to face Isolde. "What's *with* you? You've been acting weirdly since the Yule Ball. You can't blame *this* on a caffeine withdrawal!"

A faint, new sound invaded the room.

Tap tap tap.

Both students paused, faces of horror replacing their irritation.

Tap tap tap.

"Is that you?" queried Marius, though his proximity to Isolde told him otherwise.

Tap tap tap.

"What in Merlin's hairy..."

"Mr *Spencer*."

If it was possible, the room seemed to fall into an even blacker black as the familiar, deep voice resonated from the far corner. As Isolde allowed her eyes to readjust once more, a meagre glow of candlelight began to creep from the door of the distant storeroom, encasing its recent occupant in a thin film of light.

"It is far past your curfew. Have you lost your way?"

His penetrable stare tore through the stuttering Ravenclaw as he stepped closer, the darkness still obscuring his whole profile.

He had not yet looked at Isolde.

"No, sir. I'm terribly sorry, sir. I was just asking Iz about her Charms..."

"That will be all, Mr *Spencer*." His usual satisfied smirk at this point was poignantly absent.

As her companion scuttled wordlessly from the room, the remaining two occupants were left in momentary silence.

Tap tap tap.

The door now slightly ajar, an influx of light assaulted the shadows, and Isolde could see Professor Snape in his entirety.

His eyes finally rested on her, his features unreadable. Isolde had not even noticed, so aware was she of two things: they were now alone, and *The Potion Master's Mistress*, its dishevelled pages pressed firmly together, now lay clasped within his hand. A singular thumb remained poised above the sturdy cover.

Tap tap tap.