

whydoyouneedtoknow
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Of Alex and Anne

Chapter 1: Alex Speaks

So yeah. Living on a higher plane of reality? It's not so bad.

There might be other places I'd rather be, but nothing really comes to mind off the top of my head. I mean, maybe there's a real heaven out there somewhere, and if so, we're probably missing out... but all in all, this deal isn't so bad. We get our instructions every morning (yes, by owl, and don't knock it, it works) – help this one, leave that one alone, keep an eye on the other situation... how we do it is up to us. After a thousand years or so, we've pretty much got it sorted out who does what best.

Like me. I am *killer* at doing the “little voice in your head” bit. And don't tell me you've never had one of those moments. You'll just be sitting there, doing whatever, and this little voice in your head suggests something. And maybe it's something totally awesome. Like an idea for a really great new story you could write and make all these people happy...

But whatever. If you've had it, you've had it, if you haven't, tough. Trust me, it exists. Now most of the time, that little voice is you. Your subconscious or unconscious or something, don't ask me, I'm not a doctor. But a very small fraction of the time, that little voice isn't you at all. It's me.

Look, over here, I'm waving. I look like that one famous kid, except a little older and without the glasses...

Hi. Nice to meet you. I'm Alex, by the way. Don't think we covered that. And I'm probably coming off kind of different here than I did in the main story, but come on, you don't think we honestly talk that way all the time, do you?

But anyway... I keep getting off on tangents, don't I? Just hit me if it happens again. Anyway, I was talking about doing the “little voice in your head” bit. And there was one day I had to really finesse a job like that – and I pulled it off big-time. Want to hear?

Sorry, I didn't catch that. But if you said yes, just keep reading, and if you said no, you can leave, the Back button's right up there... I'll wait.

So. Where were we?

Oh yeah. My best job ever. Well, probably my best. There was that time in...

Ow! Mags, I didn't mean you!

Sorry about that, everyone. Back on track.

So Rick, the boss man around here, was starting to get worried because his Heir was going to be in kind of a bad situation fairly soon. Heir stuff doesn't worry me so much, since I haven't got one anymore... my last descendant died in the 1600's, he was an actor, actually, worked with

Shakespeare for a while. You know Puck, the really cool fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*? The original Puck, in the first ever performance – that was my Heir. Isn't that wicked?

But yeah, he died without having kids. That wasn't so good. So it's me and Sophia and Brenna and Paul, all in the "who gives a care" category on the topic of Heirs. Not really, but you know what I mean, it kind of loses some of its immediacy when it's not your Heir we're –

Ow! That was my foot, Paul!

Yeah, all right, fine. Anyway, Rick and Maura were in a bit of a tizzy, 'cause it's their Heir we're talking about, last of their line and all, and he was going to be having major life problems. So they sent a petition Upstairs.

Don't ask me Who, or What, is Upstairs. We don't really know. But experience teaches us that when we do what He, She, They, or It (covering all my bases here) tell(s) us, good stuff tends to happen. And we have to get permission before pulling a major intervention, which is what Maura and her dad were after.

The word comes back from The Big Guy Upstairs (just randomly picking a gender here, no offense meant to anyone) with just the plain go-ahead, which meant He'd already decided intervention was allowable and had the set-up all ready for us. And it was one hell of a set-up – I mean, it went back like forty years or so... time's kind of flexible here, but it still runs more or less straight ahead... must be damn confusing up there –

Geez, Adam, you've got bony elbows, boy!

Anyway, the focus point for the intervention was this girl, about twenty or so, with the most amazing hair I'd ever seen – it's brown, nothing unusual there, but it stands out about six inches from her head all around – honestly, she must either take an hour with that stuff every morning or not bother with it at all. And not a bad body, either –

Lay off, Sophie, I am NOT scamming on her! And yes, I know she's taken! But she wasn't taken then, was she?

Yeah, this girl was your total stereotypical bookworm/homebody type. But the important thing about her is that she was a latent. She had magic, but it was dormant – never came out, never made itself known. Latents are rare – there may be more of them than we know about, just because their talents never "woke up" – but they're usually really powerful.

So Rick's idea was to give this girl special talents in place of some of her "normal" type magic. Stuff she'd need in order to help out his Heir. I'm not going into what it was he gave her, because if you've read the big story you already know about it, and if you haven't, then when you do you will. If that made any sense at all.

Yeah, Brenna, I know it didn't. That's why I said... never mind. Moving on...

So yeah, see, the problem with latents is that their magic doesn't come out unless they have some kind of shock. And the shock this girl was due for was a nasty one. This is the part I hate about the whole demi-god bit – when you have to let the bad stuff happen, because the world doesn't work right without it, but it's not fair on the people who have to suffer...

She lost her parents. Both of them, at the same time. And we had to sit up here and watch it happen – and trust me, that sucks. 'Cause she didn't have anyone else. No boyfriend, not even a friend-friend. What she did have was a baby sister, not even one yet. So now she's in shock, grieving, and totally responsible for herself and this little girl... and of course, she doesn't think anything of it when she starts having weird dreams.

But around about November (her parents died in August, by the way, just so you know), when the little kid she's been dreaming about moves in down the block with his aunt and uncle – yeah, that's kind of going to get her attention. And so she goes and tries to do something for him, starts babysitting for him a lot – and here's irony for you – if we hadn't completed the gambit, she would just have made the poor kid's life worse. Because of course she didn't treat him nearly as badly as his aunt and uncle, so he made a fuss when they did, and when he made a fuss, they treated him even worse.

The world's a weird place... you learn that when you've been around it as long as I have...

Hey, Mags, no double-dipping, girl, you already got me once!

But yeah. We did complete the gambit. And that's where I come in.

See, the girl hasn't just been dreaming about the little kid – she's been dreaming about a guy, and his friends, and all the stuff that happened to them – death and betrayal, secrets and Secret-Keepers, you know the drill. And she's liking the guy she sees in the dreams – but she has no idea he's real, and he has no idea she even exists, much less that she knows what he needs to know. So it's my job to get them together. And I did a pretty damn good job, if I do say so myself.

Shut up, Paul.

It's a good thing time's flexible up here... they're both stubborn brats when they want to be. It took me almost an hour to convince him to get up and go out for a drive, and about the same to convince her that it would be a good idea to take the kids out to the park. Because it had to be subtle, you know, nothing aboveboard, nothing open at all.

Might be nice to get out of the house for a while, I'd tell him. Won't be able to go out tomorrow or the day after. Get a breath of fresh air, just relax for a little while.

It looks like rain, I'd remind her. Don't want them sitting in the house all day. Should go out now, before the rain starts. Get them to run around a little, burn some energy off.

A solid hour with each of them, coaxing, whispering, nudging. But it finally paid off – I got them both moving in the right direction.

I almost lost her when she realized halfway to the park that she'd forgot her purse and felt like it'd be easier just to stay home, and I almost lost *him* when he turned right instead of left at a kind of important corner. But a little encouragement to her and a little directional nudging to him (which had to be *really* subtle because of the whole men-never-stop-for-directions bit) got them both right back on track.

All right. We're at the park, she said to me – not knowing I was there, of course, just thinking she was thinking. *We're staying five minutes. Maybe.*

Oh, but they're happy, I said. *Let them run around for a while. Book in your purse.* That got her – books are probably her biggest weakness. She wasn't going anywhere. I could get on my other case.

Ooh, look, I told him. *Parking space. You can show off how well you parallel park.* Always appeal to a man's pride and a woman's vanity – or is that the other way around? Anyway, it worked. He parked the car and got out.

Feel good to stretch your legs, I said. *Get a little exercise before you're stuck in the house for two days. There's got to be a park around here somewhere.* All right, so that was a little obvious, but he swallowed it, and he just thought he was a smart guy when he took exactly the right turnings to get to it.

It's funny – sad people are easier to get to than happy people. I guess they've got less to lose, so they're more likely to listen to little voices in their heads. And both of them were pretty sad that day. Him more than her, of course, since she had two other people depending on her – having to be strong for someone else limits your options a lot of times. But getting her out to the park was more or less the easy part, so it evened out.

Anyway, he found the park and sat down – with his back to them, of course. And he had some pretty damn gloomy thoughts, which I'm not putting here, since you know them already. So after he came to his conclusion about what he was going to do, he started looking around. Good. Now all I had to do was get him to notice the kid. Then she'd notice him, and then the dominoes would be falling...

Good grief, Adam, ease up, I wasn't even half a sentence off topic yet!

Children are incredibly easy to influence. Especially when you're telling them they can do something they're normally not allowed to do. *Push the boy*, I told the little girl. *Go on, push him.*

She did, twice, and the result was perfect. The guy noticed the kid, and the girl noticed the guy, and the story started coming out. Now I only had one job left – making sure he believed her. Because if you think about it, her story really was pretty damn unbelievable. “Oh, I just happened to dream all this stuff, and I just happen to be connected to you in all these strange ways...” Yeah, not happening. Except that it did. Go figure. Big Guy Upstairs again... or Girl, like I said, I'm not particular...

Ha-HA! Missed that time, Maura Smarty-Robes!

So I hung around his mind and ever so gently suggested it might be a good idea to believe what she was saying... after all, how else could she know these things... it had to be true... honestly, he wasn't too hard to convince. He was pretty desperate for something good to happen in his life – not surprising, considering all the stuff that got dumped on him the previous few months.

And I didn't have to do anything else. Once he believed her, they did all the rest themselves. And you know where it went from there. Happiness and sunshine and all that good stuff. Except that my ultra-great-nephew feels fine... he's going for a walk... yeah, I'm just going to stop with the cultural references, they're not going anywhere. Put it in a nutshell, they've got big problems ahead.

Good thing they've got each other, huh?

And to think... they wouldn't, if it weren't for me –

YOW! Maura!

Her aim's improved.

Anyway, so that's my story, and do me a favor – don't tell them about this, huh? It would probably kind of freak them out if they knew we were, more or less, playing with them. And maybe we shouldn't, but I've seen how that side of the story comes out, and... yeah.

Speaking of playing, I'm going to have to designate a few honorary Heirs here, just to keep my hand in...

But that's another story.

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Of Alex and Anne

Chapter 2: Alex and Anne

Anne Walsh let the glass door swing shut behind her. Her senior project – directing a thirty-minute play at the local grade school – was going really well. The accompanying write-up... well, it was all right. But her deadline was coming up soon.

Good thing I type fast. And turn out pretty professional stuff even on first draft.

She started down the sidewalk towards the parking lot where she'd left Jacky. Jacky was her car. Like the brother she'd named him after, he was fifteen years old. Unlike the brother, he was dark green. He had belonged to her mother, but the growing Walsh family had necessitated a minivan around the time Anne was old enough for her own vehicle.

So, Jacky's mine. And pretty reliable, considering his age. That's old for a car. She rounded the corner of the building and smiled to see him, sitting there in the parking lot, almost all alone – she held rehearsals after school, so most of the teachers and parents had already left. There were only a few other cars in the lot, and most of them, like Jacky, had somebody sitting in them...

Wait a second. There should NOT be anyone in my car.

But there is.

Jacky's passenger door popped open. The person inside got out, a little clumsily, as if he were either hurt or unused to the motion.

Or both.

Anne approached warily. She knew who this guy *looked* like, but that was impossible.

Isn't it?

The dark-haired man leaned against the side of the car as she approached and gave her a casual nod. Anne nodded back, stopping out of easy grabbing range, and set her bags down, pulling her keys from her pocket. Hanging on her key ring was a cylindrical piece of metal about as long as a ballpoint pen but significantly thicker, with a blunt point at one end. Jabbed or shoved against any soft spot on a human body, it should cause sufficient pain to make an attacker let her go.

I have no idea who this guy is, or what he wants, or how he got in my car. Better to be safe.

“Hello,” she said neutrally.

“Hello, Anne.” His voice was pleasant to listen to, not least because of his accent.

Standard English, I think, but I'm no expert. A point in his favor, though. “May I ask what you were doing in my car?”

“I wasn’t doing anything.”

Smartass. Another point. “Have we met?”

He looked momentarily dismayed. “Please don’t tell me you don’t know me.”

Anne weighed her options. “What if it’s true?”

“Then I’m in really deep sh... stuff.”

“How sweet. You remembered I don’t like swearing. Think you can remember anything else that might convince me you’re not some con man who managed to put together any clues I might have dropped, figure out where I am, and try to convince me that my writing is coming to life?”

“I know the code to open Jacky’s doors.”

And you also know Jacky’s name, I notice. Smooth. A move worthy of your name. “Good, but not good enough. Try something that isn’t written down anywhere.”

His green eyes flicked around the parking lot. They were alone. He leaned forward and said in a quiet tone, “The next Heir of Gryffindor will be named Nadia. She’ll have her mother’s hair and her father’s eyes. She’ll be bought cheaply, and yet at a dear cost. Before she is born, the Heir of Slytherin will think he has ended the line of Gryffindor, for the last son of the lion will have fallen before his Killing Curse.”

Very, very nice. And completely accurate, too. I do believe we have a winner. But one more test is in order. “All right, I believe you. I assume you locked up again when you got out?”

He nodded.

“All right, let me just get the doors unlocked, then.” She stepped forward with her keys in her hands.

“Shouldn’t you get your car key out for that?”

Anne turned to face him. “I’m sorry?”

“Yes, you are. You don’t keep your car key on that ring. Otherwise, that thing you carry around would be bumping your knee when you drive. You keep it in your watch pocket with your rings.”

Anne grinned, pulling out the object under discussion. “I think I need to stop trying to fool you.”

“Yes, I think you do.”

“Hold on, I’ll get it unlocked from the other side. Grab my bags?” Anne rounded Jacky to the driver’s side and punched a series of numbers into the keypad on the driver’s door while her passenger scooped up the three bags she’d been carrying – one cloth, one paper, one plastic – and

opened the newly unlocked back door to deposit them on the seat, then climbed into the front himself.

Anne slammed her door shut and reached across herself to fasten her seat belt. Her companion hastily did the same.

“Good boy,” she said, shoving the key into the ignition and twisting. Jacky roared to life. “We wouldn’t have gone anywhere until you did.”

“Safety nut.”

She shifted into drive, then reached across and punched him on the leg.

“Ow.”

“Point made. You’re not invulnerable around here, nor am I. And going through a windshield is the fastest way I know to ruin an otherwise really good day.”

“What, having someone you thought was just a figment of your imagination show up in your real life isn’t?”

“I’m attempting not to let your sudden, and yes, rather unwelcome appearance do that. Snide comments from you are not helpful. I assume you have no money and nowhere to stay.”

“You assume correctly.”

“At least you have clothes. And you won’t stick out too much where we’re going.”

“Where are we going?”

“Where do you think?”

“I don’t think. It’s not in my job description. Maggie does it for me.”

She punched him again, the car being stopped at a red light. “Try anyway.”

“Up to your dorm?”

“Very good.” She sniffed. “Do I smell brain cells overheating?”

“Probably. I haven’t had a brain in so long, I’ve forgotten how to use one.”

“Have you forgotten all portions of fleshly experience so equally?”

There was no answer. Anne pulled up to a stop sign and glanced over to see her passenger turning a shade of red that went rather badly with his tattered green robes. “Something wrong?” she asked.

“Yes. And no. In reverse order.”

Anne pressed lightly on the gas. “Or is it just that some things come back faster than others?”

“You could say that.”

Anne was in a quandary. Part of her wanted to keep tormenting her passenger, but another part of her, the nicer part, told her to let him be. He’d probably been through some pretty nasty stuff today. There was certainly no normal way he could end up in the grade school parking lot. And if he could have gotten out of it himself, he would have.

Ah yes. “So you’re pretty... normal right about now?”

“Are you asking in terms of physical status, or what?”

“That’ll do to start.”

“I seem to be in decent health. Runny nose, but it’s chilly out.”

“Tissues in the back seat.”

“Thanks. But if you meant magically...” He blew his nose, then winced. “Forgot how loud that is. Magically... I’m normal for this world.”

“Which is, nothing at all.”

“Precisely.”

Within her own head, Anne used a few of the words she didn’t usually verbalize. This could easily turn into a very, very bad day.

She signaled for a right and swung into the parking lot where she normally left Jacky, found a space and parked. “Time to earn your keep,” she said, shutting the car off. “Carry some of these for me.”

With two people carrying, the trip down the hill to her dorm didn’t take as long as it usually did. They managed to get inside and to Anne’s room without anyone seeing them, and when the door was shut behind them, she breathed a sigh of relief.

“What?” He was stretching his arms, having deposited the bags on the floor beside the door.

“Do you have any idea what kind of gossip would go on if people saw a strange man entering my room?”

“No.”

“Think small village, but worse.”

He blanched a little. “Ah. Your walls are an ugly color, by the way.”

Anne looked around. “They’re white.”

“Not in here. I mean in the hallway. The bottom half.”

“Ah yes, that. We call it radioactive kiwi. As good as tea or coffee for waking one up in the morning. Now.” Anne sat down at her computer and motioned for her guest to take the bed. “What the *hell* is going on here?”

“Well, it all started with the temporospatial claudication.”

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve heard that line?”

“None?”

“Exactly.”

Surreptitiously, Anne pinched herself. *Best case scenario, I wake up right now...*

Nothing changed. Her nose was still cold, her computer was still telling her she had new e-mail, and Alexander Slytherin was still sitting on her bed.

Either I’m nuts or all my dreams have just come true.

I think I’d prefer to be nuts.

But all she said aloud was, “Go on.”

xXxXx

“It was Voldemort,” Alex said, trying not to let Anne see that he was taking in every detail of her room while he told his story. He wasn’t quite in Arthur Weasley’s league with being fascinated by Muggles, but they still interested him, and American Muggle stuff was subtly different from British Muggle stuff. As evidenced by Jacky the car. It had taken him a few seconds to figure out that the reason he couldn’t see the steering wheel was that he was looking at the wrong side.

“Yes, I’d tend to assume so. What did he do?”

“He was trying – I think – to get in touch with Dad. He’s heard some kind of rumors about us – the Founders – and he assumes that Dad’s with us, or at least like us, because he was a Founder.” Alex looked at the floor, hard tiles with a brown and white fleck pattern inlaid. “He still doesn’t get it.”

“The power of an oath made,” said Anne quietly. “And an oath broken.” Her voice held sympathy, but no pity. Alex was grateful.

He straightened up and went on. “So he set this spell to summon someone of his blood, someone no longer quite among the living, and someone powerful, and – here’s the scary part – he had bindings set up. Bindings I’m not sure even I could have broken.”

Anne swore once, explosively. Alex was impressed – she might not use that sort of language much, but she apparently knew a few good ones when she did. “What type of bindings are we talking here?”

“Standard stuff, spiritual containment, punishments for disobedience, that sort of thing.” Alex kept his tone light, but he knew he probably wasn’t fooling Anne. Deep down, he was still shaking at what he’d been so close to. “And he had a power drain set up, by shared blood. If he’d gotten me, he could have drained my power and used it.”

“Nice guy,” Anne commented. “Planning to use his hallowed ancestor as a battery. Very Matrix-like, if you ask me.”

Alex shrugged. “That might have been a backup plan, in case he got someone else – like me – or in case Dad wouldn’t answer his questions or whatever. But it gets better. The thing he had set up, call it a gate or a portal or whatever, it was formulated on the principle that Dad wouldn’t want to come, that he’d fight it all the way. And he probably would, if he was just being dragged out of a comfortable afterlife. I would have – I did – until I twigged that.”

“What did you do?”

“What he wasn’t expecting.” Alex looked at the floor again. “The thing cut me off from communication first thing, I couldn’t call for help. And it was cutting me off from drawing enough power to blow it to hell. So when I figured out it was based on having an unwilling victim, I stopped being an unwilling victim, and it self-destructed and blew me to a random destination.”

Although this is probably the best random destination it could have sent me to...

Anne closed her eyes for a moment. “You jumped into it, didn’t you?”

“Oi! It worked, didn’t it?”

“You call this working?”

“It’s better than being the slave of Lord Voldemort! He’d have figured out who I was, and that I’d never help him willingly, and then he’d have drained me dry and used what was left of me to get at Maura and Paul and Rick and Weena and everybody else! So yes, I do call this working!”

“Would you mind not shouting? The walls are kind of thin around here.” Anne rubbed her temples, as if warding off a headache. “And please sit down. You’re putting a crick in my neck.”

Alex sank back down on the bed, tracing a pattern on the bedspread with his fingers. “The rest is pretty simple. I fell, I landed hard, I got up and worked out where I was – not so easy as it sounds...”

“There are stores and buildings with this town’s name on them all around that area. And once you knew where you were, you had to know if you just started walking uphill, you’d get here to the college, and a little asking would probably find me.” Anne’s tone was joshing, but also

sympathetic. “Still. Lost in another world and a foreign country, over 900 years after you died. Not the most fun thing in the world.”

“Not generally considered such, no.”

“So.” Anne framed his face with a rectangle made from her fingers and put on a hearty announcer voice. “What are you going to do next?”

“Ask you if you have any food around here?”

“No, you idiot! You have to say, ‘I’m going to Disney World!’”

“Why would I want to go to Disney World?”

“Good question.” Anne got up and opened one of the drawers of the smaller dresser. “Here. Chips. American-style chips, you’d probably call them crisps. Not real food, but a close approximation.”

“It’ll do.” Alex tore the bag open, pulled out a few crisps, and munched them reflectively. He had forgotten how many complaints a body could put up. His still ached from the hard landing on the grass of the park a few blocks from the school where he’d met up with Anne, and it was now signaling another urgent need...

“Um, I have to...”

“Down the hall, down the steps, first door on the left. Flip the sign around when you go in so the other girls don’t panic.” She didn’t even look up, continuing to type with rapid staccato clicks.

“Right.” He put the crisps down on her bed and left the room.

xXxXx

Anne typed without looking up for several seconds, then lifted her head and read what now spread across her screen.

He can’t stay here. If he stays for more than 24 hours, he’ll be sealed to this body and have to stay in it permanently. And I doubt he could get back to where he belongs when he dies a second time. You’ll have to send him back before then.

She swore under her breath again. *Yes, but how?*

She bent her head and typed again. This only worked sometimes, when some part of her that she was only vaguely aware of knew the answers already. It was how she usually was when she was writing important scenes, things she had seen happening to her characters long ago.

She looked up.

You’re the author. Use that. Write him going home, and do it so that you believe it. That’s the

only way it'll work.

Profanity was too mild. Anne hissed under her breath, and wondered what Alex would tell her she was saying.

Write so I believe it? Good trick, if I can do it. I've always got that little skeptical part of me, that little thing that says "You're not doing it right, you're not doing it well enough, no one would believe that, no one would do that, you're a hack and you're no good and you'll never get anywhere..."

Her fingers were flying. ***You're not no good. You're not as good as you could be someday, but you're not no good. You can't be no good. People are depending on you.***

Not real people. People I made up. People in a story.

So all your readers aren't real people? Your own mother and your little sibs, who read your stories and love them, aren't real people? Those little kids you're directing in that play aren't real people? And what about everyone in your choir, or all your friends you meet with for lunch on Wednesdays? Do they think you're no good?

This is why I hate arguing with myself. I always lose.

Or, you could say, you always win.

She cracked up.

All right. Better to do it now. There's not much around here I think Alex would really appreciate seeing, and he's probably in the most private place now that he could be.

Plus, this will go better if I can't actually see it. If I see it, I'll start thinking about how fake it looks, and that will make it be fake, and that spells disaster. D-I-S-A-S-T-E-R, disaster.

She nodded. *Not bad. I might win the spelling bee again this year.*

But first things first. Sending that troublesome... wizard... home.

She shook her hands out briskly and set to work.

xXxXx

Recalling a story Anne had told him, Alex flushed the toilet with his foot, then turned to unlock the stall and leave.

The stall door swung open. Alex gaped.

He was looking into his own bedroom at the Founders' Castle, exactly as it had been when he'd last seen it.

No way. It can't possibly be this easy.

The scene wavered before him, starting to break up and be replaced with the bathroom he'd just been in.

Stop that! ordered a furious voice in his head. **Who's the author around here, me or you?**

Er, you are, last time I checked. The scene of his room was starting to reform, but the bathroom was warring with it for reality space.

Then stop fighting me and walk through that freaking door. If I say it's that easy, it is just that easy. Got it?

Got it.

Good. Go.

What's the magic word?

NOW!

Alex stepped hastily through the door. With a rush of gratitude, he felt all the feelings and sensations of "home" wash over him, and noted where they all fit inside his head. *Here* were the abilities he could use if he cared to and if he was allowed, *there* were the senses that were only in the most general terms like human ones, and under it all was the feeling of peace, peace beyond knowledge or understanding, the peace that allowed him and his colleagues to do what they did without cracking up utterly.

As he turned to look back through the door, the bathroom stall he'd left dissolved, replaced by a quick view of Anne at her computer. She looked up at him and waved, then returned to typing, and that scene dissolved too, replaced by the ordinary hallway outside his door.

Well, as ordinary as anything around here.

He fell onto his bed, feeling drained. Like most normal human activities, sleep was optional for him, but it could be very nice sometimes, when everything was just getting to be too much.

I think today qualifies.

He sketched out a quick message to the others to leave where they would see it – *I'm back. I'm fine. Please don't bother me, I need to recover* – then closed his eyes and let himself drift away.

Oh, before I forget... he sent, on the edge of sleep.

Yes?

Would you do me a favor?

Depends on what it is...

Make sure my great-nephew doesn't do that again?

Already taken care of, honey lamb. There was a somewhat malicious giggle.

Alex shuddered. **Do me another favor?**

Hmm?

Don't ever call me that again.

A distinct snicker, and the connection was broken.

Alex rolled over and buried his face in a pillow. *I am going to have such strange dreams...*

xXxXx

In the Hogwarts below, Severus Snape shut his office door hastily and set a Silencing Charm on it, and on the surrounding walls. He'd managed to contain himself at the meeting, and on his way back afterwards, but now he simply had to let it out, and it wouldn't do to be heard laughing himself sick.

It wasn't every day one got to watch the Dark Lord turn a bright and revolting shade of green.